

An update of long-term trends in property and violent crime in New South Wales: 1990-2020

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AIM

The aim of this paper is to analyse the trends in the rates of annual recorded incidents of 10 categories of property and violent crime for the period 1990 to 2020 in New South Wales (NSW).

METHOD

Offence rates were calculated using criminal incident data from the NSW Police Force Computerised Operational Policing System (COPS) for the period 1995 to 2020, and the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research's recorded crime statistics report series for the period 1990 to 1994. Kendall's trend test was run on the 31 annual rates for each of the 10 offence categories.

RESULTS

Some categories of crime in NSW are now at the lowest recorded levels they have been for over 25 years. Comparing per capita rates of crime in 2020 with per capita rates in 1990, lower rates were found for: robbery with a firearm (92% lower); break and enter non-dwelling (86% lower); motor vehicle theft (85% lower); break and enter dwelling (76% lower); robbery without a weapon (73% lower); robbery with a weapon not a firearm (60% lower) and murder (57% lower). Three of the ten offence types analysed in this report were found to have recorded rates higher in 2020 than in 1990: sexual assault (213% higher); other sexual offences (126% higher) and assault (55% higher).

CONCLUSION

In the period since 1990, sexual assault and other sexual offences rates recorded long term upward trends whilst the other eight offences analysed in this report were trending down or stable. The 2020 recorded sexual assault rate was the highest recorded since 1990. The three robbery and three property crime series all recorded falls of 80 per cent or more since 2000.

KEYWORDS

trends

crime statistics

property crime

violent crime

INTRODUCTION

This brief is an annual update of the property and violent crime trends first reported in Moffatt and Poynton (2006). The aim of the paper is to examine the trends in the rates of annual recorded incidents of 10 categories of property and violent crime for the period 1990 to 2020 in NSW.

METHOD

Data

With the exception of murder, the data presented refer to the number of police recorded criminal incidents per 100,000 population.¹ For murder, rates are calculated on the numbers of murder victims per 100,000 population. Data from the NSW Police Force Computerised Operational Policing System (COPS) have been used to calculate offence rates for the period 1995 to 2020.² Criminal incident data for 1994 and for the years prior to the introduction of COPS have been taken from the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research's (BOCSAR) report series *NSW Recorded Crime Statistics*.

RESULTS

Violent crime

Figure 1 shows the number of *murder* victims in NSW per 100,000 population from 1990 to 2020. Figures 2, 3 and 4 show respectively the number of recorded *assault*, *sexual offences* and *robbery* incidents per 100,000 population from 1990 to 2020. The major points to note from these figures are:

- A significant downward trend is apparent in the NSW *murder* rate (down 57% since 1990) (Figure 1). Apart from the 2017 recorded rate of 0.7 murder victims per 100,000 population, the 2020 rate of 0.9 murder victims is the lowest in the series (along with 2019, 2018 and 2016 also at 0.9).
- Figure 2 for the recorded NSW *assault* rate shows two things: firstly the overall long term upward trend (up 55% since 1990) and secondly the drop back since the early 2000s. In the early 1990s the recorded assault rate was about 500 incidents per 100,000 population climbing to over 1,000 incidents per 100,000 population by 2001 and remaining around 1,000 to 2008. Since 2008 there has been a gradual decline (to just under 800 incidents per 100,000 in 2020) such that the current rate of recorded *assault* is similar to that of the late 1990s. The increases in recorded *assault* during the 1990s may in part be due to increased reporting of these offences by victims (Ringland & Baker, 2009). Kendall's trend test on the series reveals a significant downward trend since 2000, and currently the rate of assault remains 26% below the 2002 peak.

¹ For the rate calculations, population data were obtained from the 2020 Australian Bureau of Statistics publication: Regional Population Growth, Australia, 2018-19, Cat. No. 3218.0 (for population estimates 1995 to 2020). As no population estimates were available for 2020 at the time this report was prepared, rates for 2020 were calculated using 2019 population estimates. Another consideration is that Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) population estimates have slight revisions over time, which may impact on rates being slightly revised from previous updates of this report.

² In response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian and NSW Governments implemented various measures to minimise personal contact and contain the spread of the virus. Social distancing and social isolation initiatives were rolled out throughout March 2020. Most significantly orders under the NSW Public Health Act 2010 closed indoor spaces and businesses for non-essential activities, prohibited people from leaving their place of residence without reasonable excuse and limited most outdoor gatherings to two persons. These measures resulted in a significant disruption to regular activities and were associated with large falls in various violent and property crimes in NSW. Offences sensitive to police enforcement activity, such as drug offences and breaches of AVOs and bail conditions, however remained mostly stable.

Figure 1. Murder[^] rate for NSW, 1990-2020

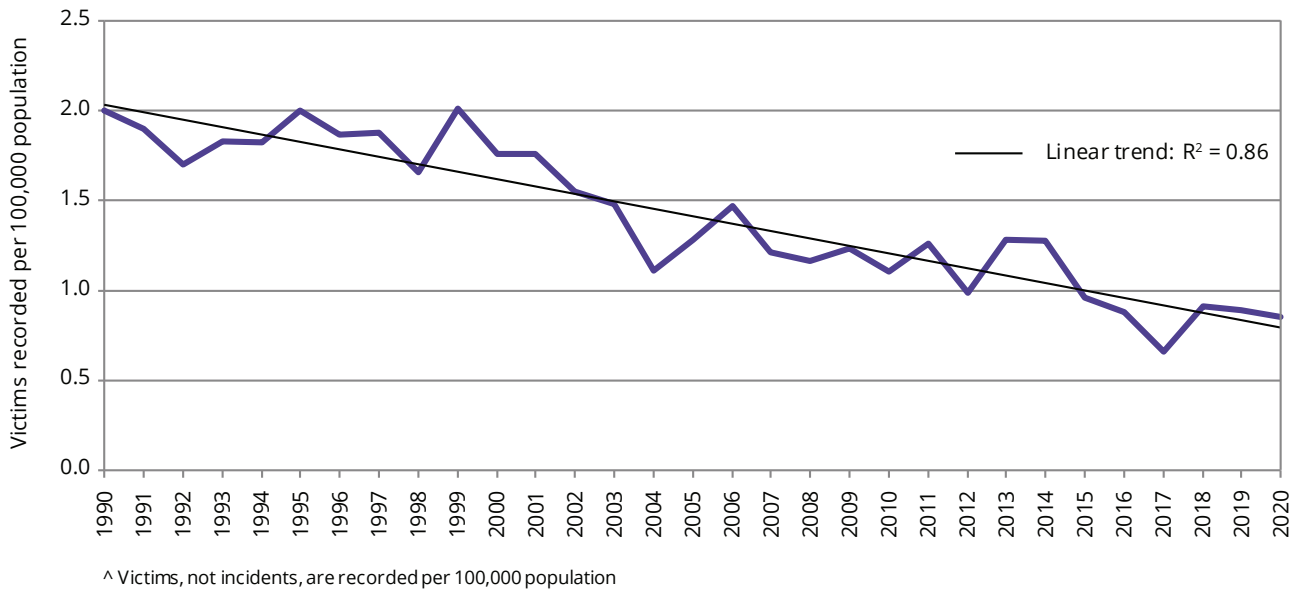
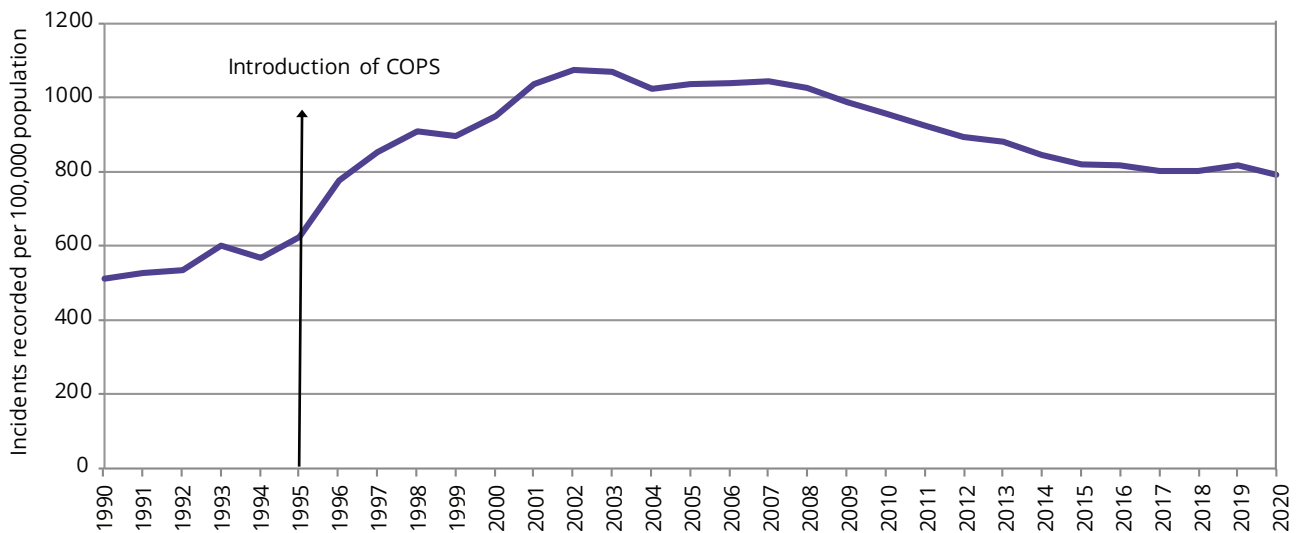


Figure 2. Assault rate for NSW, 1990-2020



- Over the period from 1990 to 2020, NSW recorded increases in the crime rate of both *sexual assault* (up 213%) and *other sexual offences*³ (up 126%, Figure 3). The increases in *sexual assault* and *other sexual offences* may be partly due to increased reporting of these offences by victims (O'Brien, Jones & Korabelnikoff, 2008). In both cases, the sharpest rises occurred in the mid to late 1990s. *Other sexual offences* recorded a significant downward trend between 2002 and 2010 (see Figure 3) but has increased by 21% since then. *Sexual assault*, however, has continued the significant upward trend since 2000 (up 59%).
- Recorded rates of all three robbery offences are now below those seen around 1990 and continue to show declines (see Figure 4). All three robbery offences show a significant and consistent downward long-term trend since 1990: *robbery with a firearm* (down 92%); *robbery without a weapon* (down 73%) and *robbery with a weapon not a firearm* (down 60%). The 2020 rate for *robbery with a firearm* is over 13 times lower than the 1990 rate (see Figure 4a).

³ The offence category other sexual offences includes recorded incidents of indecent assault, acts of indecency, grooming/ procuring and other sexual offences (e.g. wilful and obscene exposure, peep or pry).

Figure 3. Sexual offences rate for NSW, 1990-2020

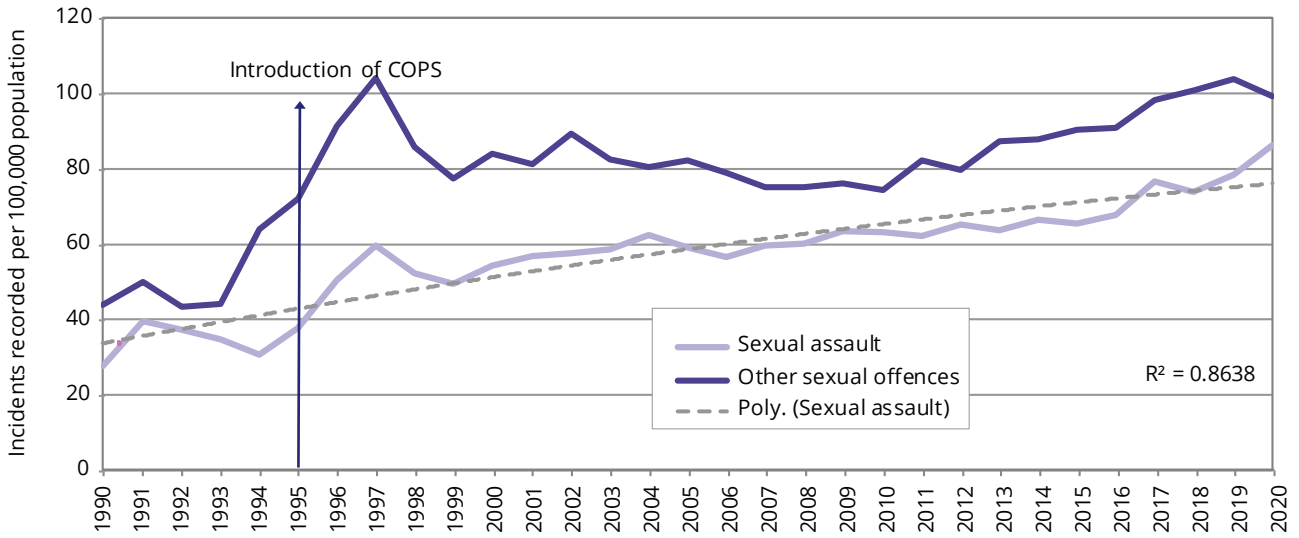


Figure 4. Robbery rate for NSW, 1990-2020

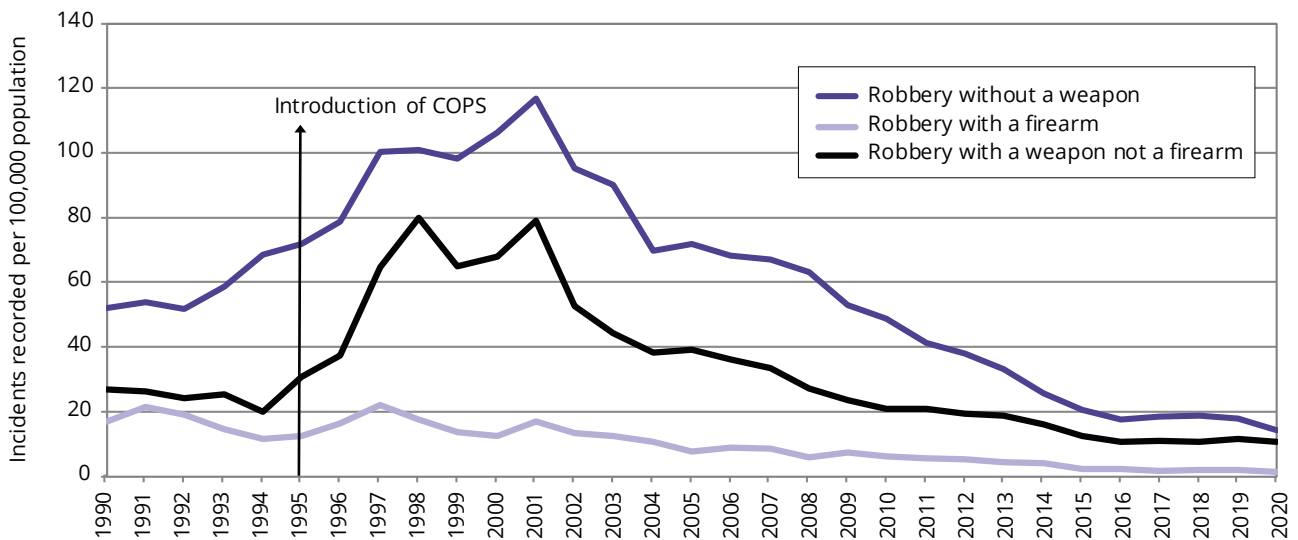
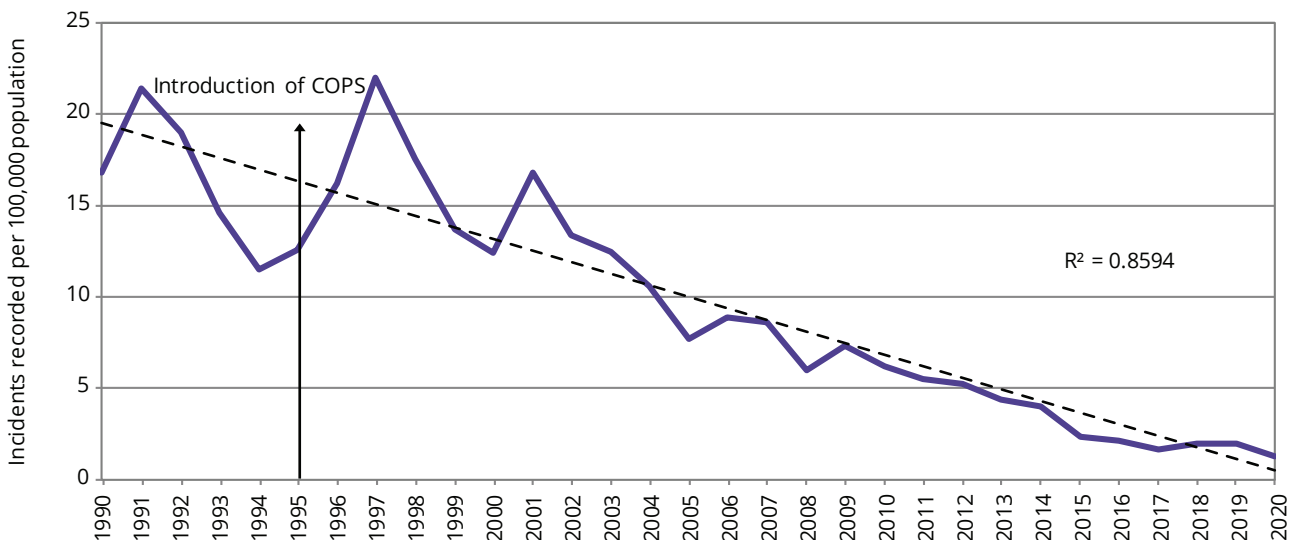


Figure 4a. Robbery with a firearm rate for NSW, 1990-2020



Property Crime

Figure 5 shows recorded rates for three major theft categories with significant downward trends since 1990: *break and enter dwelling*, *break and enter non-dwelling* and *motor vehicle theft*. The major points to note from this figure are:

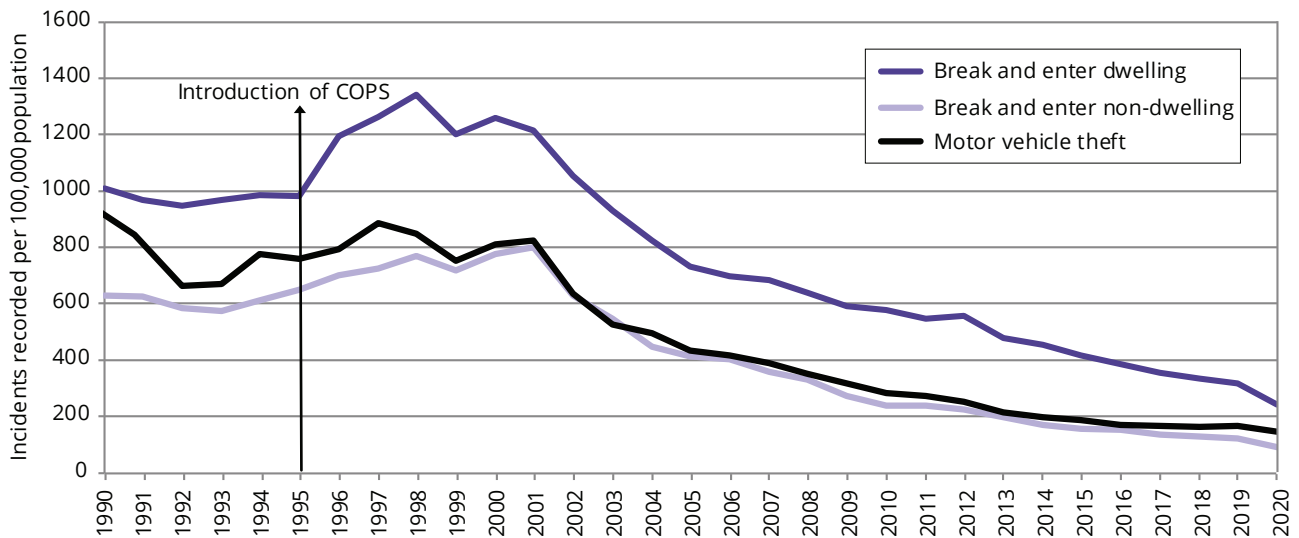
The overall shapes of the graphs for these offences show remarkable similarity. The rates of *motor vehicle theft* and *break and enter non-dwelling* continue to track one another closely as has been the case since the late 1990s. In fact the correlations between all the series in Figure 5 are 0.9 or higher since 1990.

Recorded rates of *motor vehicle theft* continue to decline significantly (down 85% since 1990). After a fall in this theft category in the early 1990s, the incident rate began to increase from 1993 onwards. From about 1997, the rate of *motor vehicle theft* stabilised at around 820 incidents per 100,000 population and then dropped sharply from 2001 onwards, having registered a 82 per cent fall since then.

Break and enter dwelling rates increased sharply in the late 1990s, but since 2001 have been on a monotonic decline as have the rates for *break and enter non-dwelling* and *motor vehicle theft*.

All three property crime series shown in Figure 5 are about a fifth of the rate of 2001 and are now well below the recorded 1990 levels.

Figure 5. Burglary and motor vehicle theft rate for NSW, 1990-2020



DISCUSSION

Some categories of crime in NSW are now at the lowest recorded levels they have been for over 30 years. Comparing per capita rates of crime in 2020 with per capita rates in 1990, the rate of:

- *robbery with a firearm* is 92 per cent lower;
- *break and enter non-dwelling* is 86 per cent lower
- *motor vehicle theft* is 85 per cent lower;
- *break and enter dwelling* is 76 per cent lower;
- *robbery without a weapon* is 73 per cent lower;
- *robbery with a weapon not a firearm* is 60 per cent lower, and
- *murder* is 57 per cent lower.

The falls in these categories of crime are countered by increases in recorded rates of *sexual assault*, *other sexual offences* and *assault*. Comparing rates of crime in 2020 with those in 1990, the rate of:

- *sexual assault* is 213 per cent higher;
- *other sexual offences* is 126 per cent higher; and
- *assault* is 55 per cent higher.

Given that recorded crime data includes only crimes that come to the attention of the police, and not all criminal acts are reported to the authorities, the trends in recorded crime presented here should be interpreted in conjunction with data from crime victim surveys.

A summary of these data is provided in Moffatt and Poynton (2006) and more recently in the 2019-20 Crime Victimization catalogue (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2021). This ABS publication now contains 11 consecutive financial years (2008-9 to 2018-19) of personal and household summary crime data obtained from a national survey, much of which is disaggregated to state level. For NSW, the latest report (for the 2018-20 reference period) states that physical assault for those aged 15 and over was reported to police 52 per cent of the time, with a personal victimisation rate of 2.2 per cent. For households, NSW break-ins were reported to police 72 per cent of the time, with a household victimisation rate of 1.9 per cent.

CONCLUSION

In the period since 1990, *sexual assault* and *other sexual offences* rates recorded significant long term upward trends whilst the other eight offences analysed in this report were trending down or stable. The 2020 recorded *sexual assault* rate was the highest recorded since 1990, up 213 per cent. Apart from sexual assault and other sexual offences, the remaining eight offences recorded significant downtrends in recorded rates since 2000. The three robbery and three property crime series all recorded drops of 80 per cent or more since 2000.

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APPENDIX

Table A1. Number of criminal incidents recorded by NSW Police by year and offence type

	Murder [^]	Assault	Sexual assault	Other sexual offences	Robbery without a weapon	Robbery with a firearm	Robbery with a weapon not a firearm	Break and enter dwelling	Break and enter non-dwelling	Motor vehicle theft
1990	119	29,776	1,606	2,552	3,022	981	1,568	58,862	36,639	54,488
1991	115	31,014	2,343	2,942	3,173	1,265	1,542	57,155	36,838	49,758
1992	101	31,773	2,220	2,583	3,080	1,132	1,444	56,437	34,754	39,423
1993	110	36,076	2,083	2,646	3,525	877	1,528	58,036	34,379	40,169
1994	83	25,732	1,397	2,908	3,120	522	912	44,850	27,858	35,304
1995	124	38,757	2,348	4,475	4,463	781	1,915	60,999	40,381	47,013
1996	116	48,219	3,139	5,663	4,890	1,005	2,318	74,009	43,502	49,137
1997	118	53,497	3,739	6,537	6,300	1,382	4,049	79,241	45,446	55,521
1998	105	57,685	3,312	5,446	6,400	1,111	5,060	84,969	48,715	53,711
1999	129	57,487	3,172	4,972	6,301	878	4,164	76,983	45,923	48,258
2000	114	61,530	3,523	5,445	6,887	805	4,397	81,648	50,392	52,481
2001	115	67,749	3,709	5,297	7,634	1,097	5,167	79,341	52,198	53,733
2002	102	70,742	3,795	5,873	6,257	882	3,459	69,242	41,419	41,858
2003	98	70,807	3,886	5,457	5,955	825	2,923	61,495	36,296	34,735
2004	74	68,049	4,157	5,349	4,644	705	2,544	54,751	29,708	32,988
2005	86	69,377	3,953	5,511	4,806	514	2,624	48,894	27,555	28,943
2006	99	70,002	3,817	5,318	4,609	598	2,445	47,033	27,070	28,155
2007	83	71,381	4,071	5,132	4,578	590	2,279	46,655	24,375	26,613
2008	81	71,243	4,180	5,210	4,392	416	1,882	44,342	22,962	24,440
2009	87	69,617	4,473	5,365	3,727	515	1,668	41,617	19,228	22,330
2010	79	68,379	4,507	5,320	3,484	442	1,493	41,251	17,058	20,281
2011	91	66,760	4,481	5,932	2,972	396	1,496	39,546	17,083	19,591
2012	72	65,350	4,767	5,815	2,781	382	1,419	40,616	16,285	18,282
2013	95	65,151	4,712	6,463	2,464	325	1,395	35,275	14,596	15,951
2014	96	63,461	4,989	6,601	1,936	299	1,198	33,980	12,791	14,892
2015	73	62,436	4,982	6,884	1,568	178	952	31,631	11,908	14,117
2016	68	63,228	5,246	7,036	1,363	165	826	29,721	11,702	13,111
2017	52	63,037	6,033	7,728	1,451	131	850	27,835	10,575	13,214
2018	73	64,088	5,891	8,040	1,496	156	841	26,552	10,229	13,088
2019	72	66,190	6,347	8,409	1,454	161	942	25,509	9,921	13,430
2020	69	64,033	6,989	8,024	1,146	103	869	19,658	7,366	11,707

Table A2. Rate of criminal incidents recorded by NSW Police per 100,000 population by year and offence type

	Murder [^]	Assault	Sexual assault	Other sexual offences	Robbery without a weapon	Robbery with a firearm	Robbery with a weapon not a firearm	Break and enter dwelling	Break and enter non-dwelling	Motor vehicle theft
1990	2.0	511.0	27.6	43.8	51.9	16.8	26.9	1010.2	628.8	935.1
1991	1.9	525.8	39.7	49.9	53.8	21.4	26.1	968.9	624.5	843.5
1992	1.7	533.2	37.3	43.3	51.7	19.0	24.2	947.1	583.2	661.6
1993	1.8	600.8	34.7	44.1	58.7	14.6	25.4	966.5	572.5	668.9
1994	1.8	566.1	30.7	64.0	68.6	11.5	20.1	986.8	612.9	776.7
1995	2.0	624.6	37.8	72.1	71.9	12.6	30.9	983.1	650.8	757.7
1996	1.9	777.1	50.6	91.3	78.8	16.2	37.4	1192.8	701.1	791.9
1997	1.9	852.3	59.6	104.1	100.4	22.0	64.5	1262.4	724.0	884.5
1998	1.7	910.0	52.2	85.9	101.0	17.5	79.8	1340.4	768.5	847.3
1999	2.0	896.6	49.5	77.5	98.3	13.7	64.9	1200.7	716.3	752.7
2000	1.8	948.6	54.3	83.9	106.2	12.4	67.8	1258.8	776.9	809.1
2001	1.8	1037.4	56.8	81.1	116.9	16.8	79.1	1215.0	799.3	822.8
2002	1.5	1075.0	57.7	89.2	95.1	13.4	52.6	1052.2	629.4	636.1
2003	1.5	1069.5	58.7	82.4	89.9	12.5	44.1	928.8	548.2	524.6
2004	1.1	1023.2	62.5	80.4	69.8	10.6	38.3	823.2	446.7	496.0
2005	1.3	1036.5	59.1	82.3	71.8	7.7	39.2	730.5	411.7	432.4
2006	1.5	1038.2	56.6	78.9	68.4	8.9	36.3	697.5	401.5	417.6
2007	1.2	1044.5	59.6	75.1	67.0	8.6	33.3	682.7	356.7	389.4
2008	1.2	1026.0	60.2	75.0	63.3	6.0	27.1	638.6	330.7	352.0
2009	1.2	986.9	63.4	76.1	52.8	7.3	23.6	590.0	272.6	316.6
2010	1.1	957.1	63.1	74.5	48.8	6.2	20.9	577.4	238.8	283.9
2011	1.3	924.8	62.1	82.2	41.2	5.5	20.7	547.8	236.7	271.4
2012	1.0	894.7	65.3	79.6	38.1	5.2	19.4	556.1	223.0	250.3
2013	1.3	879.9	63.6	87.3	33.3	4.4	18.8	476.4	197.1	215.4
2014	1.3	845.2	66.4	87.9	25.8	4.0	16.0	452.6	170.4	198.3
2015	1.0	819.8	65.4	90.4	20.6	2.3	12.5	415.3	156.4	185.4
2016	0.9	817.7	67.8	91.0	17.6	2.1	10.7	384.3	151.3	169.5
2017	0.7	801.2	76.7	98.2	18.4	1.7	10.8	353.8	134.4	167.9
2018	0.9	803.1	73.8	100.7	18.7	2.0	10.5	332.7	128.2	164.0
2019	0.9	818.2	78.5	103.9	18.0	2.0	11.6	315.3	122.6	166.0
2020	0.9	791.5	86.4	99.2	14.2	1.3	10.7	243.0	91.1	144.7

[^] For murder, the numbers and rates shown are for recorded victims rather than criminal incidents.