



## The European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics 2006, third edition

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WODC recently published the third edition of the European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics, following on from the second edition published previously by WODC (Aebi et al. 2006). With WODC one of its initiators, the 'European Sourcebook' was compiled by an international project group. The European Sourcebook comprises crime statistics for forty European countries., It contains data, where possible arranged per type of offence, covering the entire criminal justice chain, from victim data<sup>1</sup>, police registrations and prosecutions to sentences imposed and executed. The European Sourcebook is first and foremost set up as a tool to facilitate comparative studies into crime in various countries. This type of study, which gives an indication of international phenomena and trends etc., is vitally important to national policies.

The publication of the third edition has made it possible to look at trends that have emerged over the past few years. Time series from 1990 to 2003 are now available for most countries and data. Three measurements were carried out for a number of specific topics, such as the percentage of juveniles in the criminal justice chain: for 1995, 1999 and 2003.

### Methodical aspects

Combining crime statistics for various countries inspires comparative studies to be carried out and this is exactly what the European Sourcebook aims for. However, such comparative studies must be carried out on the understanding that the results of the crime statistics depend on a range of factors. In addition to the actual occurrence of the phenomenon that is being measured, the results are also influenced by *social factors* (e.g.: when people's confidence in the police is low, they will probably also be less prepared to report incidents to the police, which leads to lower recorded crime rates), by *legal factors* such as definitions of crime types and the organisation of law enforcement, and *statistical factors* such as measuring units and times.

To be able to be of optimum service to researchers and policy makers who will be using the data in the European Sourcebook, particular attention was paid to the above-mentioned legal and statistical factors. The following measures were taken within the European Sourcebook project in order to realise optimum comparability, or at least to give an indication of where and why this comparability may fail in places.

- The European Sourcebook project group started by setting up standard definitions for each type of crime, fully aware of the fact that not every country may be able to supply data in conformance with these standard definitions.
- Vital in the project were the contact persons. Every country had one contact person who coordinated the collection of statistical data in his or her country. In most cases the contact person worked in the academic world. The advantage was that the contact person was not bound by 'official' statistics which made it possible on a number of occasions to supply data that deviated from the official statistics and that were more in line with the standard definitions.
- All deviations from the standard definitions, as well as all statistical choices made by a country, are presented in the European Sourcebook. These so-called 'meta-data' form an indispensable tool in using the statistics correctly.
- Before the data supplied by each country were processed, they were validated exhaustively. The validation findings were also fed back to the contact persons.

Despite the above measures, the European Sourcebook data need to be treated with care. In general, it is difficult to make comparisons of *levels* (country A reports twice as many recorded cases of assault as country B), particularly as regards the countries with an entirely different legal system. This applies particularly to Western European countries compared with the former Eastern European countries. It is

<sup>1</sup> The victim data are taken from the International Victim Survey (ICVS). However, the most recent results of the ICVS have not been included in the third edition of the European Sourcebook as they were not yet available.

better to study *ratios* (e.g. percentages of female suspects) or *trends*. See the paragraph below for an example of trend comparisons.

### Some results

Law enforcement in the Netherlands has been more severe in recent years. Police registered more crimes and arrested more suspects, and the courts imposed more and longer sentences. Nevertheless, the level of crime as perceived by the victims did not increase. This appears clearly from the data: the number of victims remained stable in the period 1995 - 2003 (according to CBS victim surveys) or fell by some 10% (according to the Police Monitor), recorded crime rose by about 8%, the number of convictions increased by some 25% and the number of prisoners by 37%.

This raises the question if this development is found in other European countries, too. This is not entirely clear for the victim data. There are indications that the drop in offences perceived is indeed also present in other countries, but as the most recent data for the International Victim Survey (ICVS) are not yet available, this cannot be verified.

The European Sourcebook was used for the indicators police recorded crime, court convictions and prison population for a number of Western European, Scandinavian and South European countries (see table 1).

**Table 1 Changes in 2003 compared with 1995 in percentages**

	Police recorded crime	Court convictions	Prison population
The Netherlands	8%	25%	37%
Belgium	*	3%	18%
England & Wales	14%	8%	43%
Germany	-2%	-5%	19%
France	4%	38%	8%
Denmark	-12%	**	0%
Sweden	8%	-21%	7%
Finland	6%	16%	12%
Austria	30%	**	14%
Switzerland	5%	43%	-10%
Spain	4%	1%	15%
Italy	7%	6%	18%

\* Reliable data for 1995 are missing. Based on the period after 2000 the number of recordings in Belgium is showing a slight increase.

\*\* Reliable data for 1995 are missing. Based on the period after 2000 the number of convictions in both Germany and Austria have been constant.

It is clear that similar percentages of growth can be found in most countries. Exceptions are Denmark, where no increase is found and Germany, where growth is restricted to the prison population. With its increase in prison population, the Netherlands joins England & Wales in the lead. Furthermore, it is remarkable that the Netherlands is the only country where the increase percentages go up along the criminal justice chain. For example, the increase in the number of court convictions in France does not result in more prisoners, which could suggest the more frequent use of fines and alternative punishments and/or the imposing of shorter prison sentences. The opposite occurs in England & Wales: while the number of court convictions remains the same, the increase in police recordings and, particularly, prison population is much larger. Perhaps this is the result of the growing role of the Prosecution Service: more and more cases are being dealt with outside the court, leaving only the more serious cases to go to court.

### Literature

**Aebi, Marcelo Fernando, Kauko Aromaa, Bruno Aubusson de Cavarlay, Gordon Barclay, Beata Gruszczynska, Hanns von Hofer, Vasilika Hysi, Jörg-Martin Jehle, Martin Killias, Paul Smit, Cynthia Tavares**

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