CRIME AND JUSTICE
STATISTICS FOR
WESTERN AUSTRALIA:
1996

A M Ferrante
N S N Loh
M Maller
CRIME RESEARCH CENTRE
The University of Western Australia

Nedlands, Western Australia, 6907
Telephone: (08) 9380 2830
Facsimile: (08) 9380 1034
Email: crime.research@uwa.edu.au

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Professor Richard W Harding

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Mr Frank Morgan, Senior Researcher, Crime Research Centre, UWA
Mr Neil Morgan, Senior Lecturer, Law School, UWA

Authors
Anna Ferrante, Research Fellow, Crime Research Centre, The University of Western Australia.
Nini Sui Nie Loh, Research Officer, Crime Research Centre, The University of Western Australia.
Maxwell Maller, Senior Computer Analyst, Crime Research Centre, The University of Western Australia.

ISSN 1037-6941

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Crime and Justice Statistics for Western Australia: 1996

1. Judicial statistics - Western Australia.
   I. Ferrante, Anna M. II. The University of Western Australia.
Crime Research Centre. (Series: Statistical Report (The University of Western Australia, Crime Research Centre); 1996.

Additional copies of this Statistical Report are available from The Federation Press, PO Box 45, Annandale, NSW, 2038.
# Contents

Preface ........................................................................................................................................... v

General Introduction ................................................................................................................... 1

1. Crimes Reported to Police, 1 January - 31 December 1996 ........................................ 5  
   1.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................... 5  
   1.2 National Crime Statistics ......................................................................................... 6  
   1.3 Crimes Reported to Police in Western Australia, 1996 ........................................ 7  
   1.4 Offences Against the Person .................................................................................. 12  
   1.5 Motor Vehicle Theft ............................................................................................... 15  
   1.6 Location of Offences Reported to Police ............................................................. 15  
   1.7 Tables — Reported Offences ................................................................................. 17

2. Police Apprehensions and Juvenile Cautions, 1 January - 31 December 1996 .... 37  
   2.1 General ..................................................................................................................... 37  
   2.2 Trends in Arrests ..................................................................................................... 38  
   2.3 Distinct Persons Arrested ...................................................................................... 38  
   2.4 All Arrests (charges) ............................................................................................... 44  
   2.5 Cautioning ............................................................................................................... 48  
   2.6 Tables - Police Apprehensions and Juvenile Cautions ...................................... 51

3. Adult Court Records, 1 January - 31 December 1996 ................................................ 61  
   3.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................. 61  
   3.2 Higher (Supreme and District) Courts .................................................................... 62  
   3.3 Lower Courts (Courts of Petty Sessions) ............................................................... 69  
   3.3 Tables — Adult Courts ............................................................................................ 71
4. Children’s Court Appearances, 1 January - 31 December 1996 ............................... 86
   4.1 General ..................................................................................................................... 86
   4.2 Trends in Children’s Court Activity, 1990-1996 .................................................. 88
   4.3 Characteristics of Distinct Persons ....................................................................... 88
   4.4 Major Offence of Distinct Persons ........................................................................ 90
   4.5 Results and Penalties ............................................................................................. 90
   4.6 All Offences ............................................................................................................. 92
   4.7 Juvenile Detention .................................................................................................. 95
   4.8 Referrals to Juvenile Justice Teams ....................................................................... 95
   4.9 Tables — Children’s Court and Panel ................................................................. 96

5. Adult Imprisonment and Community Corrections, 1 January - 31 December 1996 ...................................................................................... 108
   5.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................... 108
   5.2 Imprisonment ........................................................................................................ 109
   5.3 Lock-ups ................................................................................................................. 116
   5.4 Community-Based Orders ................................................................................... 123
   5.5 Parole and Work Release ..................................................................................... 129
   5.6 Home Detention .................................................................................................... 131
   5.7 Tables — Correctional Services ........................................................................... 132

Appendix A .............................................................................................................................. 159
Appendix B .............................................................................................................................. 164
Appendix C .............................................................................................................................. 167
Appendix D .............................................................................................................................. 174
Preface

Introduction

This Statistical Report draws together available crime and justice statistics for Western Australia for 1996. This is the seventh full year of reporting by the Crime Research Centre and as the series grows, the analysis of trends, which is one of the features of the Report, becomes more significant.

The Report contains some notable inclusions and omissions which are described in the General Introduction. Most importantly, comprehensive information on police lock-ups is presented for the first time (see Chapter 5).

Highlights and Trends

There have been several notable changes in data presentation and coverage in the 1996 Report. They include the following:

- The regular Table 1.5 has been disaggregated so that offences by metropolitan and non-metropolitan district are not merely presented as ‘Against the person’ or ‘Property’ but are broken down into more informative offence categories. This makes it possible to begin the process of identifying disparities and trends marking metropolitan/non-metropolitan areas and also within those broad categories. The Centre considers the issue of rural crime and safety to be one of great current importance and hopes to be able to carry out major research in this area in the near future.

- Fuller analysis has been made of juvenile cautioning data. The impact of the major changes introduced in 1995 by the Young Offenders Act have become more apparent in the second recorded year of operation.

- For the first time, information is able to be published relating to the operation of juvenile justice teams. This diversionary mechanism became available in Western Australia in March 1995, so 1996 is the first full reporting year. Chapter 4, section 4.1, contains an invaluable flow chart tracing the business of juvenile justice from first police contact through to the available modes of disposition; whilst section 4.8 contains some preliminary analysis of the operation of the teams in relation to offenders (by age, race and sex) and offences. It is anticipated that more comprehensive analysis will be able to be carried out in subsequent years.

With regard to 1996 crime patterns, perhaps the most striking factor is the murder rate: see page 6. At 1.1 per 100,000 (less than half of the 1995 rate) it is at historically low levels - comparable to the low European rates such as those found in the UK or the Netherlands. It is sometimes worth reminding ourselves of this to keep the community’s recurring ‘law and order’ debates in perspective.

On the other hand, armed robbery and other robbery rates are at historically high levels (see page 8). The reasons for this are not readily apparent, though there is some concern that the tightening up of Pawnbrokers’ legislation may have made burglary/theft less attractive, pushing offenders towards cash targets. This is something which merits further research.

Western Australia has had the highest burglary and motor vehicle theft rates in Australia for quite a few years past, and this unfortunately remains the case (see page 7). However,
it should be noted that each of these offences has fallen during 1996. It is possible that, for a mixture of demographic and security reasons, these offence levels may have peaked for the time being; this will be kept under review.

Finally, it should be noted that 11.3 per cent of all arrests are for drug offences. Analysis carried out at the Centre has indicated that this feeds through to a situation where about 9 per cent of criminal court business relates to charges of simple possession or use of cannabis. About one in three of such offenders have no previous conviction for anything at all, i.e. drug or non-drug. In other words, otherwise law-abiding individuals are being drawn into the criminal justice system for nothing other than cannabis possession or use. In the current climate of debate about effective use of police and judicial time, the allocation of scarce and expensive community resources evidenced by these figures must be a cause of concern.

Acknowledgements

As always, the Report is made possible only by the cooperation of the WA Police Service and the Ministry of Justice. To these organisations, we extend our appreciation and we hope that the mutually advantageous relationship continues.

Within the Centre itself, the Report is the product of tireless and meticulous work by the authors Ms Anna Ferrante, Ms Nini Loh and Mr Max Maller. The desktop publishing was again skilfully undertaken by Ms Sadie Operchal and proof-reading was conducted by Mr John Fernandez.

R W Harding
12 January 1998