

# National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS): an analysis of the impact on recorded crime

Companion Volume to Crime in England and Wales 2002/2003

## Part One: The national picture

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors,  
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'It is vital to measure crime accurately if we are to tackle it effectively'

*(Rt Hon David Blunkett MP, Home Secretary, July 2001)*



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## Preface

Statistics have become increasingly important to all areas of public policy. They both serve to highlight and describe the nature of social problems and also to monitor and inform the policies and practices designed to remedy them. Yet, in many complex areas of public policy, the practice of recording, collating and producing statistics has evolved over time. The field of crime statistics has been no exception. There has been considerable debate over recent years as to the relative merits and shortcomings of recorded crime statistics in England and Wales, and several attempts have been made to reform the process of collecting and presenting them to provide greater reliability and accuracy.

In 1998, changes to the Home Office Counting Rules clarified the recording of multiple victims of related incidents and added a number of new offences to the list of those crimes that the police should report in their statistics (see Povey and Prime, 1999). Following a recommendation in the Home Office Review of Crime Statistics (Simmons, 2000), last year, 2001/02, saw the publication of the first crime volume presenting data from both the British Crime Survey and police recorded crime data together (Simmons et al., 2002). The result has been a more holistic approach to the presentation of statistics on crime.

In 2002/03 further change was introduced with the specific aim of improving the way in which the police record crime. The National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS) has sought to bring about a victim-centred approach to crime recording and to provide a basis for greater consistency of recording between forces. In the long term, the changes included within the NCRS will produce recorded crime data which are increasing reliable, fair and comparable – a vision shared by the Home Office, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, the Association of Chief Police Officers and everyone with a stake in understanding the true pattern of crime in England and Wales.

In the short term, however, the cost of introducing these changes has been to inflate artificially estimates of the increase in the number of crimes recorded by the police. The main Crime bulletin (2002/03), published alongside this companion volume, shows that without taking into account the impact of introducing the NCRS the numbers of crimes recorded by police forces in England and Wales increased by seven per cent from 2001/02. This stands in stark contrast to the overall trends in the British Crime Survey, which show a decrease of two per cent from 2001/02 to 2002/03. The difference this year can largely be explained by the introduction of the NCRS and it has therefore been imperative to monitor the impact of these changes to enable the Home Office to provide a better indication of the actual level of police recorded crime in 2002/03. When the effect of the NCRS is taken into account, police recorded crime decreased by three per cent overall from 2001/02 to 2002/03.

Considerable attention has been paid to how the impact of the NCRS can best be measured. The method of doing so and the findings are both described in Part One. The report provides estimations of the NCRS effect nationally for different offence types and for all crime. Part Two provides our best analysis of the impact of the NCRS in each police force in England and Wales.

It is important that the national crime statistics present a clear picture without compromising their accuracy. The adjustments made to the police recorded crime figures in 2002/03 as a result of the NCRS have been necessary to inform everyone involved in reducing crime, not least the public, about the real trends in crime in England and Wales. However, adjusting crime statistics inevitably introduces an added layer of complexity to their interpretation.

The conclusions of this report are that most of the impact of the NCRS, certainly for the crimes measured in the government's main crime targets – domestic burglary, vehicle thefts and robbery – was realised throughout 2002/03 with little evidence of any continuing impact. The picture will of course vary from force to force, and certain other crime types

may still reveal further increases owing to changes in recording practices and reporting habits. However, on balance, we believe we can now stop making the adjustments to the recorded crime figures to reflect the impact of the NCRS over the past year and let the statistics stand as they are.

Recorded crime statistics are the product of an administrative system like many other social statistics. They will be affected by further changes in that system, and this has been equally true in the past. However, the introduction of the NCRS means that these statistics are now more consistently produced and comparisons of police performance, both across time and between individual forces, will be more robust as a result. We believe that this is an outcome which everyone can support.

PAUL WILES

Director

Research, Development and Statistics

Home Office



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## Executive summary

Variation in recording practices had made comparisons between police forces and, indeed, national estimates of the level of crime difficult to measure accurately. The Home Office has for some years sought to improve the consistency of police crime recording, in the first instance by making significant changes to the Home Office Counting Rules (see Povey and Prime, 1999). This report describes the latest attempt to bring about substantial improvements in this area: the introduction of the National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS).

All police forces in England and Wales adopted the NCRS in April 2002, although a few had moved in this direction a little earlier. The NCRS was developed by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) with assistance from the Home Office following the investigations into crime recording variation by ACPO, the Home Office and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC).

The NCRS aims:

- To promote greater consistency between police forces in the recording of crime.
- To take a more victim-oriented approach to crime recording.

The focus of the NCRS has been to harmonise police forces' approaches to crime recording in order to improve confidence in the recorded crime statistics and to enable a more robust comparison of police performance to be undertaken. The implementation of a more victim-oriented approach to crime recording will also provide a better measure of the service demanded from the police, and aims to promote public confidence in the police service as a whole.

### Prima facie versus evidential approach

For many police forces, the introduction of the NCRS required a move to a more prima facie approach to crime recording, that is recording based more on the victim's perception of a crime occurring rather than the police satisfying themselves that a crime had indeed taken place. Although a shift towards prima facie crime recording had been occurring in an ad hoc way in a number of forces prior to the universal adoption of the NCRS, the Standard served to formalise this process nationally. In doing so, it was not intended that police forces should trawl for all potential criminal activity that occurs and thereby record this as crime, but rather focus on the demands being placed upon the service by victims and to ensure these are recorded in a consistent manner. A number of practical examples of how the NCRS might have changed the police recording of incidents reported to them, are given below.

- A victim reports that, in an argument with someone else, they were pushed, although they have not been injured. This will result in the police recording a violent crime on the evidence of the victim. This may not have been recorded as such in the past.
- Police are called to a scene of domestic violence. The victim confirms that a common assault has taken place but does not wish to take the matter further. If there is no credible evidence to the contrary this will be recorded, whereas in some forces it may not have been in the past.
- A householder reports a window broken as criminal damage. Again, if there is no credible evidence to the contrary this will be recorded, whereas previously the lack of evidence may have led some forces to assume that the damage alone was not evidence of criminal intent.
- A person contacts the police to say that their credit card has been used fraudulently. In the past, if there was no other evidence to support this, this may not have been recorded. It would be recorded under the new system (unless credible evidence to the contrary was uncovered).

It was anticipated that such a move would result in more crimes being recorded than would have been the case had the NCRS not been introduced. The Home Office has therefore estimated the extent to which the introduction of the new recording Standard has impacted upon the recorded crime statistics in 2002/03 in order to provide a balanced interpretation of the real trends in crime in England and Wales.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To assess the NCRS effect, and to gauge the underlying trends at a force and national level, a full evaluation was carried out in the course of the 2002/03 financial year. The Home Office collected and analysed data for certain offence categories of crime-related incidents, as well as police recorded crimes, for each police force in England and Wales, for the period from April 1999 (for those forces that could provide backdated data) to March 2003. This approach was agreed with ACPO and police forces through the National Crime Recording Steering Group, established and chaired by the Home Office Research Development and Statistics Directorate with police service representatives from each of the 10 regions, HMIC, and the Home Office Police Standards Unit.

The methodology involved comparing trends in:

- the number of crime-related incidents reported by the public to the police (in several main offence categories); and
- the number of crimes recorded by police.

To monitor the extent to which crime has risen before and after the introduction of the NCRS, the ratio of police recorded crimes to crime-related incidents (i.e. crime calls for service) has been compared by force and by crime type. Provided a force's incident recording system remained reasonably consistent over the year (and this was not always the case), the incident count could be used as an indication of trends in the demand for service on the police, to compare with the trends in those crimes being recorded. In other words, the incident counts were taken as the best guide to 'real' changes in crime on the assumption that the propensity of the public to report crimes should remain reasonably constant over this period.

It has been assumed that any changes in the ratio between crimes and incidents are explained by the impact of the introduction of the NCRS. In particular, 'step changes' (i.e. significant and sustained increases in the ratio between crimes and incidents) after the adoption of the NCRS compared to the year before are considered to indicate a probable NCRS impact.

An estimate of the NCRS impact on police crime recording has been calculated, for both individual forces (this is discussed in Part Two of this report) and to generate a national estimate. The national picture of the impact of the NCRS on the offence types of violence against the person, robbery, all theft and total crime (total crime constitutes all recorded crimes, including for example sexual offences and the 'other offences' group) has been constructed using a sample of 25 out of the 43 police forces in England and Wales (22 for domestic burglary). The remaining forces were excluded from the calculation of the national estimates of the NCRS impact, primarily because the incident data provided to the Home Office by these forces did not provide a sufficiently stable baseline with which to compare the ratio of crimes recorded.

## **THE NCRS IMPACT ON TOTAL CRIME AND MAIN OFFENCE CATEGORIES**

Estimates of the percentage impact of the NCRS on recorded crime vary considerably between offence types. A similar degree of variation is likely to exist between the different crimes that make up each of these groups, although it has not been possible to estimate the effect of the recording changes on the individual crimes that make up the full list of notifiable offences. There is also considerable variation between police forces in the impact of these changes, due to the fact that each force was starting from a different position in terms of its recording practice and has had to move towards a point of greater consistency with other forces.

The national picture for total crime demonstrates **an overall NCRS impact of 10 per cent** on the recorded crime statistics for 2002/03. In other words, the crimes counted in 2002/03 were 10 per cent higher than they would have been under pre-NCRS recording, reflecting a change in recording practice rather than a real increase in crime. This estimate represents the impact on this year's recorded crime statistics, not the full impact of the NCRS, as this will have affected the data for some forces in earlier years.

- The violence against the person offence grouping demonstrated the largest NCRS impact (23 per cent in 2002/03). Whilst most of the impact occurred in the first quarter of 2002/03, a subsequent rise in the ratio of crimes to incidents in the latter part of the year may indicate that the NCRS impact is not yet complete for this offence type.
- The national picture demonstrates that domestic burglary figures were three per cent higher because of the NCRS effect, with no indication of any continuing effect beyond the second quarter of 2002/03.
- The NCRS effect on robbery is estimated to have been in the region of three per cent, although the comparatively small numbers of robberies mean that small changes in the number of crimes and incidents can result in disproportionately large estimated effects. Once again, there is little evidence of any enduring NCRS effect post 2002/03.
- The national picture for theft shows an NCRS impact of nine per cent. The data suggest that this effect has now levelled off.
- The impact on vehicle theft was estimated using a different method from other offences because most forces were unable to provide incident numbers relating specifically to these types of theft. The result is an adjustment to the change in recorded vehicle thefts from 2001/02 to 2002/03 from minus one per cent to minus nine per cent. Most of this impact occurred in the first two quarters of the year.
- The national picture demonstrates that criminal damage figures were nine per cent higher because of the NCRS effect.

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings in this report fulfill the commitment of the Home Office to evaluate the impact of the NCRS on recorded crime figures which was made in the National Policing Plan in 2002. The national impact on total recorded crime in 2002/03 has been estimated to be 10 per cent. Whilst different offence types show varying degrees to which the NCRS effect has been fully realised, we feel it is safe to conclude that, for the most part, the effect is now over. This appears to be particularly the case for the main target crimes of burglary, theft and vehicle crime. Therefore the Home Office has decided, on the basis of the evidence in this report, that the figures published this year (in the main Crime in England and Wales 2002/03) will be the last in which a calculated adjustment for the NCRS effect will be included.

Of course, as an administrative data set, police recorded crime will continue to be affected by changes in the recording systems that govern its collection. Hence, we might anticipate some further changes as a result of the continuing maintenance and improvement of the Home Office Counting Rules, and also from the new auditing procedures brought in to monitor the implementation of the NCRS. In addition, recorded crime will continue to be affected by changes in the reporting of crime. However, it is our belief that the NCRS has established far greater consistency, along with systems which should enable this consistency to be maintained and improved. The result will be recorded crime data that are increasingly reliable and fair, and that provide a sound basis upon which to compare the performance of both the police service and the government in tackling crime.



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# 1 Introduction

The National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS) was introduced officially across all police forces in England and Wales from April 2002.

## The NCRS aims

- To promote greater consistency between police forces in the recording of crime; and
- To take a more victim-oriented approach to crime recording.

The full text of the Standard is available over the Internet at: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/recordedcrime1.html>

## The necessity for this companion volume to Crime in England and Wales 2002/03

The introduction of the NCRS has led to an expected increase in the number of recorded crimes in most forces. The differing base from which each force started to move towards greater consistency in crime recording has meant that it has been difficult to establish precisely the size of that change in the number of recorded crimes. However, the continuing importance of police recorded crime statistics in target setting and in measuring the impact of crime reduction activity, makes it necessary to disentangle the effects of the recording Standard from real changes in the level of crime during 2002/03.

This companion volume reports on the introduction of the national framework for monitoring the impact of the Standard, and presents the Home Office estimates of the contribution of the new Standard to the increase in recorded crime during 2002/03. Part One (this volume) provides a national overview, whilst Part Two provides information on the impacts in the 43 police forces in England and Wales – <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/rdsolr3203.pdf>

## CRIME RECORDING IN ENGLAND AND WALES

The process by which police forces record crimes has been the subject of continued scrutiny over the last 20 years. Aside from the considerable academic literature (see, for example, McCabe and Sutcliffe, 1978; Bottomley and Coleman, 1981; Coleman and Moynihan, 1996), the Home Office has also published a number of different studies (Ekblom and Heal, 1982; Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC), 1996; Burrows et al., 2000; HMIC, 2000; Simmons, 2000). Whilst it is not possible to review the literature here, a number of main points are worthy of note:

- Police forces tend to hold separate records of incidents (i.e. allegations of crimes or calls for service from the public) from their records of crimes.
- There is considerable variation in the systems (administrative, computer, geographical, personnel etc) which different police forces employ to record both incidents and crimes.
- The process of deciding whether to 'crime' an incident is complex. A number of factors external to the police can all impact on the likelihood of an incident becoming a crime (for example, the type of offence, who is reporting it, and the means of reporting it (999, in person call etc)).
- Internal police practices can also impact on the recording of incidents as crimes. Over time, different forces had developed different standards of 'proof' before recording an incident as a crime.

- Some forces tended to record allegations on a more prima facie basis, that is recording all incidents as crime that were reported by those who felt they had been a victim. Others only classified the reported crime once an investigation of the evidence had taken place. In fact, most forces existed on various points on a continuum between these two extremes resulting in considerable variation in the crime rates they were reporting.

The variation in recording practices had made comparisons between police forces and, indeed, national estimates of the level of crime difficult to measure accurately. The Home Office has for some years sought to improve the consistency of police crime recording, in the first instance by making significant changes to the Home Office Counting Rules (see Povey and Prime, 1999). This report describes the latest attempt to bring about substantial improvements in this area: the introduction of the National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS).

## **WHAT IS THE NATIONAL CRIME RECORDING STANDARD (NCRS)?**

With effect from April 2002, all police forces in England and Wales agreed to adopt crime recording procedures in accordance with a new national standard. This standard is known as the National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS). It was developed by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) with assistance from the Home Office following the investigations into crime recording variation by ACPO, the Home Office and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC).

### **The aims of the NCRS**

The NCRS has two distinct aims:

- To promote greater consistency between police forces in the recording of crime.
- To take a more victim-oriented approach to crime recording.

These aims embrace a number of elements:

### **Harmonising police forces' approaches to crime recording**

The HMIC Thematic Inspection Report On the Record (2000), together with the Home Office Review of Crime Statistics (Simmons, 2000), provided a major catalyst for the introduction of the NCRS. Both of these reviews built on earlier work that illustrated a degree of inconsistency in the way in which different police forces approached the recording of crimes under the established Home Office Counting Rules. Burrows et al. (2000) scrutinised the recording of incidents and crimes in five police forces and found that the proportion of incidents recorded as crimes varied from 33 per cent in one force to 55 per cent in another (the average across all five forces being 47 per cent). Their report highlighted how some police forces had adopted an evidential approach to crime recording whilst others took a more prima facie approach (see below).

Numerous factors are known to affect the crime figures, and not just the police. For example, a higher number of police officers can in certain circumstances cause a rise in recorded crime, since there are more officers recording it. This is particularly likely to be the case for crimes whose recording is dependent on the police being present or being called when the crime becomes apparent, for example shoplifting offences, possession of drugs or some low-level violent crimes. Changes in the law, and even insurance considerations, can also affect the level of recorded crime. The BCS shows that only around 40 per cent of crimes are reported by the public to the police, and although most of these unreported crimes are considered too trivial to report (according to the BCS respondents) this nonetheless leaves a large amount of 'headroom' for extra reporting. Finally, recorded crime depends on the recording practices of the police from the level of individual officers and individual commanders to force and national policies.



Furthermore, changes in public attitudes to reporting crime or to policing more generally may also affect the numbers of crimes that are presented to the police and therefore available to record. A police force that loses the confidence of its public may find that the public report fewer crimes, and therefore its level of recorded crime would be lower as a result.

### **Improving confidence in the recorded crime statistics**

Recorded crime statistics have for some time been viewed with some concern amongst the academic community, some sections of the media and also the general public. As suggested, at least part of this concern has been well founded, although more often based on variation in recording systems and not necessarily any malpractice. However, this situation has led to some lack of confidence in the statistics and the reported changes in crime levels.

The NCRS aims to improve the reliability of police recorded crime data. These data, alongside the BCS and other data sources, will allow a more accurate and more complete picture of crime to be presented. It is anticipated that by establishing a more transparent and consistent recording process, confidence can be restored in crime statistics and in the important information they provide to help society both assess the performance of the police and government, and also address specific crime problems.

### **Enabling a more robust comparison of police performance**

Improving the recording of crime in a consistent manner is vital if police performance is to be measured accurately and if the public is to be able to compare and assess the performance of different police forces using the crime statistics.

The implementation of the NCRS will increase our ability to confidently compare performance between forces, Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs) and Basic Command Units (BCUs). It will require constant vigilance (and supporting checks have been introduced which are outlined below), and there will undoubtedly be further room for improvement. However, the NCRS has brought about a much greater consistency in the systems used to record crime compared to the recent past, and we are confident this is now at a level where comparative performance can be properly assessed.

### **Providing a better service to victims and the general public**

The NCRS embodies the shifting police focus towards serving victims and the general public, by ensuring that the police record all reports of suspected crime by a victim or their bona fide representative. The implementation of a more victim-oriented approach to crime recording will therefore provide a better measure of the service demanded from the police, and aims to promote public confidence in the police service as a whole. It will do this by giving victims the assurance that the potential crimes being reported by them to the police will be properly recorded. More consistent and complete data will also facilitate the effective analysis of crime to support evidence-led policing interventions.

## **NCRS GENERAL PRINCIPLES AND SUPPORTING PROCESSES**

Supporting processes and comprehensive and clear guidance, interpreting the principles of the NCRS, have been introduced (see box).

### **Prima facie versus evidential approach**

As mentioned previously, the implementation of the NCRS can be seen as a shift towards a prima facie based model of crime recording, although it should be stressed that the NCRS does not imply pure prima facie crime recording<sup>1</sup>. Crime recording by the police is most easily visualised along a continuum from a prima facie approach to an evidential approach. The former model accepts that details of alleged crimes be taken at face value, and are recorded without scrutiny. The latter model

1. Indeed, as a result of the NCRS, some forces may have moved back from trying to capture anything that might be evidence of criminal activity towards capturing the demands from victims consistent with the new national standard.

## General principles

- All reports of incidents, whether from victims, witnesses or third parties and whether crime related or not, will result in the registration of an incident report by the police.
- Following the initial registration, an incident will be recorded as a crime (notifiable offence) if, on the balance of probability:
  - (a) the circumstances as reported amount to a crime defined by law (the police will determine this based on their knowledge of the law and counting rules), and
  - (b) there is no credible evidence to the contrary.
- Once recorded, a crime will remain recorded unless there is credible evidence to disprove that it has occurred.
- It is important that the Standard supports a victim-focused approach to crime recording where the public's call for service is met, as opposed to a proactive one where the police are required to trawl for potential crimes.

## Supporting processes

- Leadership  
Chief Officers and local BCU commanders should issue an unequivocal statement and clear commitment to the NCRS.
- Force Crime Registrar (FCR)  
Each force should appoint a Force Crime Registrar to act as final arbiter in both the audit process and the interpretation of the counting rules. This individual should be outside operational line command and answerable to the Chief Officer with overall responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of crime recording processes. A major training programme for FCRs and other staff involved in crime recording commenced in April 2003.
- The incident recording system  
Forces should seek to capture all crime-related incidents coming to the notice of the police so as to establish an accurate and timely picture of what is happening locally. It is envisaged that in future, incident and crime recording systems should be fully integrated or at least linked to facilitate tracking and audit between the systems.
- The crime recording system  
A modern crime recording system, available force-wide, is essential to the proper implementation of the NCRS.
- The crime recording process  
Responsibility for the recording of crime should be placed in the hands of a dedicated and highly trained group of staff, such as is common in dedicated Crime Recording / Crime Management Units, whether centrally or locally based.
- Audit (national and local)  
An essential element of the NCRS is the need for regular and ongoing local and national scrutinisation at all stages of the process. The Audit Commission, on behalf of Police Standards Unit, carried out an audit of each police force's compliance with the NCRS during 2002/03. These crime data reviews helped forces to identify weaknesses in their crime recording practices so that they could be addressed.

requires that details of any incident be challenged and validated, in the same manner that might be expected if the case were to be presented in court in order to charge the suspect. However, as the HMIC report *On the Record* (2000) states:

'(these) two approaches are not mutually exclusive. The recording of crimes involves a complex interaction of the unique circumstances surrounding each crime incident, a force's organisational approach and style, and the recording officer's views.'

The NCRS advocates a practical and common sense approach to crime recording within a more victim-focused approach. Although a shift towards prima facie crime recording had been occurring in an ad hoc way in a number of forces prior to the universal adoption of the NCRS, the Standard has served to formalise this process nationally. In doing so, it is not intended that police forces should trawl for all potential criminal activity that occurs and thereby record this as crime, but rather focus on the demands being placed upon the service by victims and to ensure these are recorded in a consistent manner. To be clear on this point, the Standard does not require the police to measure all crimes that occur in society, but to measure consistently those crimes which the public believe should be brought to the attention of the police.

Here are a number of practical examples of how the NCRS might have changed the police recording of incidents reported to them:

- A victim reports that, in an argument with someone else, they were pushed, although they have not been injured. This will result in the police recording a violent crime on the evidence of the victim. This may not have been recorded as such in the past.
- Police are called to a scene of domestic violence. The victim confirms that a common assault has taken place but does not wish to take the matter further. If there is no credible evidence to the contrary this will be recorded, whereas in some forces it may not have been in the past.
- A householder reports a window broken as criminal damage. Again, if there is no credible evidence to the contrary this will be recorded, whereas it may not have been in the past.
- A person contacts the police to say that their credit card has been used fraudulently. In the past, if there was no other evidence to support this, this may not have been recorded. It would be recorded under the new system (unless credible evidence to the contrary was uncovered).

### **Home Office Counting Rules (HOCR)**

Definitive guidance on crime recording is contained in the Home Office Counting Rules on crime (HOCR). These rules are updated and revised each year, and the latest version is available on the Home Office website (<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/countrules.html>). Throughout the implementation period, various clarifications have been made to the HOCR to ensure that clear and consistent recording practices are adopted in every force. Changes and clarifications will continue to be made as and when required, and the rules are revised annually.

### **THE IMPACT OF THE NCRS**

Although the NCRS generates the basis for better performance management information, in the short term it has meant an artificial increase in recorded crime. This has occurred because forces have been asked to record crime reports that may previously have gone unrecorded because, for example, they felt there was insufficient evidence to fully support the occurrence of the crime, or there was little basis upon which the police could have investigated and/or detected the crime.

ACPO predicted that the effect of the NCRS would inflate the number of recorded crimes by as much as 15-20 per cent. This increase was expected to represent an artificial increase, one that would bear no relation to real changes in the level of crime. This report sets out the Home Office efforts to measure the impact of the NCRS on recorded crime during the period April 2002 to March 2003, building on the initial analysis carried out prior to April 2002 reported in Simmons (2001) and *Crime in England and Wales 2001/02* (Simmons et al., 2002).

### **Structure of the report**

- Chapter 2 describes the Home Office methodology for monitoring the impact of the NCRS during 2002/03 on police recorded crime.
- Chapter 3 describes the national NCRS impact on the police recorded crime statistics for 2002/03.
- Chapter 4 considers whether the impact of the NCRS is largely complete or whether we might expect to see continuing recording effects.

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## 2 Analysing the NCRS

The NCRS is the latest of a series of changes designed to improve the way in which the police record crime. Alongside these changes, the Home Office, in consultation with police forces, has developed a methodology to measure the impact of the recording changes. This methodology, derived from work for the Home Office Review of Crime Statistics (Simmons, 2000) and additionally by Lancashire Constabulary, enables an estimation to be made of the 'real' change in the level of recorded crime for 2002/03 which is thought would have occurred if the NCRS had not been introduced.

### **Other national changes to police recording practices**

Before the introduction of the NCRS, the most significant recent change to police recording practice occurred in April 1998, when amendments to the HOCR added a number of new offences to the list of crimes that the police should report in their statistics. These recording changes also altered the basis for counting the number of offences for crimes involving more than one victim; under the 1998 counting rules, the statistics were changed to measure one crime per victim wherever possible. It has been widely acknowledged that these changes to the counting rules had the effect of artificially increasing total recorded crime by 14 per cent in a single year. For violence against the person offences, the inclusion of common assault, harassment and assault on a constable in the list of notifiable offences, contributed to a recorded increase in this crime of almost 120 per cent which bore no relationship to real changes in victimisation in that year (see Povey and Prime, 1999).

In order to ascertain and quantify the overall impact of the recording changes in the 1998/99 financial year, it was necessary to implement a national process of monitoring. The assessment of the impact comprised two methods:

- 18 forces undertook a double counting exercise recording crimes using both the old counting rules and coverage, and the 1998 counting rules;
- the other forces sampled a proportion of offences which forces felt that the 1998 counting rules had affected the most (Povey and Prime, 1999).

Although double counting provided a good statistical basis from which to understand the impact of the recording changes in 1998, this method was regarded as too resource intensive by a number of forces involved. More critically, the nature of the changes with the NCRS, which did not involve a change in the rules for the crimes that needed to be recorded, but rather a change in the culture of recording by individual officers, meant that it would have been very difficult to assess the impact of the NCRS in the same way.

The nature of recording changes involved in the adoption of the NCRS by forces in 2002 was quite different from the changes in 1998. Generally, the impact of changes to the counting rules in 1998 was confined to a small number of specific crime types; whereas the impact of the NCRS is much more diffuse across offence categories. As said, the NCRS, relied more on changes to the culture of crime recording in many forces, and how individual police officers recorded the allegations of crimes received from the public. For this reason an alternative method to monitor the impact of the NCRS on recorded crime was adopted and implemented by forces. The methodology was adopted nationally because it was believed that it would provide the best, and most nationally consistent, monitoring process, whilst minimising the costs to police forces.

## FORCES WHICH ADOPTED THE NCRS PRIOR TO 2002

The basic principles inherent in the NCRS were introduced in a small number of forces in advance of the formal adoption of the Standard nationally; their dates of adoption ranged from April 1999 to October 2000. The initial analysis of the 'early adopter' forces, namely Avon and Somerset, Lancashire, Staffordshire, and West Midlands was based on a methodology using forces' recorded crime data only<sup>2</sup>.

The analysis of the recorded crime and incident data for 2001/02, based closely on the national methodology subsequently applied over the course of 2002/03, indicated that the impact of recording changes on the police crime statistics in 2001/02 was of the order of five percentage points nationally. That is, the seven per cent increase in recorded crime in 2001/02, other things being equal, appeared to be in reality an increase of no more than two per cent (Simmons et al., 2002).<sup>3</sup>

### Summary of the initial analysis of the impact of the NCRS on the early adopters

- The impact of the NCRS varied considerably between different types of crimes. In general, less serious crimes and high volume crimes were most affected.
- The crimes covered by the government's targets were affected to some degree, but the impact based on the five early adopters appeared smaller than for other high volume crimes.
- The impact of the NCRS varied from force to force (and even across different areas within the same force), depending on their previous recording practices.
- The impact was not instantaneous in every force. It took more than a year for the full impact to be revealed in some forces.
- There was evidence of some pre-implementation impact on crime figures both from anticipation of the Standard (e.g. the implementation of NCRS training for staff in some forces) and also through the work (of forces and the Home Office) in promoting the Standard and improving the understanding and application of the existing counting rules.

Simmons et al. (2002)

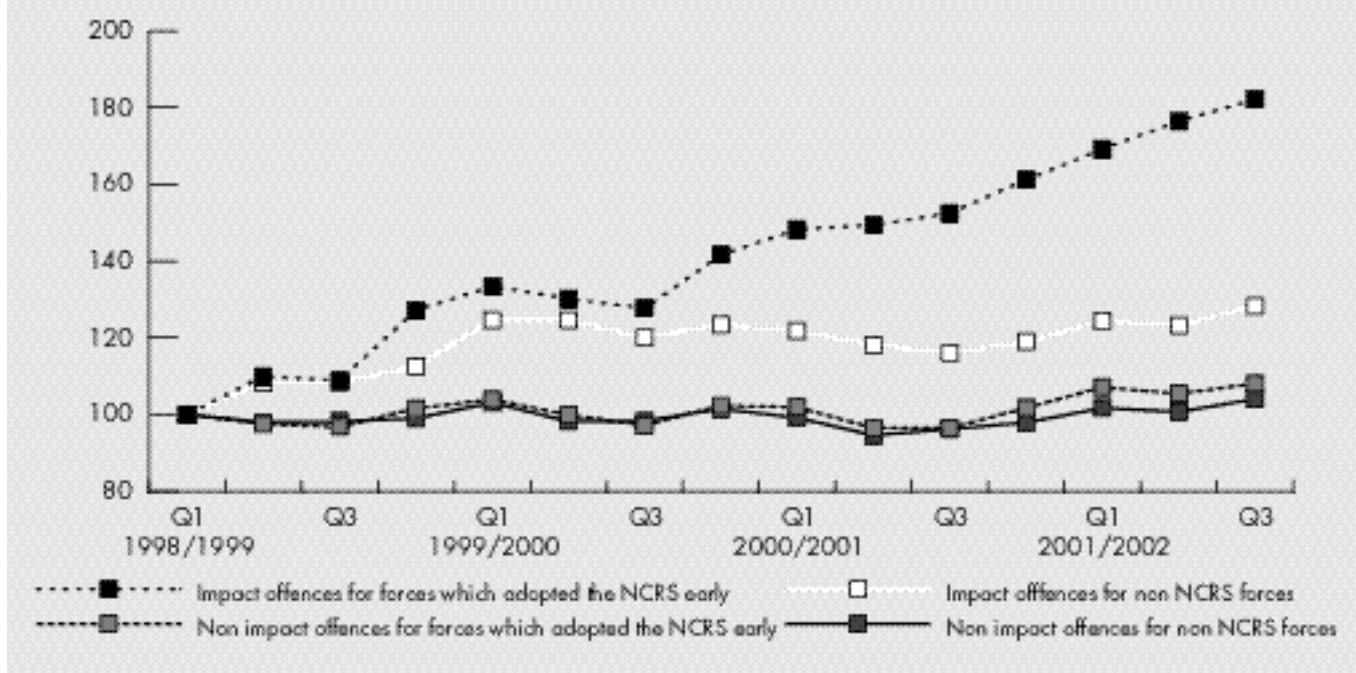
The analysis of the early adopters showed that the recording changes varied considerably between different categories of recorded crime. The changes increased the number of recorded crimes, principally in the less serious crimes in the violence group, in criminal damage and in other thefts. For sexual offences, although there appeared to be quite a large NCRS effect, it is thought that this was predominantly due to the small numerical base and improvements in the treatment of victims of sexual offences by the police and other agencies.

For violent crime, an apparent eight per cent increase nationally in 2001/02 became an estimated five per cent decrease when taking into account the impact of recording changes. The increase recorded for the target crime of *domestic burglary* (also referred to as 'burglary dwelling') was halved, despite the expectation that the impact would be much smaller than that for violence or criminal damage. In fact, the performance target crimes such as domestic burglary, personal robbery and vehicle crime did not show a marked NCRS effect in the early adopter forces (for more detail see Simmons, 2001).

Further analysis of the early adopter forces suggests that the initial conclusions were well founded. Figure 2.1 compares quarterly crime trends in the early adopter forces for crimes which were identified as significantly affected by the recording changes in the original analysis and then other crimes which did not appear to be significantly affected. Each series has been indexed so that the first quarter in 1998/99 equals 100 and therefore the different lines on the chart indicate relative changes in each group rather than an absolute level.

2. It was initially thought that Kent was an early adopter, and it was included as a fifth pilot force. However, subsequent to the initial analysis, it was confirmed that whilst Kent had introduced many of the supporting processes of the NCRS from April 2000, the force did not actually apply a more *prima facie* approach until April 2002.
3. In order to evaluate the impact of the NCRS in 2001/02, the change in the average ratio of recorded crimes to crime-related incidents in each category between the first quarter of 2001/02 and the fourth quarter was compared. Owing to incomplete data and changes in some forces' incident recording systems, a comparison within the same financial year was the most robust, but this differs slightly from the method used in 2002/03 when better incident data were available.

**Figure 2.1 Indexed trends in recorded crimes in forces that adopted NCRS principles early compared to other forces, for two groups of crimes – those previously identified as impacted by the NCRS and those not (Quarter 1 1998/99 – Quarter 3 2001/02)**



The graph, previously published in *Crime in England and Wales 2001/02*, shows that there was little change over the period in the offences identified as being minimally affected by the new principles, either in those forces adopting new recording practices or in other forces. In addition, it demonstrates that there was a significant impact for those offences that were initially identified as likely to be affected.

It is obvious that there was an increase in the impacted group of offences in those forces identified as adopting NCRS principles. It also seems that there was a small effect in other forces, and there are a number of reasons why this might have occurred. For example, some forces which did not pilot the NCRS moved towards a more victim-focused crime recording practice over this period, even though the force was not recognised as adopting the new standard at the time. A number of HMIC inspection reports had encouraged such a move and will have had an impact on forces' recording practices. In addition, the 1998 counting rule changes took longer to absorb than perhaps was initially anticipated, and these too will have had a continuing impact. Furthermore, government policies to improve the reporting and recording of certain crimes which fell into the list of affected crimes, such as domestic violence and racist incidents, will have affected the police service generally and this may have given rise to increases in recording which are unrelated to the NCRS.

## METHODOLOGY FOR THE HOME OFFICE MONITORING OF THE NCRS IMPACT 2002/03

By simply looking at the trends in recorded crime, it is possible in theory that any increase in crime may have been real, and simply coincided with the adoption of new recording practices. Therefore to assess the NCRS effect, and to gauge the underlying trends at a force and national level, a full evaluation was carried out in the course of the 2002/03 financial year.

The Home Office collected and analysed data for certain offence categories of crime-related incidents, as well as police recorded crimes, for each police force in England and Wales, for the period from April 1999 (for those forces that could provide backdated data) to March 2003. This approach was agreed with ACPO and police forces through the National Crime Recording Steering Group, established and chaired by the Home Office Research Development and Statistics Directorate with police service representatives from each of the 10 regions, HMIC, and the Home Office Police Standards Unit.

An estimate of the NCRS impact on police crime recording has been calculated, for both individual forces (see Part Two) and to generate a national estimate. The methodology involved comparing trends in:

- the number of crime-related incidents reported by the public to the police;
- and the number of crimes recorded by police.

Police recorded crime data are routinely supplied to the Home Office. However, incident information at a police force level was only available within certain crime groupings, previously defined by HMIC. The categories include<sup>4</sup>:

- Violence against the person
- Burglary dwelling
- Robbery
- All theft
- Total crime.

It is important to recognise that considerable variation exists between forces' incident recording systems and their coverage (for example, a few forces do not include over the counter requests or other sources in their count of incidents). However, provided a force's incident recording system remained reasonably consistent over the year, the incident count could be used as an indication of trends in the demand for service on the police, to compare with the trends in those crimes being recorded. In other words, the incident counts were taken as the best guide to 'real' changes in crime on the assumption that the propensity of the public to report crimes should remain reasonably constant over this period. In most cases, then, one should expect that the trend in recorded crime should follow the trend in incidents under an established crime recording regime.

The findings in Chapter 3 show that, overall, most forces recorded more crimes than crime-related incidents. At first this seems surprising. However, some crimes will never have been recorded initially as incidents and in other cases one incident may have led to the recording of more than one crime (as per the revised 1998 counting rules). This might be especially relevant to the relatively high ratio of crime to crime-related incidents for violence against the person offences. The police may not record incidents for violence offences they happen upon in the street (particularly late night, alcohol-related violence) and those referred to them by specialist units (for example, offences of domestic violence and sexual assault).

To monitor the extent to which crime has risen before and after the introduction of the NCRS, the ratio of police recorded crimes to crime-related incidents (i.e. crime calls for service) has been compared by force and by crime type. It has been assumed that any changes in the ratio between crimes and incidents are explained by the impact of the introduction of the NCRS. In particular 'step changes' (i.e. significant and sustained increases in the ratio between crimes and incidents) after the adoption of the NCRS compared to the year before are considered to indicate a probable NCRS impact. Take as an example, if for Force A the ratio of crimes to incidents was 1.50 in 2001/02 (e.g. 1,500 crimes and 1,000 incidents were recorded), and the ratio increased to 1.60 in 2002/03 (e.g. 1,650 crimes and 1,030 incidents were recorded), then the NCRS effect on 2002/03 is assumed to be seven per cent (i.e.  $(1.60/1.50 - 1) \times 100$ ), although the number of recorded crimes in Force A will appear to have increased by 10 per cent from 1,500 to 1,650 crimes.

The national picture for the impact of the NCRS on the offence types of violence against the person, robbery, all theft and total crime<sup>6</sup> has been constructed using a sample of 25 forces. The estimate for the NCRS impact on burglary dwelling is based on the data of 22 forces because three forces were not able to differentiate between domestic burglaries and non-

4. Although incident data were collected from forces for other crime categories (e.g. burglary other, burglary all, criminal damage, sexual offences, and other offences), not all forces were able to provide these data due to the limitations of their incident systems, or else data were not used to calculate the NCRS estimate because the numbers were so small. A discussion of the limitations of the methodology follows below.
5. The British Crime Survey results support this hypothesis. The proportion of crimes being reported to the police has hardly changed since the mid-1990s (at around 40 per cent). Most of the significant changes have been in the proportion of reported crimes being recorded by the police (rising from around 50 per cent to 60 per cent over the last five years, that is back to the level in the early 1980s).
6. Total crime constitutes all recorded crimes, including for example, sexual offences and the 'other offences' group.



domestic burglaries. The remaining forces were excluded from the calculation of the national estimates of the NCRS impact. This is primarily because the incident data provided to the Home Office by the excluded forces did not provide a sufficiently stable basis upon which to compare the ratio of crimes recorded. Some forces had introduced new systems (both computer and administrative systems) for the recording of incidents in the course of 2002/03. Other forces showed evidence of a large change in the practice of recording incidents as well as crimes, which may have been a side effect of the NCRS. More detail on the context in which the NCRS was introduced in individual forces is given in Part Two.

The ratio of police recorded crimes to incidents for each quarter (three-month period) following 1 April 2002, has been compared with the same ratio for the full 12 months before implementation (1 April 2001 – 31 March 2002) to estimate the impact of recording changes on each quarter in 2002/03, and then for the full year. The 12-month period was chosen to provide a sufficiently stable baseline on which to make comparisons between the full years' published data for 2001/02 and the recorded crime statistics for 2002/03. These estimates do not therefore include the recording impacts in earlier years for those forces moving towards more victim-focused recording prior to April 2002.

Details of the formula used to calculate the NCRS impact on crime is included in the box on page 13.

It is worth stressing that these calculations can only provide an estimate of the NCRS effect. There are a number of limitations to this methodology which are outlined below. The results are summarised in Chapter 3, and have been cited alongside recorded crime data in the published Home Office Quarterly Updates (see Povey *et al.*, 2003a, and Povey *et al.*, 2003b) and in the annual recorded crime statistics published in *Crime in England and Wales 2002/03*.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE HOME OFFICE METHODOLOGY

There are some limitations to the methodology adopted in this report.

- **Other 'cultural' changes to recording incidents**

Changes which have occurred to some forces' incident recording processes or systems may have affected the reliability of calls for service as an indicator of underlying trends in crime. This is particularly so if they were introduced at the same time as the wider NCRS recording changes. In some instances, there is evidence of similar cultural changes to incident recording, inextricably linked to the implementation of the NCRS by forces, which have resulted in an inflation of incident numbers, coinciding with the time the NCRS was introduced by the majority of forces in April 2002. For forces where changes to incident recording appear to have been significant, they have been excluded from national estimates of the NCRS effect. However, some of the forces included may have been affected by these factors to a lesser degree. The overall effect will have been to make estimates of the NCRS impact lower (i.e. more modest) than they would have otherwise been. In turn, the effect of this will have been to make the estimates for the 'real' (i.e. adjusted) changes in crime slightly high.

- **System changes to recording incidents**

Some forces had modernised and upgraded their call handling procedures and IT systems prior to or during the monitoring period. This clearly impacted on the number of incidents being captured and recorded by the forces. Any force which believed that its calls for service count could have changed over the monitoring period was asked to undertake additional analysis. Where possible these analyses have been taken into account in explaining the trends in crime in those forces over the last two years.

- **Real increases in crime-related incidents**

We have generally assumed that forces experiencing large changes to their incident count will have done so because of improvements in the capture of incidents associated with the introduction of the NCRS (outlined above). These forces have generally been excluded from the national estimates of the NCRS effect. It is possible that some of these changes may actually have been the result of an increase in the actual number of crimes reported to the police.

- **Small numbers of crimes and crime-related incidents**

For crimes where numbers are comparatively small, estimates of the impact of the NCRS will be considerably less robust. Small fluctuations in the incident and/or police recorded crime data for low frequency offences such as sexual offences and also robbery in some cases, result in disproportionately large percentage changes over time. In these circumstances, it may not be appropriate to use the national methodology to calculate the NCRS impact.

- **Analysing the impact on offence types**

Currently, it is not possible to adjust for the impact of the NCRS on certain crime types because of limitations in crime-related incident data. Police incident data systems have been designed for internal management information rather than to monitor the impact of recording changes on crime levels. In some circumstances police are unable to differentiate between types of incidents – for example, theft of and theft from vehicle incidents cannot normally be separated from the wider category of theft.

- **Analysing the impact in sub police force areas**

In most forces incident data are collected at a force level and are not available for smaller geographic areas, such as CDRPs or BCUs. Therefore smaller scale analysis of any NCRS effect has not been possible.

## Method of calculation for the NCRS effect on 2002/03 \*

The following notation is defined as:

I1 = total number of crime-related incidents in year 2001/02

I2 = total number of crime-related incidents in year 2002/03

C1 = total number of recorded crimes in year 2001/02

C2 = total number of recorded crimes in year 2002/03

R1 = ratio of crimes to incidents for year 2001/02 = C1/I1

R2 = ratio of crimes to incidents for year 2002/03 = C2/I2

To calculate the NCRS impact on 2002/03 we compare the ratio of crimes to incidents for this period with the ratio of crimes to incidents for the year 2001/02.

**N = NCRS impact = R2/R1**

**As a percentage the NCRS impact = (R2/R1 - 1) \* 100**

To calculate the "real" increase in crime from 2001/02 to 2002/03 (i.e. that part of the unadjusted increase which is not attributable to the NCRS) it is first necessary to calculate the number of crimes that would have been recorded in 2001/02 if the NCRS had been in place (A1).

A1 = adjusted recorded crime in 2001/02 = C1\*N

Therefore the **real increase** in crime from 2001/02 to 2002/03 =

**Real increase (number) = C2-A1**

The real increase in crime can also be expressed as:

**Real increase in crime (fraction) = C2/A1**

**Real increase in crime (percentage) = (C2/A1 - 1) \* 100**

Example

I1 = 1,000

I2 = 1,030

C1 = 1,500

C2 = 1,650

R1 = 1,500/1,000 = 1.50

R2 = 1,650/1,030 = 1.60

**N = 1.60/1.50 = 1.07**

**N (as %) = (1.60/1.50-1)\*100 = 7%**

A1 = 1500\*1.07 = 1,602

**Real increase:**

**1,650-1,602 = 48**

**1,650/1,602 = 1.03**

**(1,650/1,602- 1)\*100 = 3%**

\* To calculate the NCRS impact on each quarter of 2002/03 use the same formulae as described above, but substitute C2 and I2 with the number of crimes and incidents for that specific quarter.



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## 3 The national picture

This chapter summarises the findings of the monitoring of the NCRS impact in 2002/03, beginning with a summary of the history of recording changes evidenced by the British Crime Survey (BCS). The findings that follow provide a national perspective of the impact of the NCRS on forces across England and Wales<sup>7</sup> for the main offence groups. The NCRS impact in individual police force areas is provided in Part Two.

### THE PICTURE FROM THE BRITISH CRIME SURVEY

Without adjusting for the NCRS impact, police recorded crime data in 2002/03 show a marked different trend from that shown in the BCS. Non-adjusted figures show a national increase of seven per cent in police recorded crime between 2001/02 and 2002/03, compared to British Crime Survey findings, which show a decrease of two per cent. Including the impact of the NCRS brings police recorded crimes more in line with the BCS (the overall effect on police recorded crime is a three per cent fall from 2001/02 to 2002/03).

Figure 3.1 shows the comparative trends since 1981 in the crimes that BCS respondents say happened to them, those that they reported to the police and the police recorded crimes. The lines show indexed trends rather than absolute levels in order to better compare the movements in these statistics relative to one another.

Between 1981 and 1991 the line representing those crimes that the public chose to report to the police was rising more quickly than the overall trend in actual BCS-measured crime. The trend in recorded crime appears to track the trend in reported crime. This suggests that most of the change in recorded crime over this period was due to increased reporting of crimes by the public.

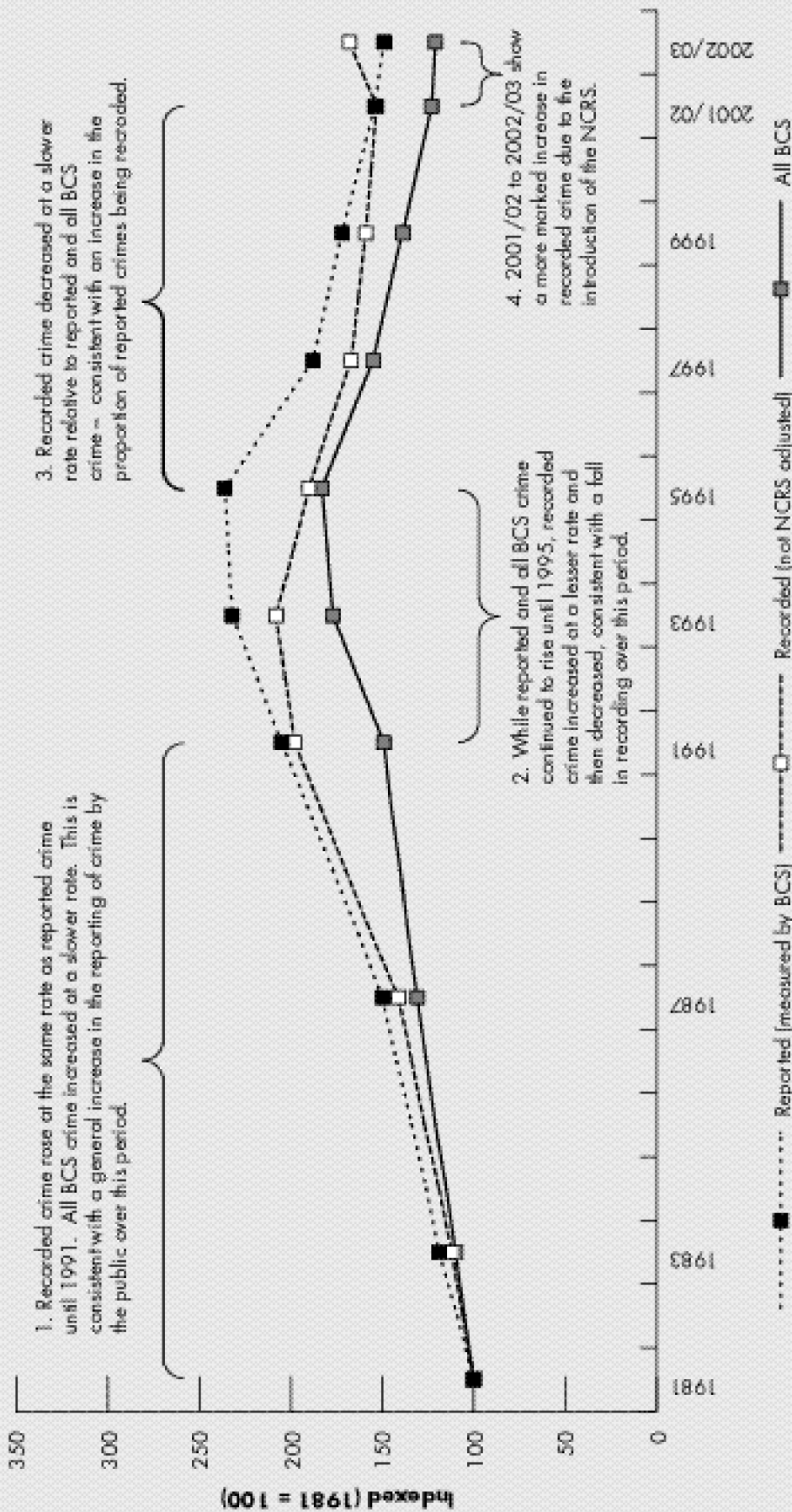
Between 1991 and 1995 the situation changes: the trend in recorded crime appears to rise at a lesser rate compared to the similar trends in reported crimes and all crimes. This is consistent with a drop in the recording of crime by the police, relative to reporting and real experience. Over this period, the BCS suggested crime was also rising.

Since 1995, the trends in all crime and reported crime have been reasonably consistent, suggesting no significant change in the public's willingness to report crimes to the police, in general. However, it can be seen that the trend in recorded crime has fallen less than the trend in reported and all crime from the BCS. This is consistent with an increase in police recording of crime since 1995. The increase in recording therefore began prior to the introduction of the NCRS, possibly in response to various HMIC reports urging forces to improve their recording practice and wider government policies to improve the treatment of victims and in particular the police response to domestic violence and racist incidents. However, we can see that the increase in recording in the latest year, when the NCRS has had its main impact, has been the most significant.

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7. The national picture of the NCRS impact has been produced using a sample of 25 forces for all offence types except burglary dwelling which uses 22 forces (three forces included in the national estimates were not able to split burglary offences between domestic and non-domestic burglaries). See Chapter 2 for more details.

**Figure 3.1 Indexed trends in the reporting and recording of crime, and all BCS crime, 1981 to 2002/03 (1981 = 100)**

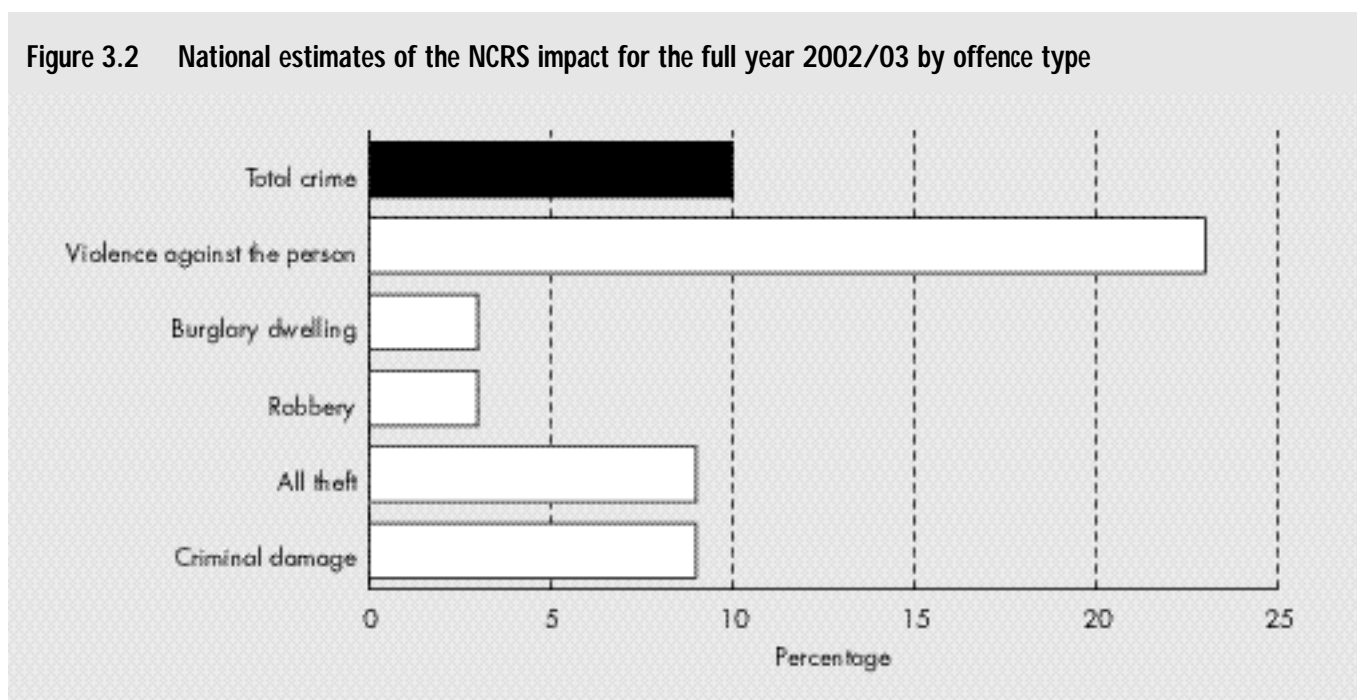


1. BCS estimates of incidents for 1991 to 2002/03 are based on estimates of population and the number of households in England and Wales, that have been revised in light of the 2001 Census. For more information please see the main Crime bulletin.
2. For 2001/02 and 2002/03, reported and all BCS crime relate to interviews carried out in the 2001/02 and 2002/03 financial years respectively, and incidents experienced in the 12 months prior to interview. Recorded crimes relate to incidents in the 12 months up to the end of September 2001 and September 2002 respectively (with most of the impact of the NCRS in the first quarter of the 02/03 financial year). This is so that the recorded crime data are centred on the same period as reported and all BCS crime - i.e. centred on March 01 and March 02.

## THE NCRS IMPACT ON TOTAL CRIME AND MAIN OFFENCE CATEGORIES

Estimates of the percentage impact of the NCRS on recorded crime vary considerably between offence types (see Figure 3.2). A similar degree of variation is likely to exist between the different crimes that make up each of these groups, although it has not been possible to estimate the effect of the recording changes on each of the individual crime types that make up the full list of notifiable offences.

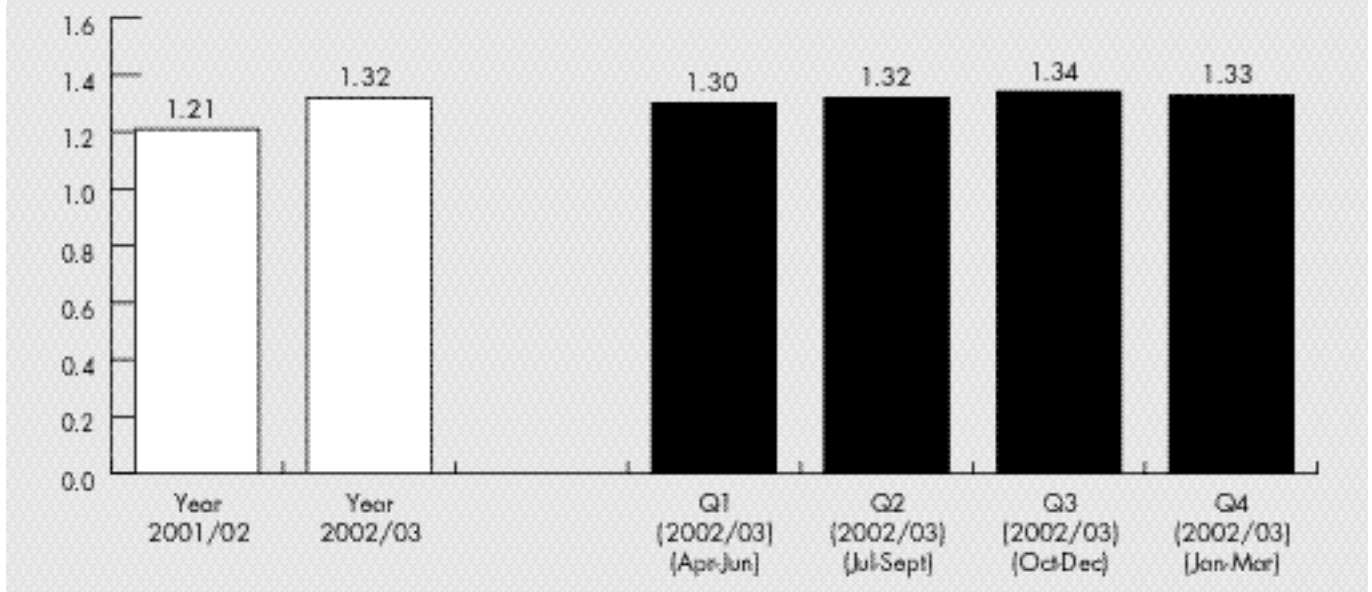
**Figure 3.2 National estimates of the NCRS impact for the full year 2002/03 by offence type**



### Total recorded crime

The national picture for total crime demonstrates an overall NCRS impact of 10 per cent on the recorded crime statistics for 2002/03. In other words, the crimes counted in 2002/03 were 10 per cent higher than they would have been under pre-NCRS recording. Total crime is most affected by the numerically largest offence of 'all theft', accounting for approximately 40 per cent of total crime. (The estimate for total crime is based on all recorded crime and not just the total of the offences for which NCRS impact estimates are separately available.)

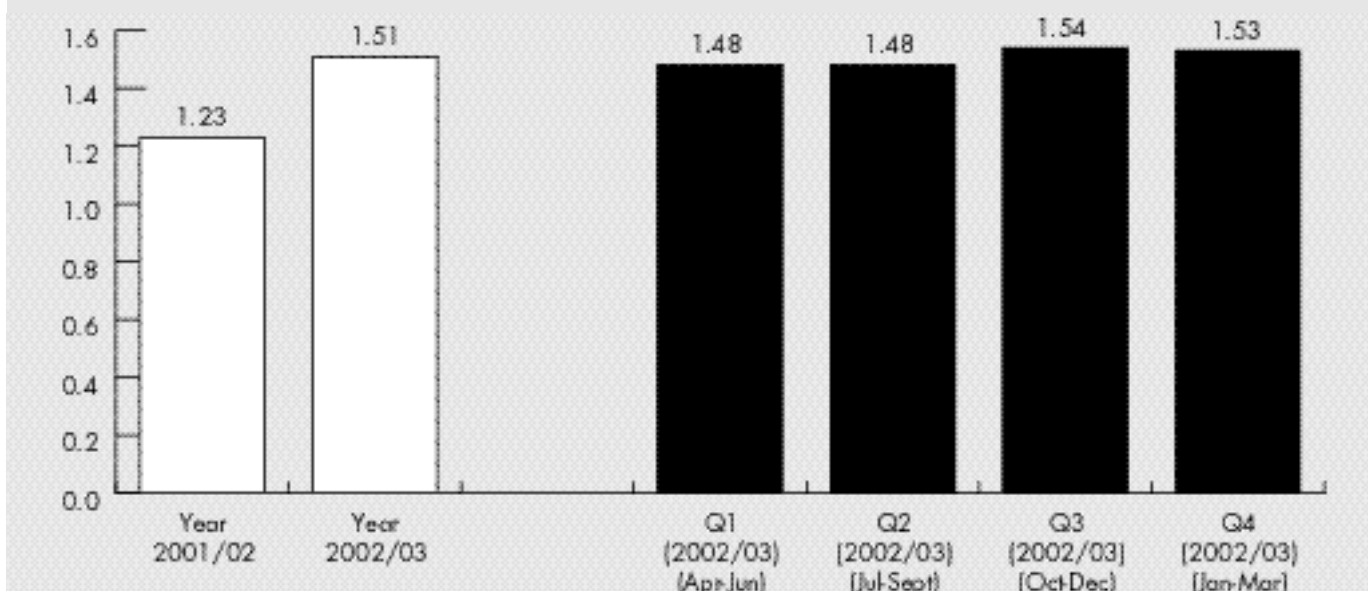
Figure 3.3 illustrates that the ratio of recorded crimes to incidents increased from 1.21 in 2001/02 to 1.32 in 2002/03, with most of this impact occurring in the first quarter. The quarterly ratio bars demonstrate an increasing ratio of crimes to incidents from quarter one to quarter three. The very small change in the ratio across the four quarters would suggest that there was little additional NCRS impact in subsequent quarters and overall it might be concluded that the impact of these recording changes has largely been completed.

**Figure 3.3 Ratio of crimes to incidents: total crime (2001/02 – 2002/03)****Violence against the person offences**

Violence against the person demonstrates the largest NCRS impact (23 per cent). Prior to the introduction of the NCRS, many of these offences, particularly low-level violence offences, might have been dealt with by way of advice and not necessarily recorded as crimes, because they rarely involved injury.

Figure 3.4 illustrates an increase in the ratio of violence against the person crimes to incidents from 1.23 in 2001/02 to 1.51 in 2002/03, producing the overall estimate of a 23 per cent increase in recording. The quarterly ratios suggest that most of this impact occurred in the first quarter, although the relatively large additional rise of 0.06 in the third quarter may indicate that the NCRS impact is not yet complete for this offence type. It is possible that there will continue to be a further improvement in recording in this category in future years. It has been significantly affected by other changes, in particular the drive to increase reporting and recording of domestic violence and racist incidents.

It is estimated that the NCRS impact on the broader category of all violent crime (including violence against the person, robbery and sexual offences) was 20 per cent. The estimates for sexual offences and robbery are discussed below.

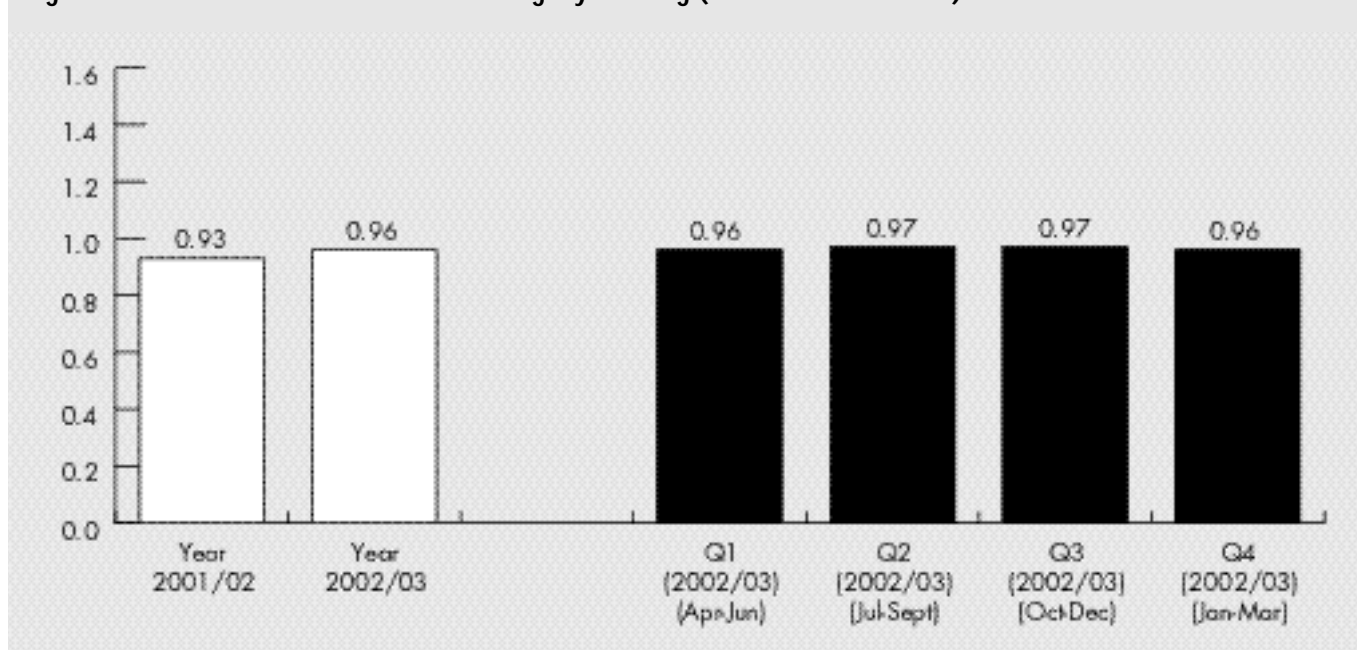
**Figure 3.4 Ratio of crimes to incidents: violence against the person (2001/02 – 2002/03)**



### Domestic burglary offences

The national picture demonstrates that domestic burglary figures were three per cent higher because of the NCRS effect. Figure 3.5 shows that the rise in the ratio of crimes to incidents for burglary was from 0.93 in 2001/02 to 0.96 in 2002/03 across England and Wales. The quarterly ratios do not suggest any continuing impact beyond the second quarter. The serious nature of domestic burglary suggests that the overwhelming majority of allegations reported prior to the NCRS would have been recorded as crimes, hence the small NCRS impact. This is consistent with the evidence from the data quality audits carried out by the Audit Commission on behalf of the Police Standards Unit during 2002/03. It should be noted that three forces were not able to split burglary categories between burglary dwelling and burglary other. These have been excluded from the estimates.

**Figure 3.5 Ratio of crimes to incidents: burglary dwelling (2001/02 – 2002/03)**

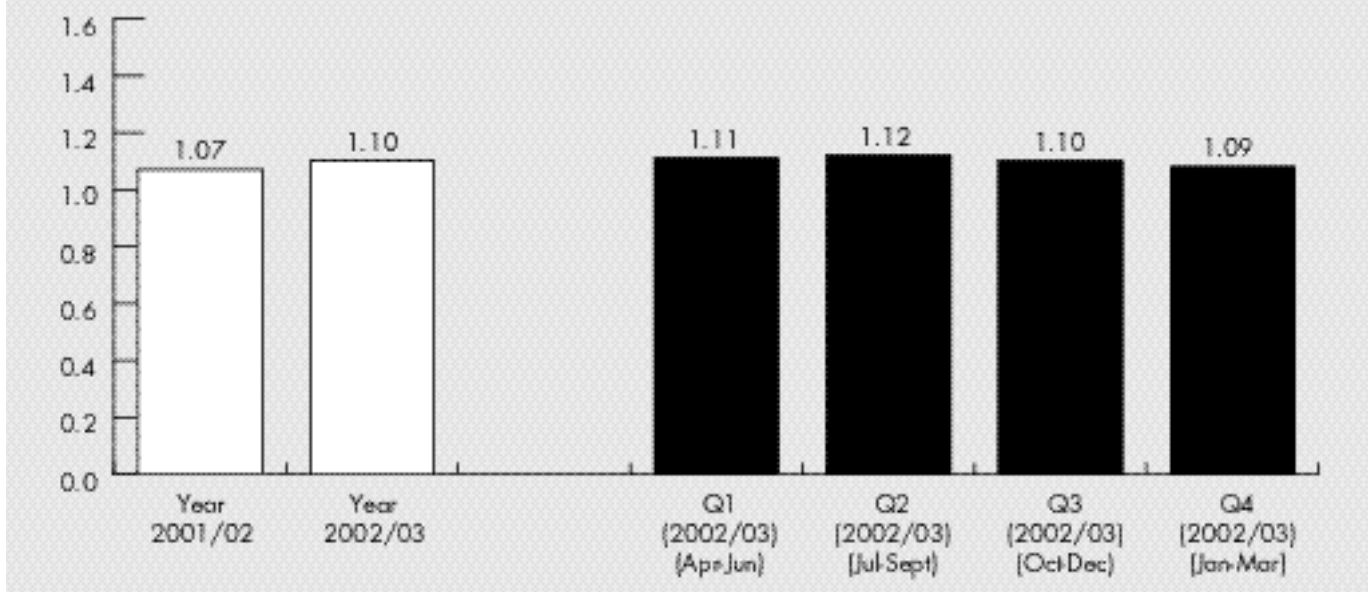


The NCRS impact on the offence of 'Burglary other' (i.e. not in a dwelling) was estimated to be two per cent. The impact on the overall category of 'All burglary' was three per cent.

### Robbery offences

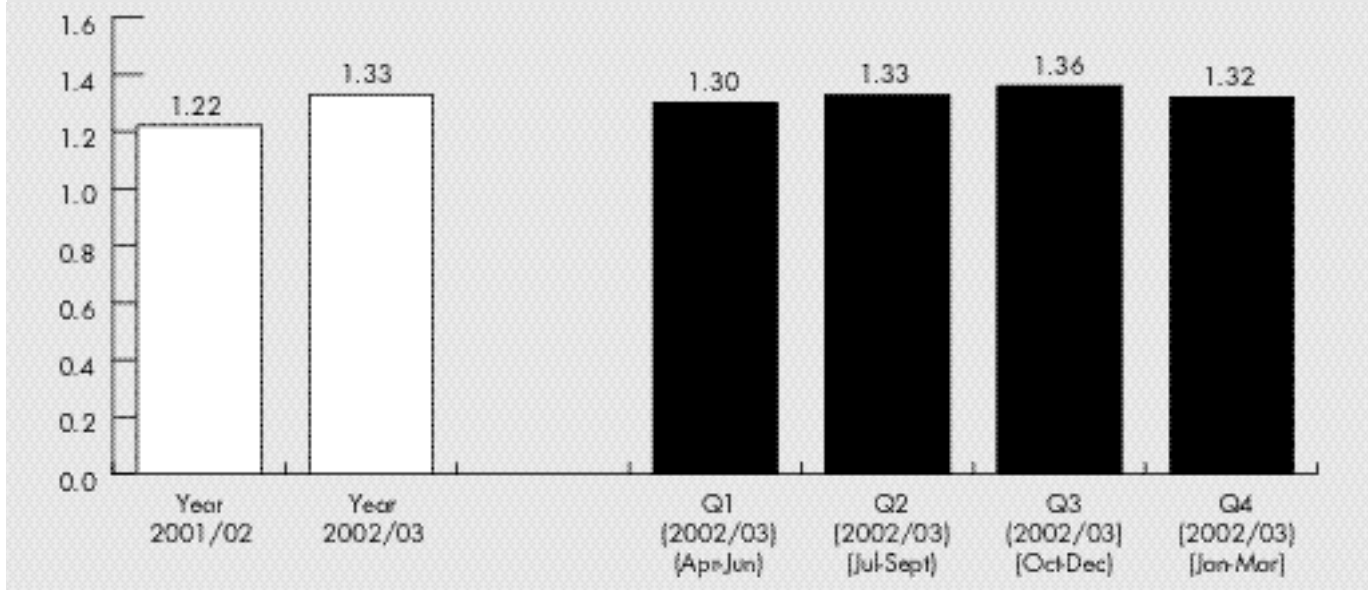
Robbery is one of the categories of crime that has been least affected by the NCRS. However, like sexual offences, the comparatively small numbers of robberies mean that small changes in the number of crimes and incidents can result in disproportionately large percentage changes. The impact of the NCRS has been estimated on all robberies: this includes personal robbery (which typically accounts for between 85 to 90 per cent of all robbery offences) and robbery of business property.

The national picture for robbery offences in Figure 3.6 illustrates an increase in the ratio of crimes to incidents of around three per cent between 2001/02 and 2002/03. The quarterly ratios do not indicate much variation in recording for robbery over the course of the year across the country as a whole. The reduction in the ratio from quarter two is not significant at present, although a continuation might indicate a lowering of recording standards and this is something that will need to be considered in crime data audits.

**Figure 3.6 Ratio of crimes to incidents: robbery (2001/02 – 2002/03)****Theft offences**

The national picture for theft shows an NCRS impact of nine per cent, with an increase in the ratio of crimes to incidents from 1.22 in 2001/02 to 1.33 in 2002/03. Since theft comprises about 40 per cent of all crime, its NCRS effect has a large influence on the total crime effect.

The quarterly ratios demonstrate an increasing ratio of crimes to incidents from quarter one to quarter three, and a decrease of 0.04 in quarter four. This would indicate that the NCRS impact for theft has now levelled off. Any further fall in the ratio of crime to incidents might indicate a lowering of recording standards and this is something that will need to be considered in crime data audits.

**Figure 3.7 Ratio of crimes to incidents: all theft (2001/02 – 2002/03)****Vehicle theft**

The method for calculating the impact of the NCRS on recorded crime relies on a comparison of the number of crime-related incidents to recorded crimes. However, for vehicle theft, very few forces were able to easily separate their crime-related incidents for vehicle crimes from the wider category of 'thefts'. Therefore, an alternative way of reviewing the impact of the NCRS on recorded vehicle theft had to be adopted.

A comparison of the trends in crimes of recorded vehicle theft was carried out, using data from all forces in England and Wales. The analysis looked at data from two groups of forces; one group comprises eight forces that had introduced the principles of the NCRS by early October 2001; the other comprises the remaining forces that had introduced the NCRS by April 2002<sup>8</sup>.

Vehicle theft comprises the police recorded offences of theft from a vehicle, theft or unauthorised taking of a motor vehicle, and aggravated vehicle taking.

The main points from this analysis are:

- The eight forces that adopted the NCRS early showed a fall of seven per cent in the number of recorded vehicle theft offences between 2001/02 and 2002/03; whereas the forces that introduced the NCRS in 2002 showed an increase of one per cent over this period.
- Therefore, for all vehicle thefts, the difference between the two groups of forces (i.e. those that had already experienced the NCRS effect and those that were likely to be experiencing an inflation of recorded vehicle thefts due to the recent adoption of the NCRS) was **eight percentage points** over the full year 2001/02 to 2002/03.
- Taking into account this differential for vehicle theft, the adjusted national change for 2001/02 to 2002/03 would be a **reduction of nine per cent**.
- Over England and Wales as a whole, looking at each quarter in 2002/03 compared to the same quarter the previous year, there was a five per cent increase in vehicle theft in the first quarter of this year (April to June 2002), concurrent with the introduction of the NCRS by the majority of forces. In the following three quarters this fell to a one per cent increase, then a three per cent decrease, and then a five per cent decrease in the final quarter of 2002/03.
- The largest percentage increases for recorded vehicle theft occurred in the first two quarters of 2002/03, and it would therefore be reasonable to conclude that the NCRS impact was greatest in this period. In addition, the NCRS effect on the national level of recorded vehicle theft appears to have been limited to approximately the first half of 2002/03, at which point the number of offences appears to resume its normal seasonal trajectory.
- For theft from a vehicle offences the difference between the trend for the group of forces that had introduced the NCRS previously and the majority that introduced the NCRS in April 2002 was **10 percentage points**; the earlier NCRS adopting forces showed an eight per cent fall, while the forces which adopted the NCRS from April 2002 demonstrated a two per cent increase.
- Taking into account the NCRS impact on theft from a vehicle offences, the adjusted change for 2001/02 to 2002/03 is **a reduction of 10 per cent**.
- For theft or unauthorised taking of a motor vehicle the difference between the two groups was only **three percentage points**; the early adopting group experienced a six per cent fall in crimes over 2002/03 compared to 2001/02, while other forces experienced a three per cent drop. This suggests that the impact of the NCRS on the less serious crime of theft from a vehicle was, as had been anticipated, greater than for offences of theft and unauthorised taking of a motor vehicle.
- Taking into account the NCRS impact on theft or unauthorised taking of a motor vehicle offences, the adjusted change for 2001/02 to 2002/03 is **a reduction of seven per cent**.
- These estimates for vehicle theft offences are higher than those previously published by the Home Office (Simmons et al., 2002; Povey et al., 2003b).

### Criminal damage

The national picture demonstrates that criminal damage figures were nine per cent higher because of the NCRS effect. Similar to violence against the person offences, prior to the introduction of the NCRS many of these offences, particularly minor criminal damage incidents, might have been dealt with by way of advice and not necessarily recorded as crimes which has resulted in this relatively medium-sized NCRS impact.

8. The NCRS estimate for vehicle crime (thefts of and from vehicles) published by the Home Office in the quarterly statistical bulletin in April 2003 (see Povey et al., 2003b) was calculated using this type of analysis based on the data of 38 forces.

## Sexual offences

The national estimates for the sexual offences group of crimes demonstrate that it is one of the categories of crime most affected by the NCRS. However, it is important to recognise that comparatively small numbers of this type of offence mean that small changes in the number of crimes and incidents result in disproportionately large percentage changes. Coupled with this, sexual offences, for example child abuse or rape, are often reported to the police via referrals from specialist teams or hospitals rather than reported via 999 calls. These reports are unlikely to result in an incident record being made. In sum, the estimate of the NCRS effect will be unreliable, although our analyses have shown that it is very significant and in some forces perhaps greater than the estimates for violence against the person.

## Other offences

'Other offences' comprise different types of unrelated offences whose relationship between incidents and crimes is not consistent. (For example: kidnapping would not be expected to have the same relationship of incidents to crimes as public health offences.) The estimate of the NCRS effect on these offences is therefore also suspect.

## ADJUSTING CHANGES IN CRIME

Table 3a shows how adjusting for the NCRS effect impacts on the change in recorded crime from 2001/02 to 2002/03. It has not been possible to adjust all individual offence types in this way because of the lack of availability of lower-level incident data and problems in estimating the impact for offences with a numerically small base. However, the impact on total crime is clear: from a seven per cent increase using unadjusted figures to a fall of three per cent using NCRS adjusted figures.

**Table 3a Trends in recorded crime from 2001/02 to 2002/03: unadjusted and NCRS adjusted figures**

Offence group	2002/03 compared to 2001/02	
	Unadjusted % change	Adjusted % change
<b>Violent crime <sup>(1)</sup></b>	<b>22</b>	<b>2</b>
(inc) Violence against person	28	5
Robbery	-11	-14
<b>All burglary</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>- 1</b>
Burglary dwelling	2	- 2
Burglary other	1	- 1
<b>All theft <sup>(2)</sup></b>	<b>4</b>	<b>- 4</b>
(inc) Vehicle theft	-1	- 9
Criminal damage	4	- 4
<b>Total recorded crime <sup>(3)</sup></b>	<b>7</b>	<b>- 3</b>

1. Violent crime includes the offences of violence against the person, robbery and sexual offences. An adjustment to the number of sexual offences has not been included owing to difficulties in calculating the NCRS effect.
2. All theft includes other offences as well as vehicle theft (the only single offence group for which an NCRS effect was estimated and an adjusted figure was calculated).
3. The figures for total recorded crime include all notifiable offences – not just those listed in the table.

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## 4 Concluding remarks

This report has summarised the findings of a year-long process to monitor the impact of the introduction of the NCRS across all police forces in England and Wales. Given that the NCRS was formally adopted in April 2002, it could be expected that its impact should be fully realised in the recorded crime figures for 2002/03. There is some evidence that this is the case.

However, the NCRS requires more than a mechanical change of police policy. It encompasses a change in recording culture which will only be complete when individual police officers have made their own adjustments along the evidential/prima facie recording continuum. In many cases these adjustments to police practice are likely to be quite subtle and may take time to be fully implemented. Furthermore, the preservation of these standards in crime recording requires both constant maintenance and constant vigilance and we cannot completely rule out further changes to the recording of crime.

### **HAVE THE EFFECTS OF THE NCRS ON THE RECORDED CRIME STATISTICS BEEN FULLY REALISED?**

We have drawn certain conclusions regarding the introduction of the NCRS and its impact on the recorded crime statistics. In doing so, we have met the commitment to evaluate the impact of the NCRS on recorded crime figures which was made in the National Policing Plan in 2002.

Domestic burglary, vehicle theft and robbery are the target crimes for police forces identified in the National Policing Plan and in the national Public Services Agreement (PSA) for the Home Office. The analysis suggests that the overall impact of the NCRS on the offences of burglary and robbery in England and Wales was relatively small, around three per cent, and that this impact occurred by and large in the first quarter of 2002/03. For theft of and from vehicles, the main NCRS impact occurred within the first two quarters of 2002/03. The impact of the recording changes turned a one per cent reduction into a nine per cent reduction from 2001/02 to 2002/03. There is no evidence nationally of any continuing impact on the recorded crime statistics in these three crime categories beyond the first quarter of 2002/03. We can conclude then that the implementation of the NCRS should be reasonably complete and the data from which these targets are derived are now relatively stable.

For other crimes, the results are somewhat different.

For violent crime, there was a significant increase in the numbers of recorded crimes in 2002/03, building on other large increases in preceding years. Furthermore, the continuing impact throughout the year might indicate that we should expect to see further increases in the numbers of violent crimes recorded by the police next year, irrespective of any real changes in the level of violent crime. This will be due not only to the move towards greater recording under the NCRS but also the policies of successive Home Secretaries aimed at improving the police response to certain categories of violent crime, in particular racist incidents and domestic violence (which has been estimated to comprise around one-quarter of all recorded violent crime).

For criminal damage, there are also increases in recording over the course of the year, and this may also indicate some lingering effects of the NCRS. Theft offences (excluding vehicle crime) appear to have stopped rising by the final quarter of 2002/03; however, their recording had been rising in the first three quarters so it is by no means clear that the impacts are completely through. The data also suggest there may be continuing increases in the recording of sexual offences, and in the broad 'other offences' category. Overall therefore, we might expect to see some further increases in total recorded crime over the next year as a result of the NCRS, although the effect on the key target crimes is expected to be minimal.

Part Two of this report summarises the impacts of the NCRS in each of the 43 police forces in England and Wales. It gives some indication of the extent of local variation. In some forces it seems the NCRS impact has fully taken place and will no longer impact upon recorded crime. Other forces are showing a slower rate of NCRS impact and may yet still see some effect after 2002/03. The impact of these changes on specific categories of crime also varies considerably between forces. It should not be assumed, therefore, that the national estimates described here should apply to an individual police force.

## **THE WAY FORWARD**

There is a need to return to having one set of recorded crime figures as soon as possible. Therefore the Home Office has decided, on the basis of the evidence in this report, that the figures published this year (in the main bulletin Crime in England and Wales 2002/03) will be the last in which a calculated adjustment for the NCRS effect will be included.

That is not to say that changes in recording will cease to impact on the police statistics. Of course, as an administrative data set, police recorded crime will continue to be affected by changes in the recording systems that govern its collection. In addition, it will continue to be affected by any changes in the reporting of crime. It is also likely that the NCRS will not have resolved all of the inconsistencies in police recording that exist, although our belief is that it has established far greater consistency, along with systems which should enable this consistency to be maintained and improved. Probably the most important of these are the audits of police data quality.

We have not been able to evaluate the quality of implementation of the NCRS within forces – either in terms of the response of individual officers in recording according to the new rules, or how police forces have implemented the Standard and the accompanying changes in their systems and structures. These matters will be addressed through the auditing of police data quality, currently being undertaken by the Audit Commission at the request of the Home Office.

In addition to the external audit of police data quality, the NCRS has brought with it other checks on the quality of police data. Within forces, there is a senior officer with responsibility for the quality of data, and a Force Crime Registrar, independent from operational pressures, with a remit to maintain the integrity of crime recording, to carry out regular audits of their own data and with a direct line to Chief Officers. These changes should significantly improve the standards for crime recording over the longer term.

Finally, the most important bulwark against poor data quality is probably the recognition by those responsible for providing it that good data are not 'just statistics' but are a key part of their job without which their performance would be so much poorer. Although the NCRS alone cannot change this, it is a part of a general step change in the use of information across the police service – and will provide a solid backbone on which the techniques of problem-oriented policing and the National Intelligence Model can rest. By ensuring that data – both statistical and in other forms – become a central part of the modern policing environment, the quality of the data will be best served.

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