

RECENT TRENDS OF CRIME IN ITALY

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Introduction

During the last few years the phenomenon of crime has received increasing priority in the framework of national emergencies. Nevertheless, the administrators of criminal justice have not always been able to provide an adequate and timely response to the increase in crime, while a subculture is developing in a worrying way, especially in particular "at risk" contexts. This illegality is favoured by the attraction of easy gain and possible impunity.

This fact has created a sense of unease within public opinion which, fuelled also by the wide coverage of the phenomenon by the mass media, has led to a stronger reaction to this type of problem with respect to other social problems.

The quantity of crime is defined through official statistical surveys which, however, only record those acts that violate the penal code that come to the attention of the social control agencies.

It is obvious that, as far as data interpretation is concerned, the reporting rate is linked to the level of efficiency of the police forces and of the judiciary in their crime prevention and repression activity, as well as to the type of penal laws in effect at a given time.

Statistical sources

Data related to the spatial and geographical study of crime are usually taken from the National Statistical Institute's (ISTAT) monthly survey, which is based on reported offences against which the judicial authorities have taken legal action.

The survey, known as the crime statistics survey, covers violations of the penal laws, with the exception of fines, and the people responsible for such violations.

According to the present penal code, which was introduced on 24 October 1989, in those cases where the perpetrator is known, criminal proceedings commence when the public prosecutor formulates the charge, in accordance with Art. 405 c.p.p. In those cases where the perpetrator is unknown criminal proceedings are considered active when the crime is registered in the special "Register of unknown perpetrators".

Another source of statistical information in the field is the survey on criminality carried out by ISTAT in collaboration with the Ministry of the Interior and with the assistance of the police force. This survey covers reports of criminal acts that are transmitted to the judicial authorities by the state police, the Carabinieri, and the Revenue Guard Corps. Unlike the crime statistics survey, it does not cover offences that are directly reported to the judicial authorities, but those that have been reported but which do not result in criminal proceedings.

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Within the penal sector, ISTAT also deals with statistics related to prisoners who have received an irrevocable sentence. These provide interesting information of a social character about the defendants as well as statistics on the number of prisoners who enter and leave the correctional institutions, and the number of detainees in prison at the end of each month.

In December 1987 ISTAT also implemented a new type of sample survey among families: the so-called "multi-scope" survey. This provides for an analysis of certain types of victimisation and for an evaluation (albeit partial) of the extent of hidden crime.

The last sweep of this survey, which was carried out between December 1989 and May 1990, produced the following results: 69.9% of attempted theft, 72.5% of threats, 53.7% of robbery with violence, 55% of damage, and 38.4% of thefts were not reported by the respondents, amounting to an average of 38.4%. Furthermore, 55.7% of all cases were reported by the respondents, 43.4% were not, while 0.9% of the respondents did not answer the question.

During the previous sweep of this survey, conducted between December 1987 and May 1988, non-reported offences amounted to approximately 42.7% and mainly involved attempted theft (70.4%), threats (67.9%) and robberies (55.8%).

The main reason for not reporting an offence is related to mistrust: "very little can be done in these cases" (65.9%) or to "lack of interest on the part of the authorities for this type of offence" (20.9%). In this context, the high number of crimes committed by unknown perpetrators (81.5% of the total of reported crimes in 1991), represents a denied justice. In particular, the high percentage of unreported cases of theft (94.6%) indicates, unfortunately, a decriminalisation of the offence. All this creates a sense of deep mistrust in the criminal justice system, that may even induce many victims not to report criminal acts, at least in cases of minor offences and those that are not covered by an insurance.

Long-term trends

A long-term retrospective analysis of crime, starting in the fifties, allows particular phases of the crime phenomenon in Italy to be identified.

In fact, taking as an indicative parameter the number of reported offences per 100,000 inhabitants, it is possible to note a first phase which went from 1950 to the end of the sixties, characterised by a gradual and relatively modest increase in crime; with crime coefficients at around 1,500-1,800 reported offences per 100,000 inhabitants.

The seventies represented a second phase characterised by a rapid increase in the number of reported offences; in 1976 related coefficients exceeded 3,800 offences per 100,000 inhabitants. During these years the socio-cultural transformation of the country became even more intense as a result of such phenomena as youth contestation and the emergence of new consumption models and needs that were usually beyond the actual economic capacity of the individual. This was also the period in which two new phenomena appeared in the field of crime in Italy: terrorism and drug trafficking, to which were linked the rapid expansion of organised crime.

The first half of the seventies, which registered a significant increase in crime, was followed by a decade of relative stability, although, in general, the levels of

crime remained high (approximately 3,500 offences per 100,000 inhabitants). This continued until towards the end of the eighties when a further strong increase was registered, which in 1991 reached almost 5,000 offences per 100,000 inhabitants.

During the whole period under consideration, with the exception of attempted or committed murder which actually increased, a drop in the number of offences against the person (blows, wounds, threats, etc.) was registered. On the other hand, a general increase was recorded for the other types of crime and in particular for robbery, burglaries and economic crimes, including those connected with drugs.

The most recent developments

One worrying aspect nowadays is the increase in criminal behaviour which has become more and more associated with the aggressive use of available resources (huge amounts of capital, violence, etc.). These have given rise to a deep sense of unease and alarm, that call for the urgent need to adopt the appropriate preventive and social defence measures.

In fact, alongside the development of a delinquency which has similar characteristics in most countries of the world, (theft, robbery, criminal gangs, etc.), it is possible to identify the development of a transnational delinquency. The activities of this type of delinquency transcend the barriers of each single country and represent, without doubt, the most dangerous form of crime in that it is less easily controlled by the national states and has its main implications in currency crimes (laundering), arms dealings and the drug market.

From this point of view, the phenomenon should be observed by means of an analysis of the serious damage caused to the country by criminal organisations and the expansion of the "mafiosa" culture, from both a political and socio-economic point of view, and in terms of its effects on the correct functioning of the local institutions and other public organs.

An analysis of the annual data on offences reported by the police forces to the judicial authorities during the last three years (1989, 1990, 1991) immediately shows a conspicuous increase in crime; in 1991 a total of 2,647,741 offences were reported against 2,501,640 in 1990 and 2,053,522 in 1989. However, the increase between 1990 and 1991 was 5.8% and therefore much less than the 21.8% increase registered between 1989 and 1990.

Furthermore, an analysis of the disaggregated data for certain types of offences (homicide, robbery, theft, etc.) shows a drop in the rate of increase. This could be a sign of an inversion of trends which seems to be confirmed by the provisional data on offences reported between January and September 1992, which show a consistent decrease compared to the same period in 1991.

During the period under consideration a significant decrease was registered in murders (-24.9%); robbery (-18.9%); and theft (-12.8%) while, on the whole, the number of reported crimes decreased by 9.8%. On the contrary, according to Criminalpol data, the number of reported offenders increased by 11.5% and the number of arrested persons by 20.6%, which is an indication of the improved efficiency of the police force.

Furthermore, the eighties witnessed a new phenomenon: the massive presence of foreigners in the criminal sphere which mainly took the form of a low paid work force.

The progressive involvement of foreigners in the sphere of crime is confirmed by the data related to reported foreigners, which in 1991 amounted to 21,307, i.e. 4.2% of the total. The number of foreigners in prison is even more consistent: in 1991 13,000, i.e. 16.2% of the total prison population was composed of foreigners, and in December of the same year 5,365 of the total prison population of 35,485 detainees were foreigners. The picture does not change much during the first half of 1992: 6,466 of the 46,414 new prisoners were foreigners. Furthermore, on 30 June 1992, 7,884 of the total prison population of 45,577 were of foreign origin.

The burning actuality of the phenomena of drugs, organised crime and migrant deviance should not divert attention from those illegal behaviours that also cause social panic. Particular reference is made, as far as the quantitative dimension of the phenomenon is concerned, to simple and aggravated larceny which, in 1991, represented more than 64% of the total crimes reported by the police; it is important to note that approximately 95% of the perpetrators of these offences are still unknown.

At a geographical level, the phenomenon of crime is diversified according to the different degree of urban concentration as well as between one region and another. As far as the first aspect is concerned, the crime coefficients of the ten chief towns of the large Italian provinces (Turin, Milan, Genoa, Bologna, Florence, Rome, Naples, Bari, Palermo, Catania) for different years, have been compared with those of the main towns of the remaining provinces as well as with their corresponding communes. This has enabled a relatively reliable classification to be made whereby the provincial capitals rank in top position, followed by the other main provincial towns, and finally by the remaining communes.

On the other hand, an analysis of the coefficients of criminality at the regional level highlight a very interesting aspect. This is the concentration in four southern regions (Campania, Puglia, Calabria and Sicily) of the most serious and socially alarming offences such as murder, robbery, criminal gangs, extortion and bomb attacks.

From an analysis of 1991 data related to the most serious offences, it is possible to observe that 1,255 wilful murders were reported in these four southern regions put together, compared to 557 in the rest of Italy (with coefficients per 100,000 inhabitants of 7.3 and 1.4 respectively). Furthermore, 22,282 cases of robbery were reported in the four regions against 16,924 in the rest of Italy (with coefficients of 128.8 and 41.8); 417 cases of criminal gangs compared to 407 in the rest of Italy (with coefficients of 2.4 and 1.0); 169 reported cases of Mafia associations compared to 32 in the rest of Italy (with coefficients of 1.0 and 0.1); and 1,926 cases of bomb and/or incendiary attacks against 674 in the rest of Italy (with coefficients of 11.1 and 1.7).

On the other hand, when considering criminality as a whole, it can be noted that the total number of offences, amounting to 754,803, is remarkably lower in the four southern regions than in the rest of Italy where it amounts to 1,892,938 (with coefficients of 4,362 and 4,677 respectively).

Conclusions

The aim of this report was to present a general overview of the surveys that can be used to examine crime in Italy, on the one hand; and on the other, to outline, on the basis of these sources, the most recent trends of the phenomenon.

With respect to the latter, it might be interesting to point out that statistical analysis should produce more precise elements of judgment in order to better orientate intervention policies.

To do this it will be necessary first to improve the quality of the collected data, and second to develop the use of the most appropriate statistical techniques. At present ISTAT is very much involved in this endeavour (for example, great attention is being paid to criminal acts within the framework of a multi-scope survey on families) with the aim also of making up for delays accumulated in the past. In fact, in the field of these so-called judicial statistics, the large amount of traditionally available data has not always been matched by a corresponding amount of research work.

