

LATENT CRIME IN RUSSIA¹

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Introduction

An understanding of the phenomenon of latent crime in Russia is essential for the development of legal institutes in a democratic state and in order to ensure the rights and interests of its citizens. The present crime situation in Russia is far from positive, with a yearly growth in the crime rate coupled by a decreasing clearance rate. The social threat of crime is also worsening as Russian society experiences a growing sense of fear and lack of protection in the face of spreading crime.

One attempt at tackling this problem took the form of a research project on latent crime, implemented jointly by the Ministry of the Interior of Russia and UNICRI, which aimed at working out legal and organisational measures for combating crime.

In selecting the research ideology and methodology, it was taken into account that latent crime is a complicated socio-legal phenomenon, the existence, evolution and pre-determination of which present many multifaceted aspects which require a comprehensive and inter-disciplinary approach in order to be understood. At the same time criminology as a social and legal science, with its subject matter and methodological resources, can facilitate the understanding of latent crime in its specific integrity.

For the aims of the research project, it was considered appropriate to adopt the following notion of latent crime: those acts containing elements prohibited by criminal law which are not reported to law enforcement agencies (unreported or unknown offences), or which are reported but do not receive the due legal assessment and response from law enforcement agencies (concealed offences).

By total latent crime rate is meant the sum of natural (unreported) and artificial (concealed) latency.

Research methodology

The methodological basis was a combination of statistical methods; content analysis; expert evaluation of the material at the disposal of the interior bodies regarding the refusal to prosecute; and random interviewing of the population, law enforcement officials and convicted persons.

Taking into account the considerable regional differences in Russia, the research project covered six regions which have similar socio-economic, demographic, socio-psychological and criminological characteristics. These regions

¹ Editors' Note: This is a summary of a joint UNICRI/Ministry of the Interior of Russia study which involved a victimisation survey component and which partially drew on the International Victimisation Survey.

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are located in the north-west and centre of the European part of Russia (the Pskov, Novgorod, Kaluga, Vladimir, Ryazan and Tver regions).

Random interviewing (using the face-to-face technique) was carried out directly by the research group with the use of the programmed questionnaires. The interviewers, who were already experienced in carrying out specific sociological surveys, underwent further training for this specific research. Separate representative samples were defined for each region.

Interviewing the citizens

Citizens were asked about the crimes they or their relatives and acquaintances had experienced, as well as subsequent measures that had been taken. The sample accounted for 2,068 persons. Given their demographic and social characteristics, the respondents were typically representative of the population in the target regions. 49.8% of the sample were male and 50.2% female, and all age groups were represented proportionally: i.e. persons up to 18 years of age (12.5%); between 19 and 24 (14.9%); 25 to 30 (15.3%); 31 to 40 (20.5%); 41 to 50 (14%); over 50 (22.8%). 69.4% of the respondents belonged to the urban population, while 39.4% lived in rural areas. The level of education of the respondents was high enough to allow them to comprehend and provide an answer to the questions posed; thus, 23.8% of the respondents had received higher education, 62% had secondary level (general or specialised) education, and 14.1% had lower than secondary level education. From an analysis of the occupational level of the respondents, it is possible to assume that all the social categories existing in the target areas were represented in the sample. Major groups included industrial workers (13.8%), agricultural workers (7.7%), employees in the tertiary sector (8.5%), state employed workers (9.8%) and retired persons (14.2%). Taking into consideration specific Russian features, the level of the respondents' income was identified in relation to the minimum subsistence level. 6.2% of the respondents stated that their income was higher than the stated level; 34.2% indicated that their income corresponded to that figure; 54.3% rated their income as below the minimum subsistence level (3.3% of the interviewees had some difficulties in answering this question). It should be noted that no account was taken, in the replies, of the private property at the respondents' disposal, the nature and amount of which, in a number of cases, make the owner more prone to victimisation.

The questionnaire was compiled along the lines of the International Crime Survey questionnaire, although partly modified and adapted to the characteristic features of Russia, according to the objectives and methodology identified for the given research project. The questionnaire was then tested in the town of Borovichi in the Novgorod region and adopted after a few amendments had been made. Interviews were carried out in the streets, in offices, enterprises and educational institutions, as well as in residential areas (apartments, private houses, hostels). The majority of the respondents reacted favourably to both the objectives of the research and the interviewers, although 59 persons (i.e. 3% of the total sample) refused to answer the questions. All respondents were reassured about the confidentiality of the information they provided. To check the reliability of the responses, the data of those questionnaires that received "positive" responses (i.e. the respondents reported the crimes but relevant measures were never taken) were

randomly verified by checking them against records available at military, medical and insurance institutions; 26 out of 30 cases were confirmed.

Interviewing the experts

Experts were interviewed with the aim of estimating the latency level for unreported and concealed offences. The corresponding sample in the target regions consisted of 355 law enforcement officers: of these, 28% were heads of the city and district interior bodies; 30% were criminal militia detectives; 19% were officers from the public order protection service; 18% were investigators; 23% were prosecution officers. All those interviewed were persons who, given their functional duties, receive and examine crime reports on a daily basis. Their average length of service in the law enforcement system was 11 years.

The questionnaires were completed by the respondents in their offices (in approximately 10% of these cases this was done in groups).

Interviewing the convicted persons

This part of the research, which was optional, aimed at obtaining additional empirical and illustrative material.

During the pilot interviewing, which covered people serving sentences for theft of personal property in an ordinary regime colony, 120 persons agreed to respond to the questionnaire. Of these, 45 respondents (37.5%) indicated that some of the offences committed by them had not been reported to the militia. They mainly involved petty theft of money or clothes from acquaintances or relatives. At a later stage, a larger sample of convicted persons was used, and the respondents were asked to provide responses on latent crimes for various types of offences covered by the survey. Interviewing was carried out by the research group in the male corrective labour colonies located in Pskov and the Novgorod regions. The respondents were assured that the data they provided would remain confidential and would only be used for research purposes. 332 questionnaires were distributed and responses were received from 80 convicted persons (i.e. 24.1%).

As for age composition, the overwhelming majority of the interviewed convicts were aged between 19 and 40 (85%) which, on the whole, corresponds to the 1990 census of convicted persons. Nine percent of the interviewees had received a higher level of education; 72% were persons with secondary level (general or specialised) education and 19% had not reached a secondary level of education. More than half of the interviewed detainees (54%) lived in an urban area prior to their conviction, 39% resided in rural areas, while 7% had no permanent residence. 62.5% of the respondents had been previously convicted. It may be assumed that this factor affects the crime techniques and the methods for concealing the offences.

Programmed study

A programmed study was also made of the documents kept by the law enforcement agencies and prosecution offices, i.e. registers of reported crimes and related material; recorded burglar alarm signals of attempted entry; registers containing the names of minors passed on to commissions on juvenile offenders;

telephone messages; statements and judgements made by prosecutors; investigative material related to non-registration (concealment from registration); judgements on the refusal to prosecute (where the offender was not identified). Documents available in other bodies were also examined: registers of cases when citizens addressed the forensic science bureaus to determine the seriousness of bodily injuries; documents on compensatory payments (for thefts, injuries, etc.); registers of hospitals to which injured citizens had been sent.

Victimisation results: frequency

Tables 1 and 2 present the prevalence victimisation rates for 1 and 5 years respectively. The respondents reported 1,037 criminal acts to which they, their close acquaintances or relatives had fallen victim during the last 5 years. 465 of these experiences took place during the last year preceding the interview. It may be assumed that during the 5-year period almost one out of four respondents had been the victim of an offence, while one out of ten had been victimised during the last year. One third (i.e. 32.6%) of the total number of offences reported by the respondents were related to various forms of violent assault. Nevertheless, they amounted to less than half of the number of crimes for profit (60.9%). One out of fifteen citizens had been the victim of a violent assault for profit.

Unreported offences

Different rates of unreported offences were provided, according to the different category of respondents being interviewed. Hence, according to the results of the interviews, 40% of the crimes experienced by victims were not reported during the year preceding the interview. Almost the same rate (37.5%) was given by the convicted persons. The law enforcement officials estimated this rate at 15.3%. The first figures might be more realistic, since they refer to offences which directly involved the majority of the respondents.

As Table 3 shows, the vast majority of unreported offences (i.e. two-thirds of the total) are related to property: various types of theft, robberies and armed robberies. Bodily injuries ranked second with 18.5%. Each category of crime included in the survey has its own rate of latency. Thus, 36% of bodily injuries (the corresponding figure from the convicted persons' interviewing was 59%) were not reported; sexual incidents, including rape, were not reported in 40% of the cases; as well as 54% of robberies and armed robberies. Forty-four percent of cases of theft remained unreported, which is close to the average rate. However, given the differentiated approach, this index varies substantially. Most victims of pickpocketing offences (i.e. 60%) did not report them to the police; a quarter of bicycle and motorcycle thefts remained unreported; and almost half of the thefts from summer cottages, country houses and other out-of-town buildings remained unknown to the law enforcement agencies. This trend was confirmed by the interviewed experts, although the latency figures they provided were somewhat lower.

Reasons for not reporting

From the above data, it may be assumed that a considerable share of latent crime consists of offences which are not socially dangerous and do not seriously harm the citizen. To check this assumption, the respondents were asked to specify the reasons for deciding not to report the incidents to the law enforcement agencies. It was then possible to classify these reasons into three main categories (see Table 4).

Reasons grouped under the first category include lack of confidence in the effectiveness of the law enforcement agencies (i.e. lack of evidence; the militia tackles crime inefficiently; people do not want to deal with the militia because of the

complexity of formal procedures, etc.). Thirty-nine per cent of the respondents were motivated by these considerations.

A separate question posed to the respondents, irrespective of whether they had been victimised or not, referred to the effectiveness of the militia in dealing with reported crimes. In this connection, estimates given by the persons interviewed are of some interest. Over half of the interviewed persons (55.2%) were satisfied with the militia's response: 26.1% were dissatisfied and 16.2% found it difficult to reply.

In the second category of reasons for not reporting, the respondents either dealt with the matter themselves or did not consider the offence serious enough. This category accounts for 45% of all the listed reasons, of which more than half are related to an assessment of the crime as being not serious enough or as having caused minor damage. The respondents were asked to assess the seriousness of the damage involved in the latest offence (Table 5). The survey showed that only 7% of the respondents assessed the damage as very significant, 32% as rather significant, 57% as insignificant. These data confirm the general opinion that the majority of offences related to latent crime are of an unserious nature.

The third category includes reasons of a personal nature or related to particular circumstances, such as fear of revenge or publicity of the event; and assumptions about the inappropriateness of punishment. These reasons accounted for 16.8%.

The law enforcement agents were also questioned on the reasons for not reporting. In their opinion, the main reason for this is "unwillingness to contact law enforcement agencies because of a disbelief in their effectiveness". In other words, the interviewed experts were more pessimistic about the potential effectiveness of the militia than the interviewed victims. The second main reason for not reporting, according to the experts, is "insignificance of the damage".

Concealed offences

Although, according to the results of the survey, one out of five or six reported crimes did not receive any response from the militia, this figure requires further analysis. Failure to take measures does not necessarily mean unwillingness, inability or "malicious intent" on the part of the militia. Some of the reported acts may not have actually occurred or may differ from the ones described in the reports. Furthermore, upon assessment, some of the reported events may not contain the necessary elements to be considered a *corpus delicti*. The interviewed officers of the law enforcement agencies (i.e. those who actually receive the crime reports and respond to them) estimated the corresponding index as 11.5%. This index varies according to the different types of crime. According to the experts, 12% of reports on bodily injuries are concealed, as well as 10% of rapes, 5-6% of robberies and armed robberies, 14% of thefts from building in rural areas, 13% of bicycle and motorcycle thefts, and 18% of cases of pickpocketing, etc.

Crimes are mainly concealed as a result of groundless decisions for not initiating criminal proceedings, due to the absence of the event of *corpus delicti*, or because it is assumed that this act does not present a major social threat. Following a thorough examination of the relevant material, it was discovered that a quarter of the refusals to initiate criminal proceedings were unjustified. This was particularly so in those cases where the offender was not identified and circumstances related to the crime were not clear. With reference to the specific categories of crime, it has

been estimated that 25% of all reported cases of bodily injury are concealed, as well as 15% of rapes, 20-25% of robberies and armed robberies, 10% of thefts from apartments and cottages, 25-33% of pickpocketing, 10% of thefts of bicycles and motorcycles, 17% of thefts from cars, etc. Statistical data provide more or less the same figures. According to selected statistics, one-third of complaints lodged by citizens with respect to the concealment of reported crime by the militia were found justifiable when checked by the officials of the Ministry of the Interior of Russia. Summing up, we may assume that the total rate of concealed crimes is about 30%.

Reasons for concealment

The law enforcement agents were asked to single out the reasons for the concealment of offences and to rank them according to their significance and frequency. According to their responses, the first major reason refers to insufficient militia manpower, as well as its heavy workload (i.e. limited capacity for processing the cases).

Reasons of a subjective nature ranked second. These included, above all, attempts to give the impression that the militia were successful in carrying out their work (i.e. decreasing the number of uncleared offences by concealing them). This refers to the inertia of past practices when the figures of recorded crimes and of their clearance rate were the only criteria used for evaluating the effectiveness of the criminal militia, which were the cause of serious problems. Another noted reason was the influence of such factors as poor logistical support of the law enforcement agencies, low salaries of the personnel and a number of other factors of a social character or related to living conditions.

Concluding remarks

Thus, latent crime is a real objective socio-legal phenomenon caused by a complex of interrelated factors in the spheres of socio-economic relations; legal and law enforcement policies; and social, group and individual consciousness. In general terms, the latency rate could be defined at 70%, although it varies considerably from crime to crime. Most latent crime is represented by criminally-significant events of a minor character or which present a minor social threat, the vast majority of which might be solved in ways other than through the use of criminal proceedings.

The main reasons for not reporting the offences to the law enforcement agencies are: citizens' lack of confidence in the police's ability and potential to cope with the problem of crime; the complications in becoming involved in criminal proceedings; as well as the opportunities to remedy the damage caused without having to recur to the criminal justice system.

TABLES

Table 1: Prevalence victimisation rates (5 years)*

Total sample of respondents	100%	
Have been victimised (special sample)	23.7	100%
Including Theft of car	0.6	2.4
Theft from car	3.1	10.6
Car vandalism		
Theft of motorcycle, bicycle	2.0	8.4
(Owners)		
Theft of car	0.6	2.4
Theft from car	3.1	10.6
Car vandalism		
Theft of motorcycle, bicycle	2.0	8.4
Burglary with entry	6.7	28.1
Robbery	1.6	6.7
Personal theft	15.1	63.7
Sexual incidents	1.1	4.7
Assault/threat	7.0	29.4

* Prevalence - percentage of respondents who have been victims of a specific form of crime once or more.

Table 2: Prevalence victimisation rates (1 year)*

Total sample of respondents	100%	
Have been victimised (special sample)	9.4	100%
Including	0.3	3.6
Theft of car		
Theft from car	0.9	9.8
Car vandalism		
Theft of motorcycle, bicycle	0.9	9.8
(Owners)		
Theft of car	0.8	3.6
Theft from car	0.9	9.8
Car vandalism		
Theft of motorcycle, bicycle	0.9	9.3
Burglary with entry	3.9	41.7
Attempted burglary		
Robbery	1.0	10.3
Personal theft	8.6	92.2
Sexual incidents	0.5	5.7
Assault/threat	8.7	39.2
Consumer fraud		3.0
Corruption		

* Prevalence - percentage of respondents who have been victims of a specific form of crime once or more.

Table 3: Reported crimes

	%
Theft of car	88.3
Theft from car	78.1
Car vandalism	
Theft of motorcycle, bicycle	70.0
Burglary with entry	56.5
Attempted burglary	
Robbery	48.5
Personal theft	56.4
Sexual incidents	56.5
Assault/threat	58.3

Table 4: Reasons for not reporting*

	Theft of car %	Theft from car %	Car vandalism %	Theft of motorcycle bicycle %	Burglary with entry %	Robbery %	Personal theft %	Sexual incidents %	Assault/threat %
Not serious enough		50.0		37.5	40.0	11.0	48.4	10.0	19.1
Solved it myself		50.0		18.3	6.7	5.9	11.0	20.0	15.7
Inappropriate for police		7.1			1.7	11.8	2.2		10.7
Other authorities					5.0	5.9	2.2		3.4
My family solved it		21.4			1.7	5.9	3.7		8.9
No insurance		7.1			1.7	28.5	1.5	40.0	8.9
Police could do nothing	50.0	14.3		12.5	26.7	35.8	21.3	10.0	8.9
Police won't do anything	50.0			25.0	13.3	47.1	20.6	30.0	26.6
Fear/dislike police		7.1			3.3	23.5	2.2	40.0	10.7
Didn't dare		7.1		6.2	5.0	11.8	3.7	30.0	3.6
Other reasons				12.5	3.3		2.9		1.8
Don't know									

* Percentages calculated on victims who said they had not reported the last incident of each type of crime to the police - multiple answers possible.

Table 5: Crime seriousness*

	Theft of car %	Theft from car %	Car vandalism %	Theft of motorcycle %	Burglary with entry %	Robbery %	Personal theft %	Sexual incidents %	Assault/threat %
Very serious	16.7	1.9			5.7	6.1	3.8	4.3	2.1
Fairly serious	8.2	21.1		12.2	5.7	9.1	11.2	8.6	2.1
Not serious		7.7		22.0	34.8	15.2	28.2		5.6

* Percentage based on victims of specific crimes.