

**Briefing Paper on Crime in Queensland**

**Presented to Task Force on Crime Prevention**

**October 1998**

**Research and Prevention Division**

## **Introduction**

This briefing paper has been prepared for presentation to the inaugural meeting of the Queensland Task Force on Crime Prevention. The paper utilises *recorded crime statistics* compiled by the Queensland Police Service (QPS) and *crime victimisation surveys* undertaken by bodies such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and the Queensland Government Statistician's Office (GSO). The advantages and limitations of each type of data are briefly summarised in appendix A.

The discussion is organised under the following headings:

- What are the main crime trends in Queensland?
- Which areas of Queensland have the highest crime rates?
- Which groups are most at risk?
- Who are the offenders?
- What crimes are of most concern to people at the local level?
- How does Queensland compare to other jurisdictions?

## **What are the main crime trends in Queensland?**

Police recorded crime statistics are the main source of trend measures because these are the only data which are collected on a continuous basis. Crime trends are normally expressed in terms of the number of offences per 100,000 people, rather than just the total number of offences recorded in any given year. This adjustment controls for the effect of population growth — an important consideration in the case of Queensland — and provides a measure of the extent to which there has been a change over time in the risks of being a victim.

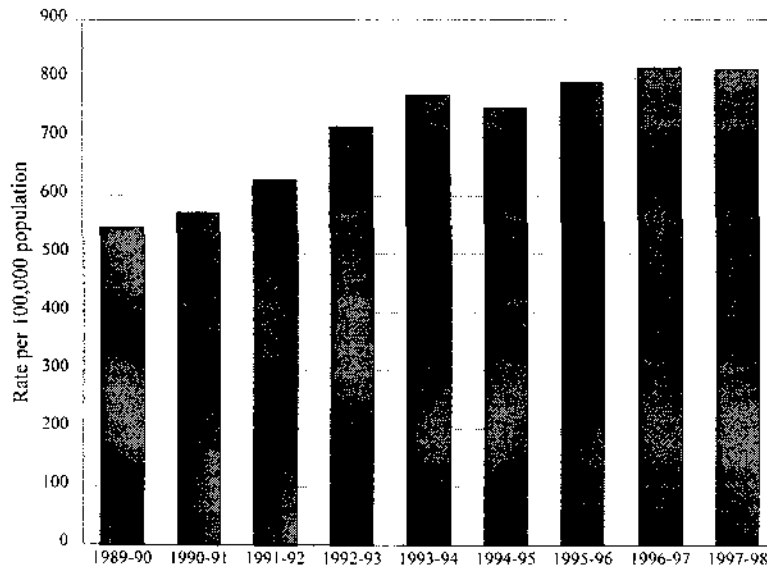
The following graphs show trends in selected offence categories for the period 1989–90 to 1997–98. Data are available prior to 1989 but there are doubts about the reliability and comparability of some of the data collected in earlier years. In addition, particularly for sexual offences and assaults, the longer the time period, the greater the probability that trends will be distorted by changes in victim reporting behaviour and police recording practices.

### **Offences against the person**

The category of crimes against the person encompasses homicide, assault, sexual offences and robbery. By far the most common recorded offence within this category is assault, which accounts for about 60 per cent of all recorded offences against the person. The next largest category is 'other sexual offences' (indecent assault, offences against children, wilful and obscene exposure, etc.) which accounts for about 15 per cent of offences against the person.

As can be seen from figure 1, there has been a marked upward trend in the rate of offences against the person recorded since 1989, although the rate of growth has slowed since 1993–94.

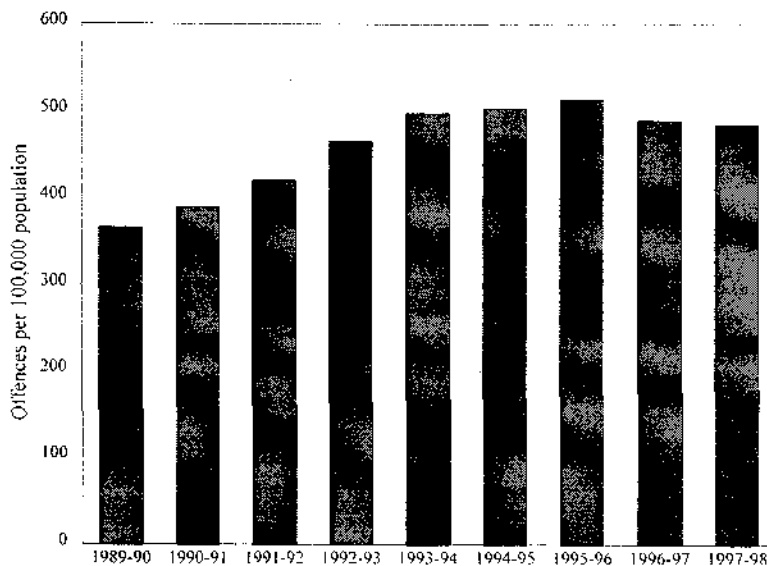
Figure 1 — Rate of reported offences against the person per 100,000 population  
(Queensland, 1989–90 to 1997–98)



Source: QPS Statistical Review 1996–97; unpublished data.

Reported assaults show a slight downward trend in the last two years (figure 2). However, the 1997–98 rate is still well above the level of 1989–90. Part of the increase in recorded assaults over the last decade may have been due to changed reporting and recording practices; for instance, there is considerable anecdotal evidence that police are now more likely than previously to record domestic incidents as assaults. However, other indicators — such as hospital admission statistics and periodic crime victims surveys — also show an increase, suggesting strongly that there has been *some* rise in the actual incidence of assault (CJC 1997).

Figure 2 — Rate of reported assault offences per 100,000 population  
(Queensland, 1989–90 to 1997–98)



Source: QPS Statistical Review 1996–97; unpublished data.

Other notable trends in relation to crimes against the person over the period 1989–90 to 1997–98 are as follows:

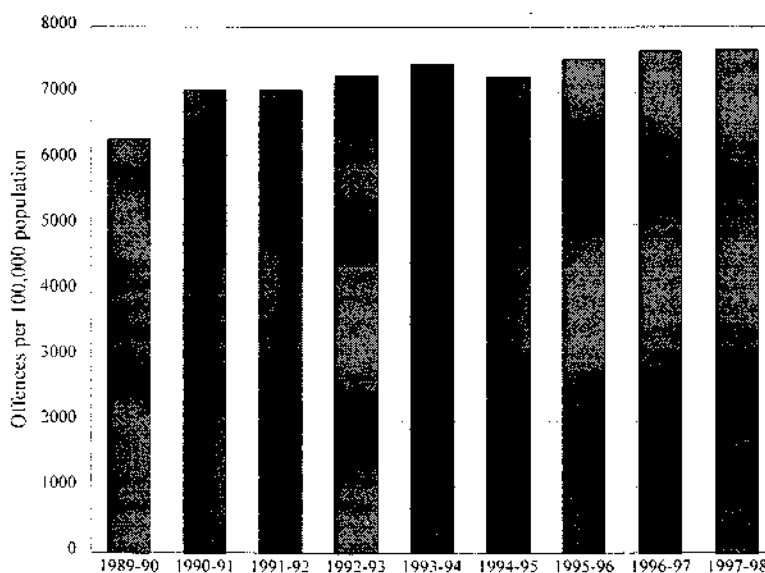
- The murder rate — which has been largely unaffected by changes in recording or reporting practices — remained reasonably stable at around 2 to 2.5 per 100,000 population.
- The rate of reported rapes/attempted rapes increased from 12 per 100,000 population in 1989–90 to 17 in 1996–97 — a rise of 42 per cent.<sup>1</sup> However, this trend *may* reflect greater reporting rather than an increase in the actual incidence of such offences.
- The rate for armed robbery rose by 157 per cent — up from 14 per 100,000 population in 1989–90 to 36 per 100,000 in 1997–98. This increase appears to have been accompanied by a shift from 'hard' targets such as banks to 'softer' targets such as convenience stores and newsagents.

### Offences against property

The category of offences against property encompasses breaking and entering, motor vehicle theft, other stealing, property damage and fraud. The largest offence groups in this category are 'stealing excluding motor vehicles' which accounts for around 40 per cent of all reported property offences, break and enter (25%) and property damage (20%). With the exception of the offence of fraud, trends over time in recorded property offences are generally less sensitive to changes in reporting and recording practices than are offences against the person.

As shown by figure 3, the overall property crime rate has increased only gradually since 1990–91. However, this measure masks some divergent trends within specific offence categories (see below).

**Figure 3 — Rate of reported offences against property per 100,000 population  
(Queensland, 1989–90 to 1997–98)**



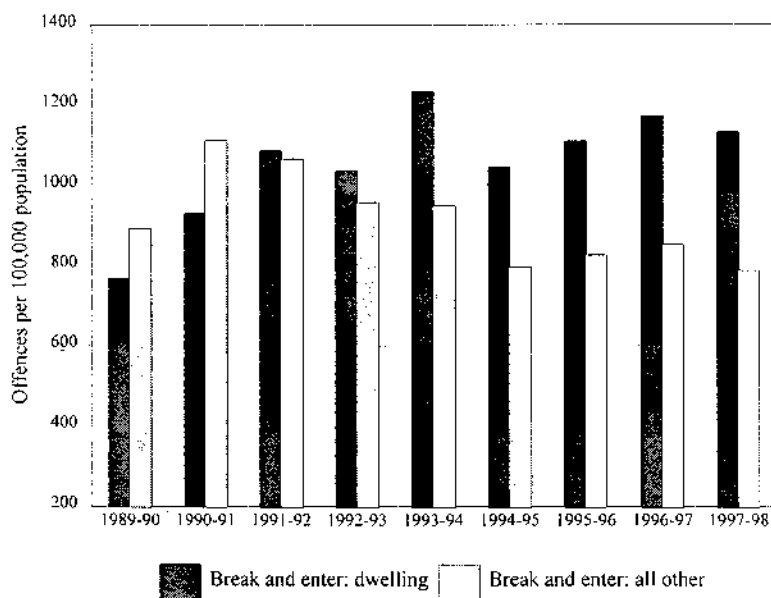
Source: QPS Statistical Review 1996–97; unpublished data.

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<sup>1</sup> Due to a change in the legal definition of rape, 1997–98 data are not comparable with earlier years.

Figure 4 shows an oscillating upward trend in the rate of break and enters of residential dwellings. On the other hand, the rate for other break and enters (which includes commercial premises, public buildings, out buildings, and so on) has declined steadily since its peak in 1990–91. This may indicate that residential properties present softer and/or more lucrative targets to burglars, but more research is required to confirm this.

**Figure 4 — Rates of reported break and enter for dwellings and all other premises per 100,000 population (Queensland, 1989–90 to 1997–98)**



Source: QPS *Statistical Reviews* 1989–90 to 1996–97; unpublished data.

For other offences against property, the main statewide trends have been as follows:

- motor vehicle theft — little change in the underlying rate for most of the 1990s and a 13 per cent drop in 1997–98
- stealing — little change over the same period
- property damage — a substantial increase in the first half of the decade, but a levelling off since then.

## Which areas of Queensland have the highest crime rates?

Treating Queensland as a single unit of analysis obscures very significant variations in the extent to which people residing in different parts of the state are at risk of being victimised. Some localities are obviously worse affected than others and trends within particular areas can sometimes look quite different to what is happening statewide. It can also be misleading to compare areas in terms of a single measure of crime, because the factors impacting on violent crime levels are not always the same as those which affect property crime levels.

As a means of highlighting the importance of geographic variations, this section presents several maps (see appendix B) which show the rate of offences against the person and the residential burglary rate for individual police divisions throughout Queensland (a division being the geographic area policed by a station). In order to control for the fact that crime rates can fluctuate substantially from one year to the next, especially in the smaller divisions, the maps show the average annual rate for the *three* years 1994–95 to 1996–97.

### **Offences against the person**

Maps 1 and 2 (see appendix B) show divisional-level crime rates for offences against the person for Queensland as a whole and, more specifically, for the South-East corner.

Most of the divisions in the State with the highest reported crime rates (shaded red) are located in Aboriginal communities, or areas with substantial indigenous populations (such as Camooweal and Burketown). Communities such as Cairns, Mareeba, Townsville, Rockhampton and Gympie also have relatively high rates (yellow or green shading).

Within the South-East corner, the highest rates are to be found in the inner areas of Brisbane, and in Surfers Paradise. In the outer urban areas, the divisions with the highest rates are Ipswich, Inala and Logan Central. In part, the high rates for Brisbane City and Surfers Paradise reflect the large number of licensed premises and the considerable amount of nightlife in these areas. However, the rates for both of these locations are also inflated by the fact that they are based on resident population rather than actual population (which is many times larger).

### **Residential burglary**

As shown by maps 3 and 4 (appendix B) the parts of Queensland most affected by residential burglary are the South-Eastern urban areas and Cairns in the north. Within the South-East, the areas which are most at risk are inner city neighbourhoods such as West End and Coorparoo, a band of lower income outer suburbs extending from Ipswich to Beenleigh, and Surfers Paradise and Broadbeach. As noted, the rates for tourist destinations such as Cairns, Surfers Paradise and Broadbeach are inflated by the fact that they are based on the permanent population, rather than the actual population.

It should also be noted that those inland and northern divisions which have large indigenous populations tend to have break and enter rates well above those of adjoining divisions.

### **Which groups are most at risk?**

Crime risks vary not only according to geographic area, but also according to socio-demographic factors such as gender, age and race. Analysis of both recorded crime data and crime and safety surveys supports the following observations in relation to crimes against the person:

- Females have a much higher risk than males of being the victim of a sexual assault or an assault within the home, but males are at a substantially greater risk of being a victim of other forms of interpersonal violence.
- Persons in the 15–19 year old age bracket experience the highest levels of risk for most forms of interpersonal violence, apart from homicide.
- The elderly (i.e. those aged 55 and over) have the lowest risk of victimisation of any age group in the community.

- Indigenous people are at much greater risk than the non-indigenous population of being a victim of interpersonal violence (CJC 1997).
- Economic disadvantage further increases the risk of a person being a victim of a personal crime. According to an analysis of the 1995 *Queensland Crime and Safety Survey*, unemployed persons were twice as likely to be a victim of personal crime as were employed persons, and three times as likely as those not in the workforce (GSO 1996).

For property crimes, such as break and enter and theft from households, the individuals who are most at risk are those whose residences are frequently empty during the day. This means that the elderly and other persons not in the workforce, including the unemployed, have lower than average risks for this type of crime (CJC 1996).

## Who are the offenders?

The main source of information about offenders is QPS recorded crime data. However, these data do not necessarily provide an accurate picture of the offending population because the police are only able to record offender details where: (a) an offence has been reported; and (b) someone has been apprehended for that offence. Clearance rates for offences against the person are relatively high (in the vicinity of 65%) but only about 20 per cent for property offences are cleared. In addition, it is possible that some categories of offenders, such as juveniles, are more likely than others to come to police attention.

According to the data collected by the QPS:

- Males generally have *much* higher offending rates than females, accounting for around 85 per cent of identified offenders against the person and 80 per cent of identified property offenders.
- The peak offending age is 17 to 24 years for offences against the person (with the exception of sexual offences, where there is a more even age spread amongst offenders).
- The peak offending age for break and enter offences, property damage and motor vehicle theft is 17 to 19 years.
- Juveniles (those aged under 17 years) have relatively high rates of involvement in property crime, but are considerably less likely than young adults (17–24 years) to be involved in offences against the person.

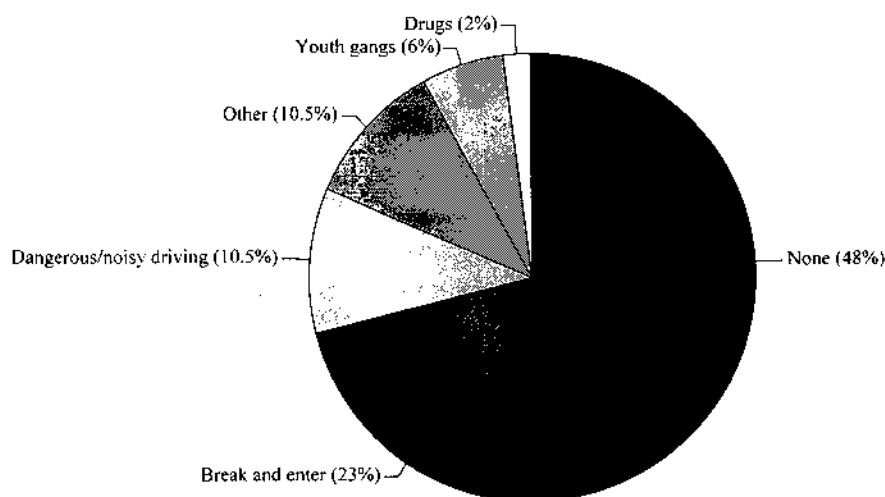
There is conflicting evidence as to whether juvenile crime has increased in recent years. Police statistics suggest that there has been little change since the early 1990s in juvenile offending rates, but there has been a steady increase in the number of juveniles appearing before the courts.

## What crimes are of most concern at the local level?

The 1995 Queensland Crime and Safety survey included a question which asked respondents to identify the main crime or public nuisance problem in their neighbourhood.

As shown by figure 5, the most commonly identified problem was housebreaking/burglaries/theft from home (identified by 22% of respondents), followed by dangerous/noisy driving (10%). Problems such as drugs and offences against the person were identified by only a very small proportion of respondents. Nearly half of the sample considered that there were no crime or public nuisance problems in their neighbourhood.

**Figure 5 — Main crime/public nuisance problem in neighbourhood (Queensland, 1995)**



Source: 1995 *Crime and Safety Survey*, Queensland.

## How does Queensland compare to other jurisdictions?

The ABS collects uniform recorded crime data on a national basis for a limited range of offences. Another source of comparative data are the crime and safety surveys which are conducted by the ABS from time to time.

The most recently available uniform recorded crime data, which covers the 1997 calendar year, enables comparisons to be made between jurisdictions for offences such as: murder, assault, sexual assault, armed robbery, unlawful entry with intent, motor vehicle theft, and other theft.

As shown by table 1, recorded crime rates in Queensland for most of these offence categories were near to or below the national average. Statistics for earlier years present a similar picture.

**Table 1 — Rates of selected recorded crimes per 100,000 population (Queensland and Australia 1997)**

Offence	Queensland	Australian average
Murder	2.21	1.74
Assault	518.75	668.78
Sexual assault	96.58	76.29
Armed robbery	36.55	48.64
Unlawful entry with intent	2,082.90	2,254.70
Motor vehicle theft	500.08	703.67
Other theft	2,721.31	2,856.35

Source: ABS *Recorded Crime 1997*.



In 1997 Queensland had the lowest recorded rate of motor vehicle theft of any jurisdiction. However, for most other major offence categories Victoria had the lowest rates of recorded crime. The Northern Territory had the highest rates for homicide, assault and sexual assault. New South Wales had the highest robbery rate and motor vehicle theft rate, and Western Australia the highest residential break and enter rate.

Most jurisdictions conducted crime and safety surveys in 1995. According to these surveys, Queensland's rate of break and enter was slightly above the national average, as were the rates for assault victimisation and robbery. On the other hand, consistent with the recorded crime data, the rate for motor vehicle theft was well below the national average (GSO 1996).<sup>2</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The key points of this briefing paper may be summarised as follows:

### **Crime trends**

- Reported crime has increased in the 1990s, but the rate of growth for most forms of personal and property crime has slowed in the last few years.
- Some of the increase in reported crimes against the person may be due to changes in victim reporting behaviour and police recording practices, but there is considerable evidence of some 'real' increase in the incidence of assault. In addition, the incidence of robbery, particularly armed robbery, has increased markedly.
- There has been an oscillating upward trend in residential break and enter rates since 1989-90. On the other hand, break and enters of non-residential properties are becoming less frequent. Survey data indicate that break and enter/theft from the home is the most frequently identified local crime problem.
- The rate of motor vehicle theft has been stable for most of the 1990s and fell significantly in 1997-98.
- The incidence of reported property damage increased significantly in the first half of the decade, but now appears to be levelling off.

### **Regional comparisons**

- Rates for reported offences against the person tend to be highest in communities with a large indigenous population. High rates are also recorded in the inner areas of Brisbane and in Surfers Paradise.
- Areas with the highest residential break and enter rates are the inner southside suburbs of Brisbane, the Ipswich-Beenleigh corridor, Surfers Paradise, Broadbeach and Cairns.

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<sup>2</sup> The discrepancies between recorded crime statistics and the crime and safety surveys may reflect differences in reporting rates and recording practices between jurisdictions.

### **Comparisons with other jurisdictions**

- Compared with other jurisdictions, Queensland is generally in the 'middle of the pack' as far as crime rates are concerned, with recorded rates for most offences being near to or a little below the national average. In the case of motor vehicle theft, Queensland is well below the national average.

### **Characteristics of victims**

- males are substantially more at risk of being victims of interpersonal violence than are females (with the exception of sexual assault and assault within the home, where the risk to females is much greater)
- young people, indigenous people and the economically disadvantaged face a greater than average risk of being victims of interpersonal violence
- persons whose residences are normally empty during the day are most at risk of being burgled
- the elderly are the least at risk of any age group of being the victim of a violent crime and also have a below average risk of being burgled.

### **Offender characteristics**

- most offenders apprehended by the police are young males
- according to police data the peak offending ages are 17–24 years for offences against the person and 17–19 years for property offences such as break and enter, property damage and motor vehicle theft
- there is conflicting evidence as to whether juvenile involvement in crime has increased in recent years.

## **Information sources**

Australian Bureau of Statistics 1998, *Recorded Crime: Australia 1997*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

Criminal Justice Commission 1996, *Residential Burglary in Queensland*, Research Paper Series vol. 3, no. 1, author, Brisbane

— 1997, *Assault in Queensland*, Research Paper Series vol. 4, no. 1, author, Brisbane.

— 1998, *Criminal Justice System Monitor*, vol. 3, author, Brisbane.

Government Statistician's Office 1996, *Crime and Safety: Trends in Queensland*, author, Brisbane.

QPS, *Statistical Reviews 1990–91 to 1996–97*.

## Appendix A

### Uses and limitations of crime data

#### Recorded crime statistics

##### Advantages

- collected on a continuous basis and so can be used to monitor trends over time
- available down to the local level and so can be used to compare crime levels in different parts of the State.

##### Disadvantages

- understate the incidence of some types of crimes, especially crimes against the person, because victims often do not report offences to police
- trends can be distorted, especially over the longer term, by changes in reporting behaviour by victims and/or in recording practices by police
- there are problems with the reliability of some police statistics prior to the 1990s.

#### Crime victimisation surveys

##### Advantages

- measure unreported as well as reported offences and so provide a more accurate measure of the overall incidence of certain types of crimes
- when repeated at different points in time, enable researchers to control for the effect of changes in reporting behaviour and recording practices.

##### Disadvantages

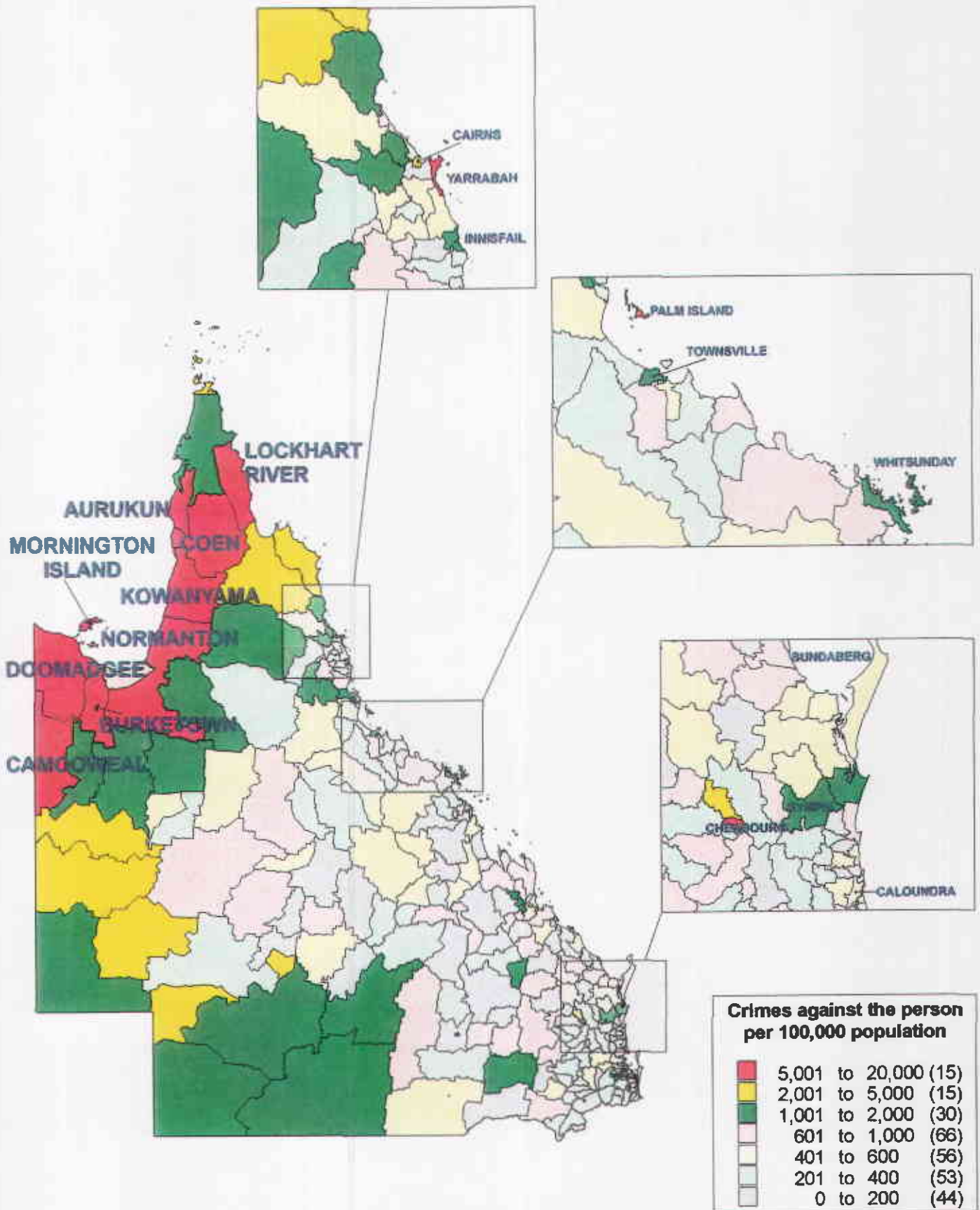
- surveys are conducted only infrequently (last available Queensland data are for 1995) and so are of only limited use for monitoring trends
- survey samples are generally too small to permit much in the way of local area comparisons
- responses can be affected by the method of survey (eg telephone versus face-to-face interviewing) and question format, which can limit the comparability of different surveys
- estimates of the incidence of infrequently occurring crimes (such as rape) may be unreliable due to sampling error
- these surveys provide data only on crimes against individuals — not on crimes against business, or 'victimless' crimes.

## **Appendix B**

**Maps of annual average rate of  
crimes against the person and  
residential break and enters  
by police division**

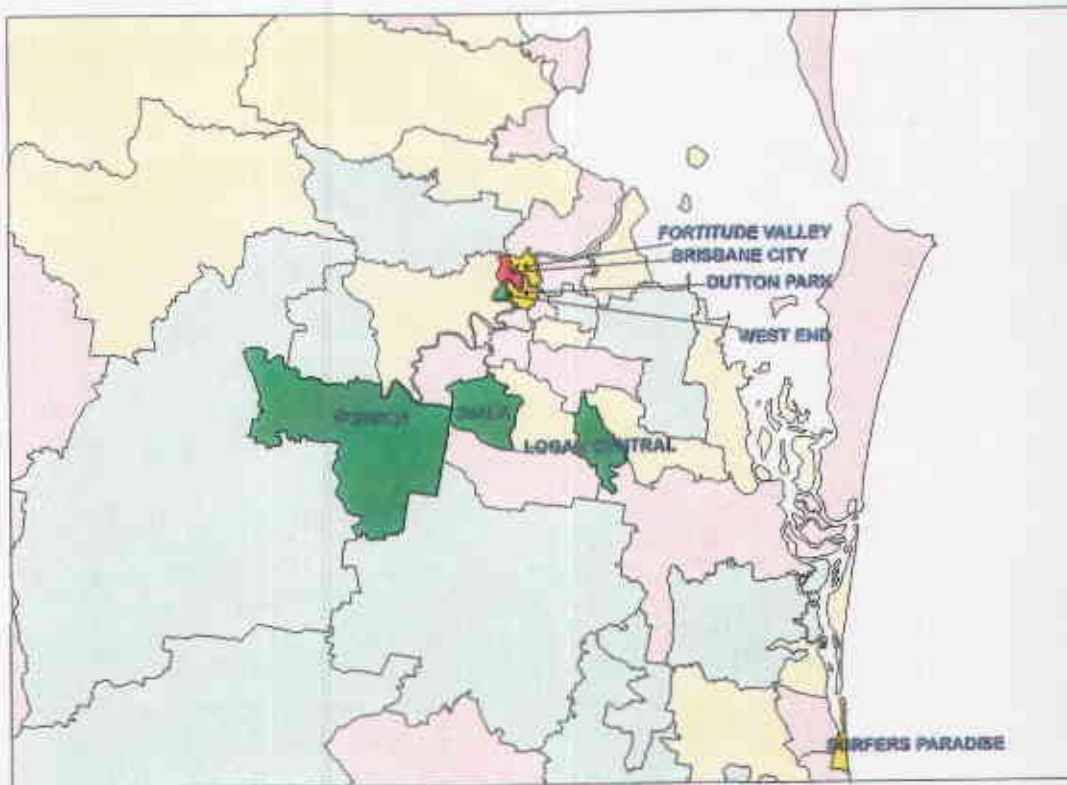
# MAP 1

## Annual average rate of crimes against the person by police division (Queensland 1994-95 to 1996-97)



## MAP 2

### Annual average rate of crimes against the person by police division (South-East Queensland 1994-95 to 1996-97)

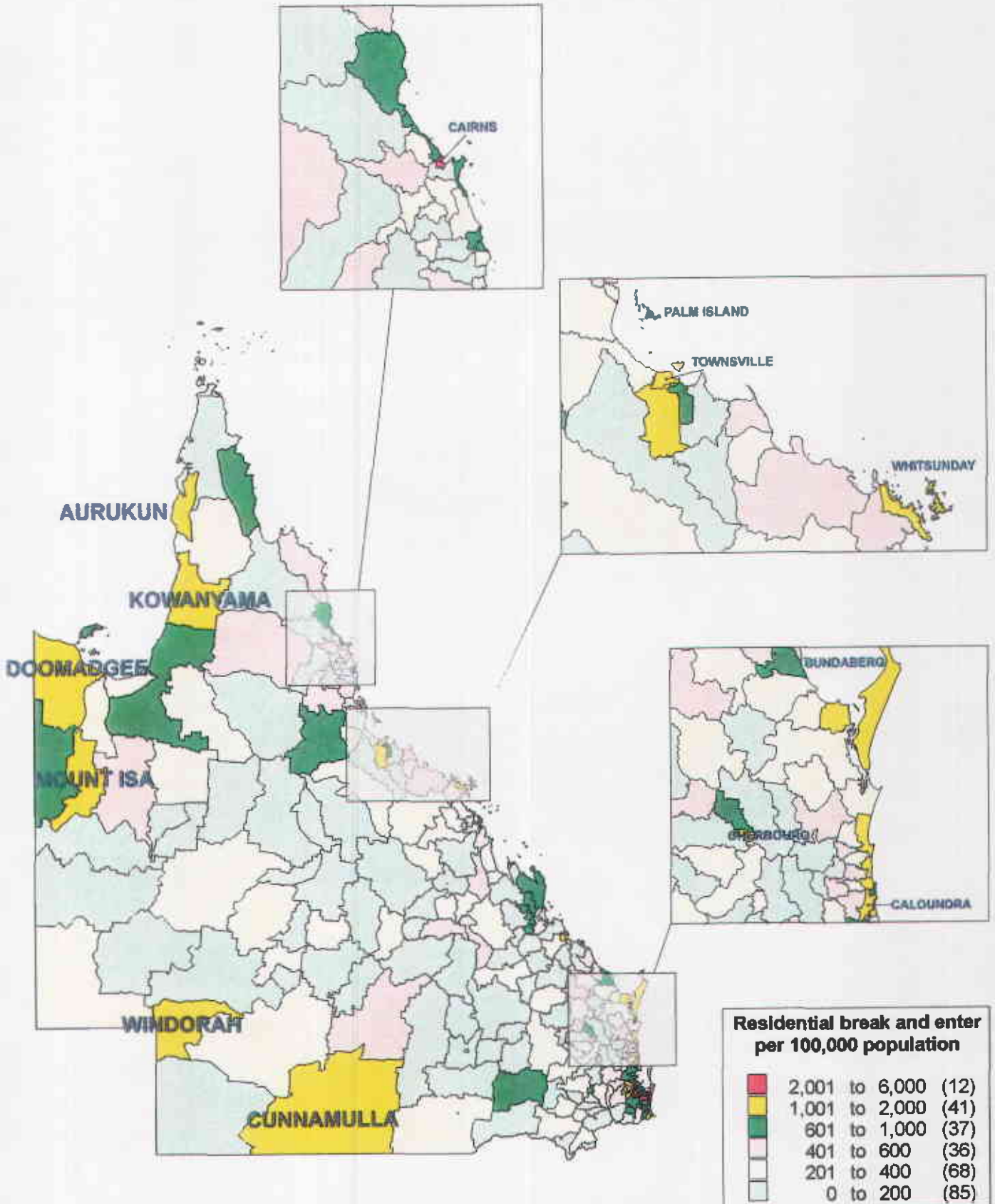


#### Crimes against the person per 100,000 population

Red	5,001 to 20,000	(15)
Yellow	2,001 to 5,000	(15)
Green	1,001 to 2,000	(30)
Pink	601 to 1,000	(66)
Light Blue	401 to 600	(56)
Light Green	201 to 400	(53)
White	0 to 200	(44)

# MAP 3

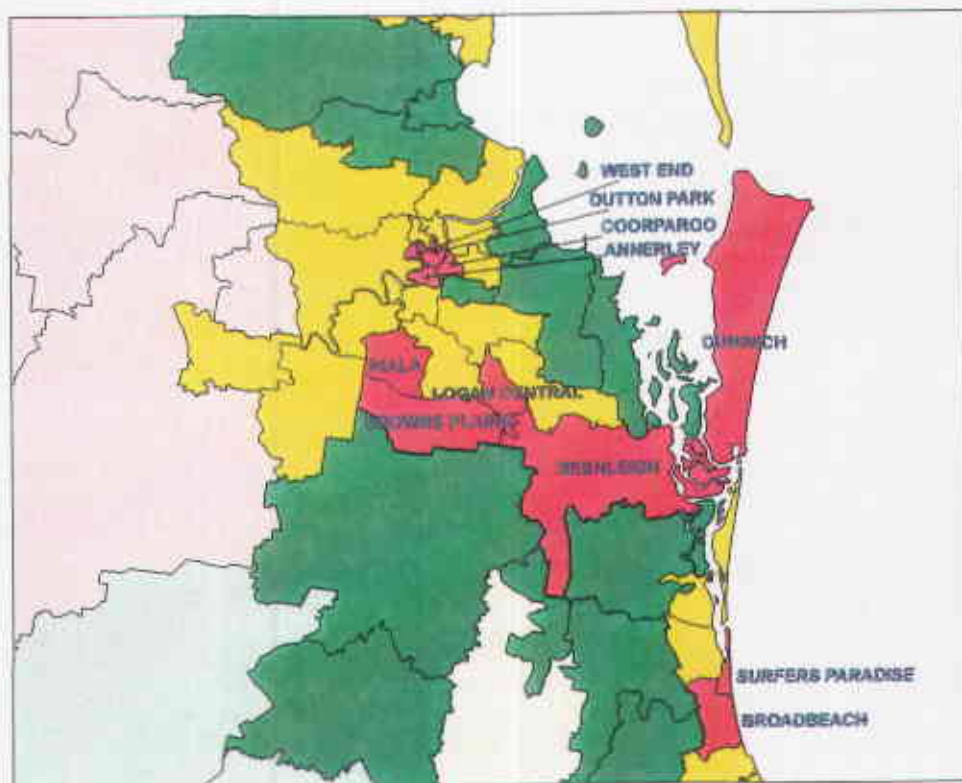
## Annual average rate of residential break and enters by police division (Queensland 1994-95 to 1996-97)





## MAP 4

### Annual average rate of residential break and enters by police division (South-East Queensland 1994-95 to 1996-97)



#### Residential break and enter per 100,000 population

2,001 to 6,000	(12)
1,001 to 2,000	(41)
601 to 1,000	(37)
401 to 600	(36)
201 to 400	(68)
0 to 200	(85)