

# A Snapshot of Crime in Queensland

CRIMINAL JUSTICE COMMISSION

Research Paper Series

Volume 5, Number 1

February 1999

ISSN: 1327-9637

research  
paper

inside

What are the main crime trends in Queensland? .....	2
Offences against the person .....	2
Offences against property .....	2
Other offences .....	3
Which areas of Queensland have the highest crime rates? .....	4
Offences against the person .....	4
Residential break and enter .....	4
Which groups are most at risk? .....	4
Who are the offenders? .....	7
What crimes are of most concern at the local level? .....	7
How does Queensland compare to other jurisdictions? .....	7
Information sources .....	8
<b>Key findings .....</b>	<b>9</b>

## Acknowledgments

The CJC acknowledges the assistance of the QPS in providing unpublished data for this paper, which was originally prepared for the Queensland Government's Crime Prevention Task Force.

## Introduction

This paper has been prepared to assist in informing the Queensland public about the extent and nature of crime in the State.

Issues addressed are:

- 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 at the local level?
- How does Queensland compare to other jurisdictions?

The paper draws primarily on *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 on page 8.

## 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 continuously. 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 takes account of the effect of population growth and enables us to see if the risk of being a victim has changed over time.

Figures 1 to 5 below show trends in selected offence categories for the period 1989–90 to 1997–98. Police data are available prior to 1989 but there are doubts about the reliability and comparability of some of the statistics for earlier years. In addition, particularly for sexual offences and assaults, the longer the 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 65 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 1989–90, although the rate of growth has slowed since 1993–94.

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).

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 — has remained reasonably stable at about 2 per 100,000 population.

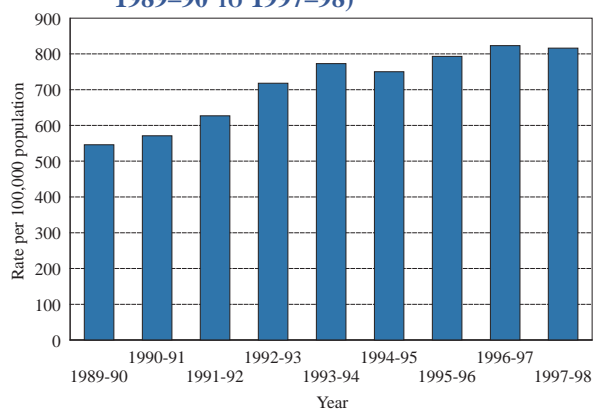
- The rate of reported rapes/attempted rapes increased from 12 per 100,000 population in 1989–90 to 17 in 1996–97 — a rise of 42 per cent.<sup>1</sup> However, this trend *may* be due, at least in part, to the greater willingness of victims to report such offences to police.
- The rate for armed robbery rose by 112 per cent — up from 17 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.

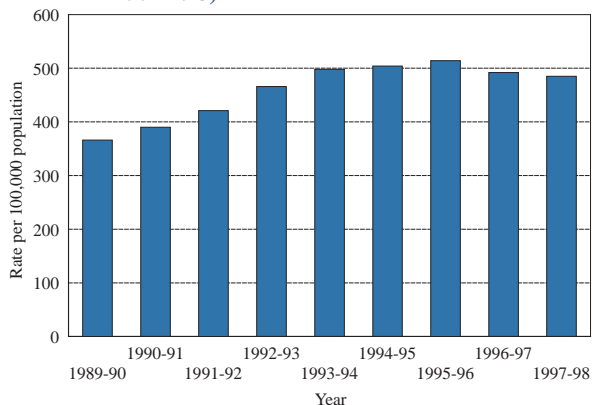
1 Owing to a change in the legal definition of rape, 1997–98 data are not comparable with earlier years.

FIGURE 1: RATE OF REPORTED OFFENCES AGAINST THE PERSON PER 100,000 POPULATION (QLD, 1989–90 TO 1997–98)



Source: QPS Statistical Reviews 1996–97 and 1997–98.

FIGURE 2: RATE OF REPORTED ASSAULT OFFENCES PER 100,000 POPULATION (QLD, 1989–90 TO 1997–98)



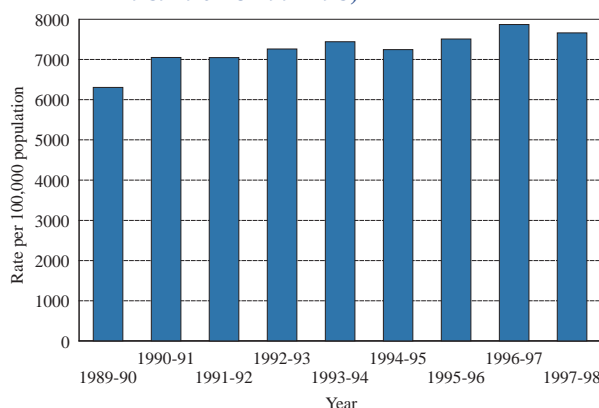
Source: QPS Statistical Reviews 1996–97 and 1997–98.

The largest offence groups in this category are ‘stealing excluding motor vehicles’ (which accounts for around 40% of all reported property offences), break and enter (30%) and property damage (15%). With the exception of the offence of fraud, trends 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.

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

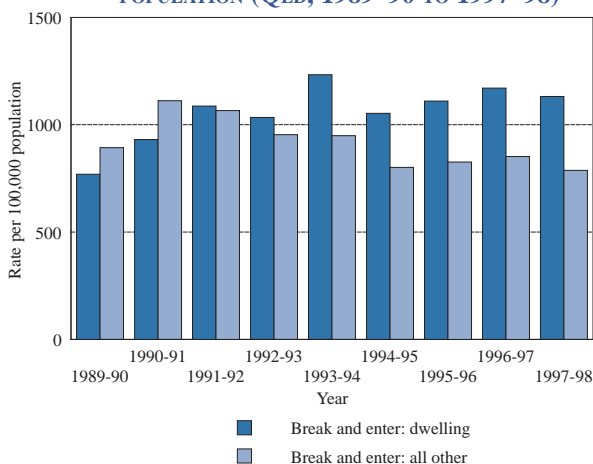
**FIGURE 3: RATE OF REPORTED OFFENCES AGAINST PROPERTY PER 100,000 POPULATION (QLD, 1989–90 TO 1997–98)**



Source: QPS Statistical Reviews 1996–97 and 1997–98.

Note: Owing to legislative changes, 1997–98 data includes ‘handling stolen goods’ offences in ‘property’ offences.

**FIGURE 4: RATE OF REPORTED BREAK AND ENTER FOR DWELLINGS AND ALL OTHER PREMISES PER 100,000 POPULATION (QLD, 1989–90 TO 1997–98)**



Source: QPS Statistical Reviews 1990–91 to 1996–97 and unpublished data from QPS.

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

- 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 in the rate during the 1990s
- property damage — a substantial increase in the rate in the first half of the decade, but a levelling off since then.

## Other offences

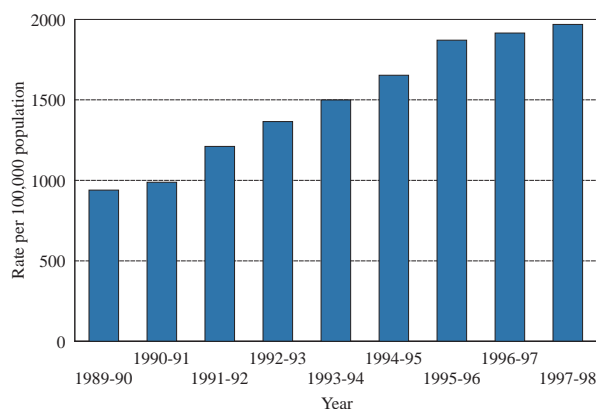
The category of ‘other offences’ encompasses drug offences, traffic and related offences, offences against good order (resisting or hindering police, disorderly conduct and language offences), and offences such as trespassing and prostitution. The number of ‘other offences’ recorded is determined to a considerable extent by the level of police enforcement activity, whereas property offences and offences against the person are normally notified by members of the public.

Drug offences are the most common form of ‘other offences’. Most drug arrests are for possession of drugs and/or items for use in consuming drugs, with cannabis typically being the drug seized by police.<sup>2</sup>

Figure 5 shows that the rate of ‘other offences’ has increased steadily through the 1990s, although there was only a small increase between 1996–97 and 1997–98. (Infringement notices were introduced for some traffic offences in late 1991, but these are not included in police crime statistics.)

<sup>2</sup> Source: Various correspondence from QPS.

**FIGURE 5: RATE OF ‘OTHER OFFENCES’ PER 100,000 POPULATION (QLD, 1989–90 TO 1997–98)**



Source: QPS Statistical Reviews 1990–91 to 1997–98.

- Notes:
1. Owing to legislative changes, 1997–98 data excludes ‘handling stolen goods’ offences from ‘other’ offences.
  2. Excludes traffic and related offences.

The most notable trends in 'other offences' are as follows:

- The rate of drug offences increased from 365 per 100,000 population in 1989–90 to 992 in 1997–98; a rise of 172 per cent. However, this almost certainly overstates the extent to which illicit drug use increased over the period; National Drug Strategy surveys indicate that there has been only a gradual increase in cannabis use in Queensland in the 1990s (Donnelly et al. 1998).
- Good order offences rose by 19 per cent between 1989–90 and 1997–98 — from 421 per 100,000 population to 499. This may also reflect increased police enforcement activity.

## 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 diverge quite substantially from what is happening statewide. It can also be misleading to compare areas in terms of a single measure of crime, because the factors affecting violent crime levels are not always the same as those affecting property crime levels.

To illustrate the importance of geographic differences, the maps on pages 5 and 6 show the rate of offences against the person and the residential break and enter rate for individual police divisions throughout Queensland (a division being the geographic area policed by a station). Because 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

Map 1 shows divisional level crime rates for offences against the person for Queensland as a whole and, more specifically, for the South-East corner.

The divisions in the State with the highest reported crime rates (shaded red) are mostly located in Aboriginal communities, or areas with substantial indigenous populations. Communities such as Cairns, Mareeba, Townsville, Rockhampton and Gympie also have relatively high rates (dark blue and dark grey).

Within the South-East corner, the highest rates are 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 may be many times larger, depending on the time and day).

### Residential break and enter

As shown by map 2, the parts of Queensland most affected by residential break and enter are the south-eastern urban areas and Cairns in the north. Within the South-East, the areas 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 rather than actual population.

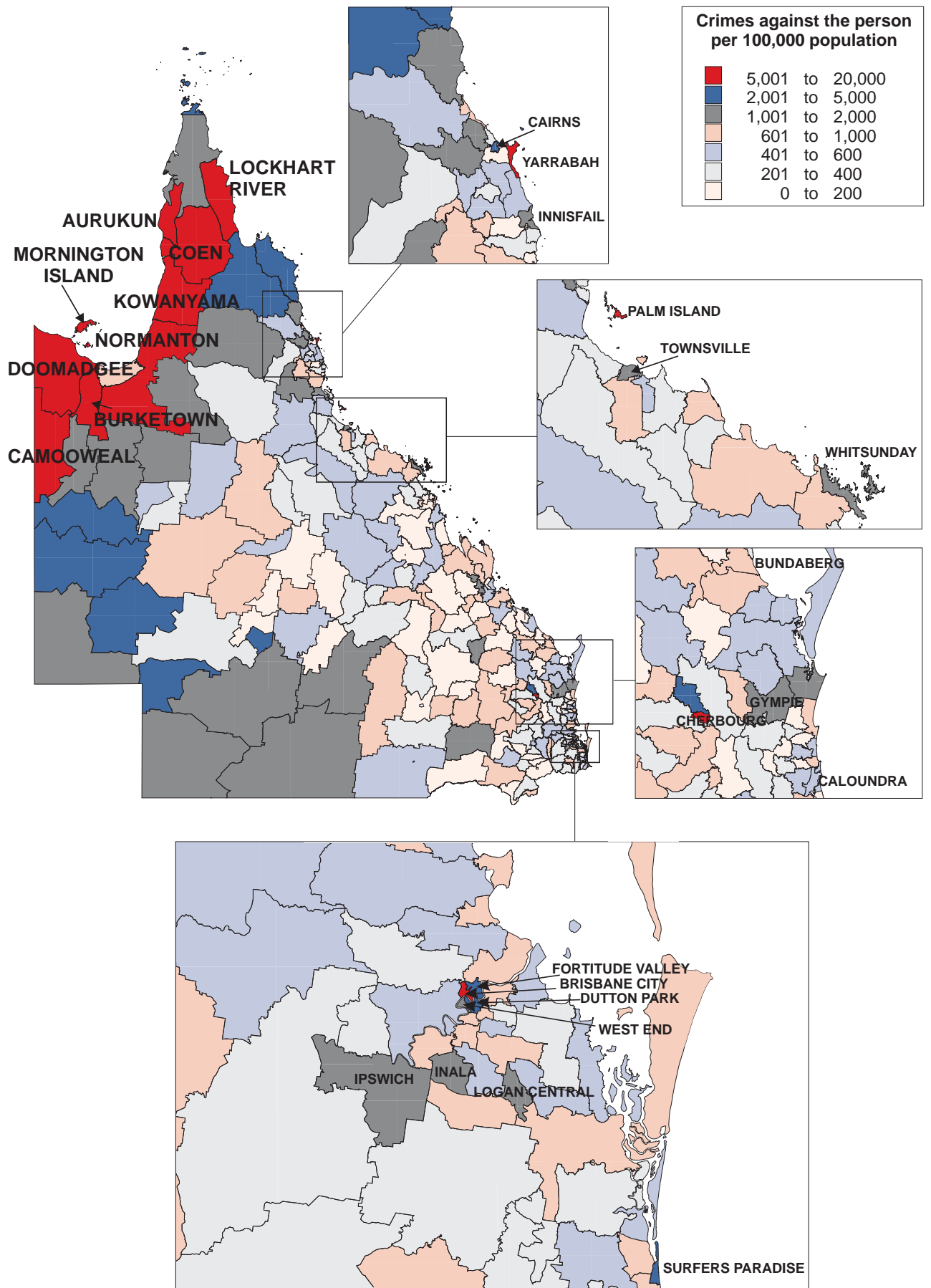
Those inland and northern divisions that have large indigenous populations also tend to have break and enter rates well above those of adjoining divisions.

## 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. In relation to crimes against the person, police crime data and crime and safety surveys show (ABS 1998; CJC 1997; GSO 1996) the following:

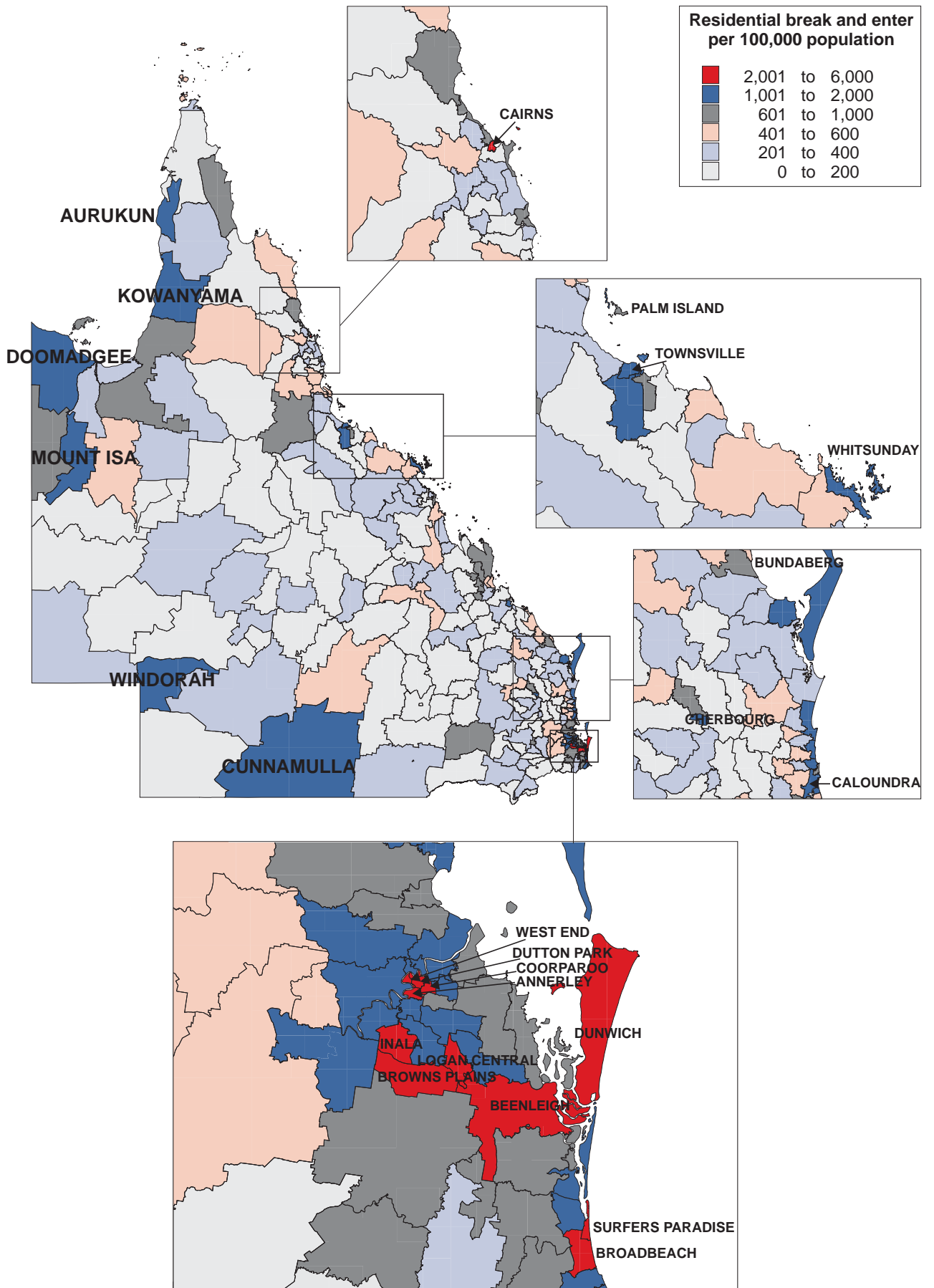
- Females have a much higher risk than males of being the victim of a sexual assault or an assault within the home, but males are at a substantially greater risk of being a victim of other forms of interpersonal violence.
- Persons in the 15 to 19 year-old age bracket experience the highest levels of 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 non-indigenous people of being a victim of interpersonal violence.
- Economic disadvantage 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).

MAP 1: ANNUAL AVERAGE RATE OF CRIMES AGAINST THE PERSON BY POLICE DIVISION (QLD, 1994-95 TO 1996-97)



Maps generated by Tracey Stenzel.

MAP 2: ANNUAL AVERAGE RATE OF RESIDENTIAL BREAK AND ENTERS BY POLICE DIVISION (QLD, 1994-95 TO 1996-97)



For property crimes, such as residential 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 others 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 22 per cent of 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 1997–98 QPS data:

- 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 among 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 to 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 (Department of Families, Youth and Community Care 1998).

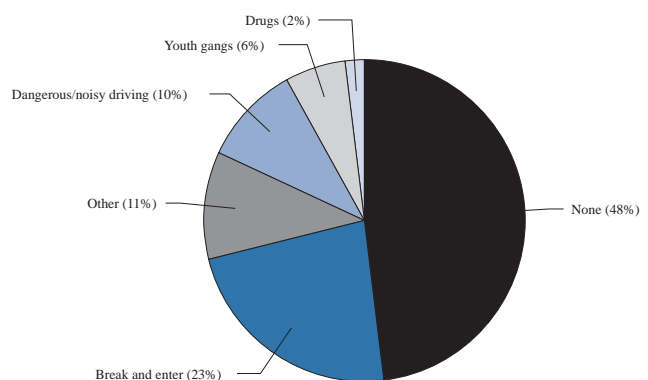
## What crimes are of most concern at the local level?

The 1995 Queensland Crime and Safety survey, conducted by the ABS, included a question which

asked respondents to identify the main crime or public nuisance problem in their neighbourhood.

As shown by figure 6, 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 6: MAIN CRIME/PUBLIC NUISANCE PROBLEM IN NEIGHBOURHOOD (QLD, 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. Other sources of interstate comparative data are the crime and safety surveys conducted by the ABS from time to time.

The most recently available uniform recorded crime data are for the 1997 calendar year. As shown by table 1, recorded crime rates in Queensland for most offence categories were near to or below the national average. Statistics for earlier years present a similar picture.

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>3</sup>

**TABLE 1: RATES OF SELECTED RECORDED CRIMES PER 100,000 POPULATION (QLD & 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	2,082.92	2,254.69
Motor vehicle theft	500.08	703.67
Other theft	2,721.31	2,856.35

Source: ABS 1998.

3 The discrepancies between recorded crime statistics and the crime and safety surveys may reflect differences in reporting rates and recording practices between jurisdictions.

## Information sources

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

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

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

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

Department of Families, Youth and Community Care 1998, *Evaluation of Juvenile Justice Act 1992*, Juvenile Justice Program, Brisbane.

Donnelly, N., Hall, W. & Christie, P. 1998, *Evidence from the National Drug Strategy Household Surveys 1985–1995*, Working Paper No. 5, Drug and Alcohol Services Council, Adelaide.

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

Queensland Police Service, *Statistical Reviews 1990–91 to 1997–98*, QPS, Brisbane.

## Uses and limitations of crime data

### Crime victimisation surveys

#### Advantages

- Surveys 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, surveys enable researchers to control for the effect of changes in reporting behaviour and recording practices.

#### Limitations

- Surveys are conducted only infrequently (the 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 (e.g. 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.
- Surveys provide data on crimes against individuals only — not crimes against business or 'victimless' crimes.

### Recorded crime statistics

#### Advantages

- Police statistics are collected continuously and so can be used to monitor trends over time.
- Data are available down to the local level and so can be used to compare crime levels in different parts of the State.

#### Limitations

- Understate the incidence of some types of crimes, especially crimes against the person, because victims may 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 data prior to the 1990s.



## Key findings

### 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 increase in the actual 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 was 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.

### 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 vulnerable to violent crime of any age group 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 to 24 years for offences against the person and 17 to 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.

Other recent titles in the Research Paper series are *The Nature of General Police Work, Gender and Ethics in Policing, Assault in Queensland*, and *The Cost of First Response Policing*. Since 1995, the Research and Prevention Division also produces on an annual basis the Criminal Justice System Monitor series.

For a limited period, this research paper will be available through the CJC's web site: [www.cjc.qld.gov.au](http://www.cjc.qld.gov.au).

Information on this series and other Criminal Justice Commission publications can be obtained from:

Criminal Justice Commission  
557 Coronation Drive  
Toowong

PO Box 137 Albert Street  
Brisbane Qld 4002

Telephone: (07) 3360 6060  
Toll Free: 1800 06 1611  
Facsimile: (07) 3360 6333  
E-mail: [mailbox@cjcc.qld.gov.au](mailto:mailbox@cjcc.qld.gov.au)  
Web site: [www.cjc.qld.gov.au](http://www.cjc.qld.gov.au)

© Criminal Justice Commission, 1999

Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the *Copyright Act*, no part may be reproduced by any process without permission. Inquiries should be made to the publisher, the Criminal Justice Commission (Queensland).

ISSN: 1327-9637

Printed by GOPRINT, Brisbane.