



No. 117

## Ethnicity and Crime

Satyanshu Mukherjee

*Criminological literature over the last several decades shows that socio-economic disadvantage and disorganised communities contribute substantially to a city's or neighbourhood's crime problem. This literature also shows that new immigrants, from some source countries, may suffer these disadvantages and inherit disorganised communities more often than others. Official statistics from Europe, North America, New Zealand and Australia show members of some migrant groups are arrested, convicted and imprisoned at a disproportionately high rate. A large number of them also appear as victims. The evidence, however, is based neither on comprehensive statistics within a country nor on data gathered over time. Also, in a comparative sense, it is rendered unusable because of a lack of consistency in the definition of such groups. Indeed, "ethnicity" is a difficult concept to quantify, involving such variables as country of origin, language, religion and physical appearance. Likewise, "migrant" is a term applied differently in different social contexts and under different immigration systems. The relevance of both terms to any one group of people can change over time and this phenomenon is itself worthy of further study.*

*This paper provides a brief analysis of the quality, reliability and content of research and currently available statistics on ethnicity and crime in Australia, and suggests methods of improving our knowledge of the relationship of ethnicity to crime.*

**Adam Graycar**  
Director

**S**egments of the population and the media in Australia have expressed concern in recent years over the participation of members of ethnic groups in crime. This is not unique—throughout Europe and North America debates on race relations and involvement of members of migrant groups in crime have been widespread since the late 1980s. Five major publications (Baumgartl & Favell 1995; Hawkins 1995; Marshall 1997; Short 1997; Tonry 1997) including original research from over 30 countries of Europe, North America and Australia have been released recently on the subject of immigration/ethnicity/race and crime. They revealed that:

- Race/ethnicity/country of origin has less to do with crime than the environment and the disorganised communities of alleged criminals.
- Particularly in Europe, lack of knowledge of the local language is considered to be a major disadvantage faced by migrant groups.
- Migrants generally have lower levels of education and a very low rate of participation in higher education, which limits their life chances.
- Migrants generally concentrate around poorer and disadvantaged city neighbourhoods.
- Migrants' unemployment rate is significantly higher than that of the native-born.
- There is evidence of some bias against minority groups in their contacts with the criminal justice system. For example, in

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decisions such as caution or prosecution, social background factors, particularly family stability, play a very important role. Suspects from minority groups often come from “unstable” families, making a caution decision difficult. This situation can influence decisions at subsequent stages of the criminal justice system.

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### Prior Research

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Research into the involvement of migrant groups in crime began in the last century. Two theories proposed to explain this phenomenon are culture conflict and social disorganisation. According to the former, “Conflicts of cultures are inevitable when the norms of one cultural or sub-cultural area migrate to or come in contact with those of another” (Sellin 1938, p. 63). The social disorganisation theory postulates that the distribution of crime and delinquency follows a city’s physical structure and the lack of an organised community to deal with these incidents.

Until about the 1950s research results showed that migrants living in disorganised communities displayed higher involvement in crime than their more fortunate counterparts, but their crime rate was lower than that of the native-born. Research of the 1990s appears to show that migrants participate in crime at a higher rate than the native-born.

The first investigation into the involvement of migrants in crime in Australia commenced in the 1950s when the Minister for Immigration established the Committee to Investigate Conduct of Migrants. The committee collected a large amount of data on migrant types and the nature of problems they encounter, and issued three reports. The major conclusion of all three was that the incidence of serious crime was lower amongst migrants than in the Australian population

generally. The committee also indicated that, while crime by migrants received undue publicity, no or little publicity was given to offences against migrants (Commonwealth Immigration Advisory Council 1952).

The committee observed that, although migrants suffered disadvantages such as the lack of proper balance of the sexes, considerable psychological strains like loneliness and unfamiliar environment, lack of knowledge of the local language and lack of family support, their lower involvement in crime was commendable.

Since the committee’s reports, two major works (Francis 1981; Hazlehurst 1987) have addressed the issue of migrant crime in Australia. Both provide detailed literature surveys that demonstrate the important role that culture, language, psychological strain and support from one’s community play in the settlement process in a new country, and Hazlehurst also presents some analysis of the National Prison Census. However, both the authors felt disadvantaged because of inadequate statistics.

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### Limitations of Current Statistical Information

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The police in all States and Territories are a major source of crime statistics, but these statistics refer only to crimes reported to and/or detected by police. The Crime and Safety Surveys in Australia and Crime Victimization Surveys conducted overseas consistently show that a majority of victims do not report incidents of victimisation to the police or other government agencies. Estimates from these surveys indicate that less than 40 per cent of crimes are reported to the police.

When a crime is reported, police seek to verify it and may decide in a small number of cases not to record the crime for statistical purposes. For all the crimes

that are recorded, the police may have details of the incidents and victims but not of an offender, unless it is a violent or personal offence where the offender’s identity is usually apparent. Offenders’ details are available only after the arrest or identification of a suspect has cleared a crime. On average, police in Australia clear about 25 per cent of the offences recorded. In other words, only about 10 per cent of the crimes that occur each year in Australia are solved and only for this set of “solved” crimes are perpetrators known. Although it can be assumed that some relationship exists between arrest data and crime data, it is grossly inaccurate to assume that suspects arrested/identified for only 10 per cent of the cleared offences are statistically representative of suspects for the 90 per cent of crimes that remain unsolved.

Once a suspect has been taken into custody or identified, their gender, age, occupation, employment status, marital status, Aboriginality, ethnicity/country of birth, etc. can be recorded. Currently only the Victorian and Western Australian Police Services publish limited statistics on ethnicity/country of birth of suspects. However, the statistics on ethnicity in both States cannot be used because they are based solely on the perceptions of the recording officer.

Only Victoria Police publish statistics by country of birth for offenders, as divided into the following categories:

- *Alleged offenders*—persons alleged to have committed a crime who have been processed by arrest, summons, caution or warrant of apprehension. Persons are counted on each occasion they are processed and for each offence (a person processed on three occasions is counted three times, and if on each occasion processed for two offences will be counted six times).

**Table 1: VICTORIA 1993–94: Number of Alleged Offenders Processed by Country of Birth, and Percentage of All Alleged Offenders from Each Country of Birth Processed for Violent, Property, Drug and Other Offences**

Country of Birth	1996 Population	Number Processed	Percentage				
			Violent	Property	Drug	Other	Total
Australia	3,215,744	99,511	12.7	59.6	10.8	17.0	100.0
Cambodia	8,258	266	9.8	74.4	4.5	11.3	100.0
Chile	6,802	149	12.1	64.4	11.4	12.1	100.0
China	28,149	241	16.6	63.9	1.2	18.3	100.0
Fiji	6,003	173	17.9	68.2	4.0	9.8	100.0
Germany	30,360	340	8.5	67.9	10.0	13.5	100.0
Greece	61,808	1,016	13.9	59.3	11.4	15.5	100.0
Hungary	7,666	123	16.3	65.9	5.7	12.2	100.0
India	24,336	257	13.2	73.2	4.7	8.9	100.0
Ireland	12,105	238	23.5	51.7	7.1	17.6	100.0
Italy	99,172	1,151	14.0	56.6	14.4	14.9	100.0
Lebanon	13,991	664	19.9	52.3	13.0	14.9	100.0
Malaysia	23,120	214	5.6	82.2	2.8	9.3	100.0
Malta	24,306	277	23.5	49.1	12.6	14.8	100.0
Netherlands	26,201	210	19.0	57.6	9.5	13.8	100.0
New Zealand	42,785	2,297	14.5	63.6	8.6	13.4	100.0
Philippines	20,150	293	19.1	72.7	1.0	7.2	100.0
Poland	23,084	337	16.3	65.0	3.9	14.8	100.0
Romania	4,812	346	7.2	73.7	11.3	7.8	100.0
Russian Federation	5,660	271	8.5	74.5	4.1	12.9	100.0
Sri Lanka	23,581	355	6.8	82.0	2.5	8.7	100.0
Turkey	14,800	570	17.0	45.1	19.1	18.8	100.0
United Kingdom	219,191	2,968	11.5	66.7	11.1	10.7	100.0
USA	10,438	163	10.4	62.6	9.8	17.2	100.0
Vietnam	55,157	2,220	17.8	60.0	10.0	12.1	100.0
Former Yugoslavia	19,795	1,380	16.2	59.7	8.8	15.3	100.0
Other countries	386,829	2,449	16.1	62.9	7.7	13.3	100.0
Unspecified	—	14,877	—	—	—	—	—
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,414,303</b>	<b>133,356</b>	<b>13.5</b>	<b>59.1</b>	<b>10.5</b>	<b>17.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: *Crime Statistics 1993–94*, Victoria Police, Melbourne

- *Individual/distinct alleged offenders*—persons only counted for the first offence for which they are processed in the fiscal year.

Details are available for about 90 per cent of suspects.

### Analysis of Current Statistics

Statistics discussed in this paper relate to:

- alleged offenders by country of birth (for Victoria only, across 25 migrant groups, comparing data from first year of collection 1993–94 with data from 1996–97);
- prisoners by country of birth (for Australia, across 9 migrant groups, using National Prison Census data collected since 1983).

However, it is important to note that the statistics presented in Tables 1–3 are numbers only; no attempts have been made to relate these numbers to total populations of each migrant group in Victoria and in Australia. The population of migrant groups varies enormously. For example, according to the 1996 Census of Population and Housing, there were 12,279 migrants from Romania in Australia, whereas there were 1,071,532 people born in the United Kingdom. According to the same census there were only 4,812 Victorians born in Romania as against 219,191 born in the United Kingdom.

#### Victoria Police data

Tables 1 and 2 present the number of alleged offenders, by

country of birth, processed for all offences for 1993–94 and 1996–97 respectively, and the percentage of alleged offenders accused of violent, property, drug and other offences. As already stated, the size of the population of migrant groups varies substantially. It would be wrong and misleading to infer that, in 1993–94, those born in the United Kingdom had the second highest involvement in crime in Victoria, after the Australian-born. Relating the number of alleged offenders to population size reveals that only 13 per 1000 UK-born were processed that year, as against 31 per 1000 Australian-born. Migrant groups born in New Zealand, Lebanon, Vietnam, Turkey and Cambodia all had a higher per capita involvement in crime than those born in Australia.

**Table 2: VICTORIA 1996–97: Number of Alleged Offenders Processed by Country of Birth, and Percentage of All Alleged Offenders from Each Country of Birth Processed for Violent, Property, Drug and Other Offences**

Country of Birth	1996 Population	Number Processed	Percentage				
			Violent	Property	Drug	Other	Total
Australia	3,215,744	107,321	13.9	61.0	9.6	15.5	100.0
Cambodia	8,258	287	8.7	51.6	27.2	12.5	100.0
Chile	6,802	144	16.0	63.2	10.4	10.4	100.0
China	28,149	298	17.8	58.4	5.7	18.1	100.0
Fiji	6,003	265	33.6	45.3	7.5	13.6	100.0
Germany	30,360	313	11.8	67.7	8.0	12.5	100.0
Greece	61,808	949	20.1	50.7	11.8	17.4	100.0
Hungary	7,666	190	13.2	60.5	11.6	14.7	100.0
India	24,336	255	23.1	65.1	2.0	9.8	100.0
Ireland	12,105	153	24.8	46.4	11.8	17.0	100.0
Italy	99,172	873	21.3	53.4	8.6	16.7	100.0
Lebanon	13,991	738	15.7	61.5	8.4	14.4	100.0
Malaysia	23,120	253	4.3	83.8	8.7	3.2	100.0
Malta	24,306	238	18.1	49.2	8.8	23.9	100.0
Netherlands	26,201	263	20.2	60.8	6.8	12.2	100.0
New Zealand	42,785	1,686	18.0	55.5	9.8	16.7	100.0
Philippines	20,150	361	10.5	60.7	14.7	14.1	100.0
Poland	23,094	478	13.6	64.2	6.1	16.1	100.0
Romania	4,812	444	9.0	66.7	13.7	10.6	100.0
Russian Federation	5,660	339	7.7	80.8	2.9	8.6	100.0
Sri Lanka	23,581	240	16.3	66.7	6.3	10.8	100.0
Turkey	14,800	674	16.6	55.2	11.3	16.9	100.0
United Kingdom	219,191	2,118	15.9	58.5	12.1	13.4	100.0
USA	10,438	122	16.4	43.4	18.9	21.3	100.0
Vietnam	55,157	3,176	6.8	51.4	32.6	9.3	100.0
Former Yugoslavia	19,795	1,383	14.9	61.2	8.9	15.0	100.0
Other countries	386,829	3,223	18.2	59.4	9.3	13.1	100.0
Unspecified	—	13,068	—	—	—	—	—
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,414,303</b>	<b>139,852</b>	<b>14.6</b>	<b>59.4</b>	<b>10.0</b>	<b>16.1</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: *Crime Statistics 1996–97*, Victoria Police, Melbourne

In 1996–97 the patterns changed. Those born in Romania displayed the highest involvement in crime (92 per 1000 as against 33 per 1000 Australian-born). Some notable figures from the two tables are:

- A large proportion of alleged offenders, 75 per cent in 1993–94 and 77 per cent in 1996–97, were Australian born.
- Of the 26 groups listed, 14 showed increases in the number of alleged offenders; substantial increases are observed for those born in Hungary, Fiji, Vietnam, Poland and Romania.
- Of those showing declines in the number of alleged offenders between 1993–94 and 1996–97, substantial decreases were observed for

groups born in Ireland, Sri Lanka, the United Kingdom and New Zealand.

- A majority of alleged offenders from all birthplace groups were processed for property offences in both years.
- Fijian-born persons processed for violent offences increased from 18 per cent of all alleged Fijian-born offenders in 1993–94 to 34 per cent in 1996–97.
- Cambodian- and Vietnamese-born persons processed for drug offences increased from 4.5 per cent and 10 per cent of alleged Cambodian- and Vietnamese-born offenders in 1993–94 to 27 per cent and 33 per cent respectively in 1996–97.

*National Prison Census data*

- The National Prison Census conducted on 30 June each year reveals that the total number of inmates in Australian prisons has increased from 10,195 in 1983 to almost double that number in 1997. Prisoners born in Vietnam displayed the largest percentage increase in number (from 18 in 1983 to 457 in 1997).
- The number of all persons charged with violent offences (most serious charge) of homicide, assault, robbery and rape increased by almost 123 per cent between 1983 and 1997. In 1997 close to half the prisoners were in prison for violent offences.
- Prisoners whose most

**Table 3: AUSTRALIA 1983–97, Number of Prisoners by Country of Birth**

Country of Birth	All Offences						Violent Offences					
	1983	1986	1989	1992	1995	1997	1983	1986	1989	1992	1995	1997
Australia	8,213	9,121	10,289	12,302	13,634	14,677	3,369	3,760	4,428	5,520	6,888	7,407
New Zealand	272	246	345	418	439	530	102	86	122	188	228	261
Vietnam	18	28	99	152	331	457	12	19	50	69	81	113
UK/Eire	612	618	656	691	780	758	265	252	286	310	423	408
Greece	48	83	80	65	75	78	16	30	24	25	27	28
Italy	136	143	129	144	153	159	62	40	44	43	51	58
Former Yugoslavia	144	145	146	177	176	154	75	69	74	61	81	69
US/Canada	47	46	61	48	47	51	14	17	17	14	20	21
Lebanon	0	131	136	183	189	152	0	31	41	38	72	62
Turkey	0	56	77	79	61	52	0	25	27	28	26	18
Other	705	679	939	1,300	1,543	2,014	252	295	357	450	595	841
<b>Total</b>	<b>10,195</b>	<b>11,296</b>	<b>12,957</b>	<b>15,559</b>	<b>17,428</b>	<b>19,082</b>	<b>4,167</b>	<b>4,624</b>	<b>5,470</b>	<b>6,746</b>	<b>8,492</b>	<b>9,286</b>

Country of Birth	Property Offences						Drug Offences					
	1983	1986	1989	1992	1995	1997	1983	1986	1989	1992	1995	1997
Australia	2,965	3,097	3,382	3,982	4,018	4,412	460	714	844	846	914	819
New Zealand	69	73	104	113	103	135	59	54	62	57	54	49
Vietnam	4	7	30	37	74	86	1	1	11	27	151	222
UK/Eire	190	207	215	206	180	173	61	71	71	65	93	101
Greece	12	22	26	11	17	19	12	27	20	23	29	20
Italy	24	30	38	39	33	24	35	58	34	45	57	59
Former Yugoslavia	41	42	50	44	46	33	8	15	7	38	36	33
US/Canada	16	5	16	5	4	8	10	20	18	19	17	17
Lebanon	—	22	46	47	27	37	—	74	27	58	73	41
Turkey	—	8	22	18	12	17	—	20	19	26	13	9
Other	189	213	252	251	277	444	162	242	185	314	464	485
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,510</b>	<b>3,726</b>	<b>4,181</b>	<b>4,753</b>	<b>4,791</b>	<b>5,388</b>	<b>8,08</b>	<b>1,296</b>	<b>1,298</b>	<b>1,518</b>	<b>1,904</b>	<b>1,858</b>

Source: National Prison Census, 1983–97

serious charge was a property crime accounted for over 28 per cent of the prison population in 1997.

- Drug offenders, 90 per cent of whom were in prison for dealing, trafficking or manufacturing drugs, accounted for less than 10 per cent of the inmates. In 1997, about half of the Vietnamese-born prisoners were imprisoned for drug offences (222 out of 457).

### Recommendations

Debates on the involvement of members of ethnic/migrant groups in crime are not uncommon, but many are based on inadequate and anecdotal information. Most notably, in efforts to explain the relationship between

ethnicity and crime, the only variable used is the country or region of migrants' origin; no references are made to social and economic conditions.

In recent years researchers have questioned whether ethnicity and crime statistics should be collected within the criminal justice system, because of possible misinterpretation. If we do not collect appropriate statistics, the present level of debate and reliance on anecdotal information will continue. If we do collect proper statistics they can not only be used to examine accusations of involvement in crime but will also enable communities to investigate the well-being of their members and seek help if necessary.

Ideally, ethnicity and crime statistics should be collected at every stage of the criminal justice system, that is: police (for persons

suspected of, cautioned or arrested for crime); prosecution (for persons prosecuted for crimes); courts (for persons charged, appeared or tried at various levels of courts, persons found guilty/not guilty, persons convicted/acquitted, persons sentenced); and corrections (for persons serving under different corrective orders, probation, community service orders, imprisonment, home detention, parole). It would also be desirable to use the same definitions all the way through the system. While this ideal situation may be difficult to achieve immediately, this should not discourage attempts to begin collecting ethnicity and crime statistics now.

Any collection of data on ethnicity and crime should begin at the police level. Although police statistics of suspects or arrestees cannot describe the

incidence of crime in a community, they are the closest to the crime scene that can be collected and are preferable to offender data gleaned through victim or crime and safety surveys. These surveys only deal with personal crimes, which constitute less than 15 per cent of all crimes. Also, as the victim and the offender see each other, and the details collected are based on the victim's impression of the offender, their reliability may depend on the type of crime and the relationship between the offender and the victim.

Ethnicity and crime statistics will be useful only if other demographic, social and economic statistics for migrant groups are also collected. These can then be used not only to understand the differences between migrant groups but also to explain relationships, if any, between ethnicity and crime. The five-yearly census of population and housing provides substantial amounts of data which could be combined with details of new arrivals compiled by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs.

The review of literature on the subject of ethnicity and crime revealed problems in defining "ethnicity". A proper definition of ethnicity might be considered to include first, second and third generation migrants. However, research from all over the world, except Sweden, shows that the involvement of second and subsequent generations of migrants in crime is very similar to that of the native-born. This suggests that the study of the ethnicity and crime relationship should focus on the overseas-born or first generation migrants. It is the first generation migrants who could find the settlement process in a new country less than smooth, especially those coming from totally different cultural, political and legal systems. If some migrant groups show high involvement in crime, that should prompt not only a study of their background but

also of their life since arrival in Australia.

Accordingly, it appears the Victoria Police statistics on arrests by country of birth provide an adequate classification for data collection. If a mechanism can be established to collect this information in all jurisdictions from all the suspects processed, this would provide a useful database. So that the links between ethnicity and crime can be explained adequately and reliably, a second data item that would be useful is "date of arrival in Australia". This would provide not only the length of exposure to the Australian way of life, but also the nature of experience since arrival in Australia. For example, those who arrived in their early childhood will have grown up in Australia—a substantially different experience to those who migrated in their thirties.

The 1996 census data reveal some noteworthy features of the population in some ethnic groups. Of particular concern are the weaknesses in the areas of education, proficiency in English and employment. If an individual is found to be lacking in education and proficiency in English language, his/her chances of engaging in legitimate, gainful employment will be diminished. While the links between unemployment and levels of crime are complex, most research and annual criminal statistics show over-representation of unemployed people among those arrested for offences and those in prison. This is supported by the European experience, which indicates such disadvantages reduce one's life chances, increase one's vulnerability to negative influences and diminish one's resilience in the face of misfortune.

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