



HM INSPECTORATE OF  
CONSTABULARY FOR SCOTLAND

Crime Audit:  
National overview report

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12 August 2010

To monitor and improve the police service in Scotland



## Introduction

In 2008-09 there were no fewer than 937,724 crimes and offences in Scotland. We know this because police forces have a responsibility not just to investigate incidents that come to their attention, but to record them for official purposes. We also know from the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey (SCJS) 2009<sup>1</sup> that members of the public tend to under-report crimes to the police. Their reasons for not reporting are typically that they feel either that the incident was too trivial, that the police could not have done anything about it or that the police would not have been interested. The survey evidence also suggests that the numbers of people reporting incidents to their local police force differs according to where they live.

It is very important that people report criminal incidents to the police and that the police subsequently record these accurately. Not only does it help to ensure that individual incidents are properly dealt with, it assists in establishing a wider picture of the scale and nature of crime and the resources needed to tackle it. In recognition of this, the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland (ACPOS) introduced the Scottish Crime Recording Standard (SCRS)<sup>2</sup> in 2004 to improve consistency in crime recording across Scotland. It was intended that this standardisation would end the variety of local practices that previously existed, and would incorporate a more victim-orientated approach as the following extract indicates:

**Aim:** To provide a more victim orientated approach that serves the needs of our communities and ensures uniformity in crime recording standards throughout Scotland.

**Principles:** All reports of incidents, whether crime related or not will result in the creation of a report, which is auditable. Following initial registration, an incident will be recorded as a crime in all cases if: the circumstances amount to a crime or offence as defined by Scots Law, and there is no credible evidence to the contrary. Once recorded, a crime will remain recorded unless there is credible evidence to disprove that a crime had occurred.

ACPOS also created the position of Crime Registrar in each force to act as an arbiter for compliance with the Standard. To complete the new arrangements, a national forum for crime registrars was set up with the purpose of maintaining consistency in matters of policy and interpretation of the Standard, nationally.

Since then, forces have been carrying out their own crime recording audits to assess their compliance. We have also previously conducted two thematic inspections on the subject<sup>3</sup>. More recently, in late 2009 ACPOS initiated a nationally co-ordinated audit across all forces to produce a single *snapshot* of crime recording across Scotland.

We took the opportunity presented by this piece of work to do our own review of a selection of incidents across Scottish forces. Relative to the volume of incidents recorded

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<sup>1</sup> Scottish Crime and Justice Survey Findings 2009, Scottish Government (2009).

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/12/14120636/0>


<sup>2</sup> The Scottish Crime Recording Standard, ACPOS (2004). [Scottish Crime Recording Standard](#)

<sup>3</sup> Thematic Inspection: Quality of service and feedback to users of police services in Scotland, HMICS (2008).

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/05/29140329/5>

Thematic Inspection: A review of how the Scottish Crime Recording Standard has developed within the police service in Scotland since 2005, HMICS (2008).

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/02/26133627/0>



by forces, the numbers we examined were very small. For that reason we are very clear that our results cannot be used to predict the wider accuracy of crime recording by any force. We are nevertheless confident that they are indicative of where further audit work needs to be done.

The aim of this report is to provide a national overview of the local issues highlighted in the individual force reports that we have also published.

## Background

When a member of the public contacts the police to tell them about an incident, the information they provide typically results in an entry being created and logged on an electronic incident logging system. Once the incident log is created, officers will examine the circumstances as reported and react accordingly. The Scottish Crime Recording Standard gives guidance to police officers on what circumstances amount to an incident being recorded as a crime and what particular crime should be recorded. Once it is established that a crime has occurred, officers are expected to record the details on a crime report form and then carry out an investigation.


A crime audit is an examination of a sample of incidents reported to the police to determine whether they have been properly recorded as crimes. Errors will include occasions where a crime has been recorded but incorrectly categorised, for example a serious assault being recorded as a minor assault (see the methodology section below for a definition of these terms). In early 2010, Scottish police forces completed a round of internal crime audits. Our crime audit is intended to complement and support force efforts to achieve greater SCRS compliance.

In conducting this audit we have sought to link this work back to relevant recommendations made in previous HMICS reports. On a general level, for example, the way in which forces respond to reports of incidents from members of the public is related to the theme of our 2008 report, [Quality of service and feedback to users of the police service in Scotland](#). More specifically, we have used the audit to assess forces' progress in responding to recommendations in two other HMICS reports:

- [A review of how the Scottish Crime Recording Standard has developed within the police service in Scotland since 2005 \(2008\)](#), recommendation 5: that, in order to achieve greater transparency and consistency within the audit regime, forces agree to co-ordinate individual force crime audits through the SCRG so that each audit is scrutinised by a crime registrar from a neighbouring force. *On an annual basis HMICS will dip-sample crime audits across all forces, including British Transport Police and Ministry of Defence Police.*
- [Domestic abuse \(2008\)](#), recommendation 5: that forces review and reinforce their quality assurance practices and processes for recording domestic abuse incidents.

## Methodology

Our audit comprised two distinct phases. First, we assessed the accuracy and robustness of the force's own internal crime audit. In its internal audit the force examined a sample of reported incidents for compliance with the Scottish Crime Recording Standard. The sample included incidents from all crime categories, including those offences that simply by virtue of being known to have occurred are almost always 'detected', such as possession of drugs. In the first part of our audit we examined a selection of these incidents.



In the second phase we looked at three specific types of crime and offence, namely domestic abuse, vandalism and minor assault. Our reasons for selecting these crime categories are explained in more detail below but, in brief, better recording of these crimes would help the police service to understand and manage the risks associated with violence and anti-social behaviour, both of which have been identified as very high priority areas by the Scottish Strategic Assessment<sup>4</sup>. For this part of the audit we selected the cases to be examined from reported incidents of domestic abuse, vandalism and minor assault that had not been audited by the force.

Domestic abuse is defined by the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland as; *“Any form of physical, sexual or mental and emotional abuse [that] might amount to criminal conduct and which takes place within the context of a relationship. The relationship will be between partners (married, cohabiting, civil partnership or otherwise) or ex-partners. The abuse can be committed in the home or elsewhere”*. This crime type is widely recognised in policing as one of high risk because of the numbers of cases nationally that result in instances of serious injury or death. Studies have also shown that victims of domestic abuse are likely to suffer many occasions of abuse before it is reported to the police. It is therefore essential that the police properly record and investigate these kinds of incident. In our audit we examined over one hundred such cases reported to the force, to assess SCRS compliance as well as adherence to the force's policy for dealing with incidents of domestic abuse.

Vandalism, described in the Scottish Crime Recording Standard as *“wilfully or recklessly destroy[ing] or damag[ing] the property of another person contrary to Section 52, Criminal Law (Consolidation) (Scotland) Act 1995”*, is a common crime in Scotland. Typically it has one of the highest single percentage shares of all recorded crime and offences, excluding motor vehicle offences such as speeding. It could therefore seriously undermine public confidence in the police were forces found to be consistently under-recording this kind of crime. For this reason we audited over one hundred incidents of vandalism to assess SCRS compliance.

Finally, we examined a similar number of incidents of minor assaults. Any assault that involves a serious injury to the victim, such as broken bones or deep cuts, should be categorised as serious while all others should be classed as minor. Minor assault, according to common law, may be defined as, *“directing an attack to take effect physically on the person of another, whether or not actual injury is inflicted”*. It too is another type of offence that typically has a high individual share of all recorded crime and offences<sup>5</sup>.


We believe that combining the two audit elements described above provides a reasonable ‘snapshot’ of how the force is responding to a range of calls from the public. Our results will help the force to focus further audit work on increasing its understanding of how well it is performing in relation to recording crime and should, where necessary, act as a driver for improvement.

In guidance drawn up by and for Scottish Crime Registrars, a standard statistical formula is used to calculate the size of sample to be audited per force in order to give results accurate to +/-3% with a 95% confidence level. The calculation assumes that the

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<sup>4</sup> The Scottish Strategic Assessment is an overview of current and long-term matters involving criminality and community safety, compiled through evidential analysis of information and intelligence.

<sup>5</sup> For statistical purposes the Scottish Government divides contraventions of Scottish law into two: “crime” is generally used for more serious criminal acts; “offences” is for less serious acts although it may be applied to serious breaches of criminal law. The distinction is made only for working purposes and the “seriousness” of the offence is generally related to the maximum sentence than can be imposed.



proportion of incidents incorrectly recorded is 0.5% of the total. In our 2005 inspection report *Meeting the Standard*, we observed an average rate across forces of around 3.0% of all incidents recorded incorrectly. If we take the difference between these two estimated proportions, i.e. 2.5%, but apply the same confidence and accuracy levels, this will allow us to audit a sample of 104 incidents per exercise.

The general principle of data testing is that the greater the *number* of records tested, the greater confidence we can have that the result is representative of the population as a whole. However, testing large numbers of records is not always possible. For this reason, we used minimum sample sizes on this occasion. Though apparently small, our sample sizes of 104 compare favourably with those used by the Home Office (80 records per crime recording category, 120 for a force-wide single test) and were felt to be sufficient for our purpose of identifying residual weaknesses in recording systems and force processes.

The Scottish guidance also advises that the sample be taken over a specified seven-day period. Because of the larger size of Strathclyde, it is advised that sampling timeframes here also be spread across three consecutive periods over 24 hours. With the exception of Strathclyde Police, we identified a single start date and time for our audits from which we asked all forces to identify consecutive incidents - from 00:01 hours on 4<sup>th</sup> October 2009. As a result, our spread of audited cases is not comparable across all forces - e.g. it may take one force several days to record 104 incidents of minor assault but another, just several hours. Nor is it necessarily representative of the way in which all such incidents are recorded in individual forces.



## Main findings

### 1. General themes

- In a number of forces we found instances where the records appeared to indicate that a crime had taken place, but no crime had been recorded and no rationale for this decision had been given. Having shared these findings with forces, on some occasions they were able to confirm after further research that the crime had in fact been recorded.

First we would stress that the SCRS is clear in its direction here: where the initial circumstances as reported to the police would suggest that a crime has taken place and yet on further investigation it is not assessed as a crime, then a clear rationale must be recorded. We would urge that this information be held in a readily accessible place to allow supervisors and other staff reviewing these decisions to examine and validate them. It should also save time when conducting future audits.

- The majority of the incidents that we found to be non-compliant had been reviewed by a local supervisor or in a force control room.

Second, and related to our first point, is the role of supervisors in the crime recording process. Many force policies dictate that a report of an incident to the police cannot be finalised without a supervisor assessing it to make sure it has been properly dealt with.

We know from other work that we have carried out in forces that many supervisors experience a conflict between the need to work alongside officers in their everyday operational policing activities and their wider supervisory role in assessing the work of these same officers which may require them to spend time in police stations accessing computer systems. In force control rooms the problems are more to do with volume of workload. Force control rooms act as hubs for handling all incident work and as such are usually very busy places, with staff and supervisors managing large numbers of incidents across large areas of Scotland. As part of their response to our audit, forces should therefore consider where and by whom the work of reviewing how incidents are quality assured is best carried out.

- A number of incidents had not been recorded as crimes and investigated further because the victim did not wish to pursue the matter.

The SCRS is unequivocal in that where the circumstances amount to a crime it will be recorded as such. In crimes such as domestic abuse there are various reasons why a victim might not want the incident investigated further. And yet to better protect them and other vulnerable persons including children, and to reduce the prevalence of this type of crime generally, all these crimes should be reported, fully investigated and where appropriate prosecuted.

### 2. All crime - test of force audit

In examining a number of the incidents previously audited by the forces as part of the national exercise co-ordinated by ACPOS, we were in effect applying a fifth layer of quality assurance to the recording process. In other words, up to that point there had been four opportunities to identify and correct any mistakes:



- by the staff taking the original report;
- by a supervisor either locally or at a force communication centre (or sometimes both);
- at the point when forces carry out their own regular sampling and checking process across all their reported crime; and
- during the national audit co-ordinated through ACPOS and conducted by force crime registrars.

Our expectation was that by the time we conducted our audit we should find very high levels of compliance with the SCRS. This was the case, and we are pleased to report that all forces exceeded the 95% compliance target set by ACPOS.

### 3. Individual crime types

The incidents we examined under the three individual crime types - domestic abuse, vandalism and minor assaults - would have been subject to the first three levels of quality assurance outlined above. In this series of tests we were therefore providing a fourth level of quality assurance.

#### a. Domestic abuse


This crime is widely believed to be considerably under-reported to the police. It is responsible for a significant proportion of the homicides that police investigate and can often have implications beyond those for the victim, for example when children are involved. We know that such wider considerations can cause victims not to report domestic abuse.

For these and other reasons, investigating the circumstances of a domestic abuse incident can be a complex task. Given this context, it is vital that the police make good initial decisions about what has happened and what needs to happen next when an incident is reported. This must include recognising when the reported circumstances amount to a crime and require further investigation.

On the basis of the incidents we audited, four forces exceeded the 95% target for compliance set by ACPOS. The four were Dumfries and Galloway Constabulary, Lothian and Borders Police, Strathclyde Police and Tayside Police. Rates for the remaining four forces ranged from 83.7% to 91.4%.

Across several forces a number of cases failed to comply because the records showed that a crime had not been recorded, despite the circumstances indicating that one had taken place, because the person reporting the incident was unwilling to pursue the matter. As we have highlighted above, the SCRS is clear on this point and states that a crime report must be made and an investigation carried out even if the victim refuses to co-operate.

Although not directly a matter of SCRS compliance, we also noted that two forces were in some instances incorrectly coding incidents as domestic abuse incidents. For the purposes of recording, domestic abuse as previously outlined (page 4) is defined by ACPOS as occurring between partners (married, cohabiting, civil partnership or otherwise) or ex-partners. It does not include incidents between other family members. Recording errors such as these can distort subsequent analyses and affect decisions on priorities and how to deploy staff and resources.



In recent years police forces across Scotland have placed considerable emphasis on the robust investigation of domestic abuse incidents. This, and the improvements that have flowed from it, are widely recognised. Examples include the introduction of domestic abuse liaison officers, who are able to provide a consistent, targeted and improved quality of service to victims. The records we examined showed high levels of activity by these staff.

Specialist databases to record and analyse domestic abuse trends have also been created. These are proving useful in helping forces to understand patterns of incidence and how best to tackle them. Where forces use a series of IT systems there is the potential problem of duplicate information being held on more than one system. This might include the original incident recording system, the crime recording system and a specialist database for recording vulnerable persons. In these scenarios staff are required to search and update any or all of these systems and in some forces not all staff having access to all systems.

Finally as part of their efforts to improve practice, some forces, including Strathclyde, are now monitoring the proportion of domestic abuse incidents that are then recorded as crimes. This focus and the use of specialist guidance to staff is increasing the proportion of incidents which when more fully investigated are then recorded as crimes and are subject to full investigation.

The ability of agencies to engage in more comprehensive and co-ordinated initiatives to reduce domestic abuse and support its victims, depends ultimately on the ability of the police to record these crimes accurately in the first place. In this regard, while we recognise the strong performance of those forces achieving compliance rates of over 95%, ACPOS should consider whether for this particular crime an even higher target is necessary.

For those forces that fall below the 95% SCRS compliance level for domestic abuse, and particularly for those that fall well below this level, there is an urgent need to increase compliance. We would expect these forces to carry out a more comprehensive programme of audits of this crime type in order to understand the reasons for their lower compliance and how best to improve it. In doing so they should consider the experience and practices of those forces whose rates are above the 95% target.


## **b. Vandalism**

Vandalism accounts for a significant proportion of all crime and offences across Scotland (11.2% in 2008-09) and is recognised to form an important element of what people generally classify as anti-social behaviour. We have also seen recently the consequences that can arise from its impact as part of a wider repeated pattern of behaviour on those members of society who are already vulnerable.

Police forces work with a range of other agencies to reduce the negative impact that this crime has on people's quality of life. This work is helped considerably by having an accurate picture of the incidence of vandalism. Indeed some forces have invested considerable effort in increasing the public's reporting of this crime to ensure that they can deliver the best policing response.

In the selection of incidents we audited we found that the compliance rate of four forces, Dumfries and Galloway Constabulary, Lothian and Borders Police, Northern Constabulary





and Tayside Police, was above the 95% target set by ACPOS. Rates for the remaining forces ranged from 86.5% to 92.3%

We would expect that forces scoring a lower compliance rate in our audit carry out further research to understand the reasons behind their performance and take action to improve it. In doing so they should consider the experience and practices of those forces whose compliance rates exceed the 95% target.

### c. Minor assaults

As outlined on page 5 an assault should be called as “minor” unless it involves a serious injury to the victim, such as broken bones or deep cuts, in which case it becomes a “serious” assault. Minor assault, according to common law, may be defined as, “*directing an attack to take effect physically on the person of another, whether or not actual injury is inflicted*”. In 2008-09 it accounted for just under eight per cent (7.9%) of all recorded crimes and offences.

In the selection of incidents we audited only two forces exceeded the 95% target set by ACPOS, namely Dumfries and Galloway Constabulary and Lothian and Borders Police. The compliance rates of the remaining forces ranged from 84.6% to 91.4%.

A number of the occasions where forces did not record crimes in compliance with the Standard concerned incidents involving children of school age as both the alleged perpetrator and victim. While we acknowledge that the circumstances surrounding these incidents can vary greatly, the SCRS is clear in the requirement to record these as crimes where appropriate irrespective of the age of those involved. The national crime registrars’ group is aware of such inconsistencies in practice and is considering this matter.

We would expect forces scoring a lower compliance rate in our audit to carry out further research in order to understand the reasons behind their performance and take action to improve it. In doing so they should consider the experience and practices of those forces whose compliance rates exceed the 95% target.

## Conclusions

Individually and nationally, police forces and APCOS invest considerable time and effort in producing analyses of crime to inform decisions, both within and at times beyond the police service, on what needs to be prioritised in order to enhance community safety. It is clearly imperative, therefore, that these analyses and the decisions that flow from them are based on the most accurate picture of crime possible. The standard for crime recording that ACPOS introduced in 2004 underpins these efforts.

From the incidents we examined, it is clear that some forces scored consistently well across the entire audit that we carried out. It would be too simplistic to interpret this as a matter of scale, for in addition to Dumfries and Galloway Constabulary the second largest force in Scotland, Lothian and Borders Police, also performed strongly. We trust that the areas we have highlighted in this report, and in our eight individual force reports, provide forces with a starting point from which to consider their current processes and procedures in more detail.

In addition to continuing to provide the necessary national structures and apparatus to support forces in their efforts, we have suggested that ACPOS consider raising the



compliance target for domestic abuse incidents above 95%. The national crime registrar's forum should take a key role in advancing this work.

We intend to follow-up force and national responses to this crime audit and will return to this subject in our future inspection programme.