

# Rising Crime

The issue of rising crime in Latvia is both contradictory and paradoxical in its essence: official statistics point to a decline in the number of recorded crimes, while other sources (the media, sociological surveys) suggest that crime is on the upswing, especially organised crime. Human security in the broadest sense is a key component of human development. Crime, especially organised crime, threatens the people's physical and material security and may seriously hamper the strengthening of democracy.

Alongside falling living standards and unemployment, respondents in sociological surveys mention crime as one of the most urgent problems in contemporary Latvian society. Publications in the press also suggest that a significant number of crimes go unreported.

In analysing crime trends since the restoration of independence, several aspects stand out:

- / there has been a gradual decrease and stabilisation in the total number of crimes, but the number of violent crimes is increasing;
- / former convicts are increasingly committing crimes again (i.e. recidivism is growing), a development compounded by poor conditions in correctional facilities and an ineffective system of rehabilitation;

- / there is an increase in unrecorded economic crimes, including corruption in government and in law enforcement institutions;

- / the economic crisis facilitates the development of organised crime, which in turn, threatens the cultivation of democracy and a free market economy;

- / major reforms in the court system and investigative bodies are taking place, which suggests that, after a difficult transition period, the work of law enforcement institutions should become more effective.

As in evaluations of human development more generally, the objective analysis of trends in crime is impossible through a narrow focus on a limited time period in the 1990s.

## 1994: The Year the Official Crime Rate Stabilised

According to data from 1994, more than 100 crimes were registered every day, totaling about five crimes every hour. Over the last decade, the number of registered crimes has almost tripled: from a total of 21,502 in 1987 to 61,871 in 1992. Current data suggest a decrease in the rate of crime to the level in 1991.

Table 9.1

Recorded and Solved Crimes in Latvia,  
1984–1994

Year	Recorded Crimes	Solved Crimes
1984	24,047	12,020
1985	25,303	18,300
1986	22,307	15,701
1987	21,502	16,117
1988	22,991	15,870
1989	29,676	13,950
1990	34,686	13,505
1991	41,929	12,504
1992	61,871	14,920
1993	52,835	14,731
1994	40,983	12,704

Table 9.2

The Total Number of Violent Crimes  
in Latvia, 1990–1994

Type of Crime	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994
Robbery	410	506	833	1177	1142
Aggravated assault	350	403	571	725	714
Murder	165	213	293	429	375
Rape	135	160	124	130	129

When analysing changes over time, it should be remembered that crime figures may reflect patterns that emerged over a period of several years. Latvia's crime rate began to rise in 1988 as a consequence of the broader liberalisation of society in the former Soviet Union. At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, changes in the economy outpaced those in the legal system, state institutions and public consciousness more broadly. The lack of appropriate legislation and the introduction of new legal norms generated feelings of insecurity among the militia (police) and prosecutors. During the period 1986–1990, the number of convicted criminals fell by almost one half. This did not reflect the existing crime situation, and there is reason to believe that this was one of the chief causes for the burgeoning crime rate. In 1993–1994 the number of convicted offenders reached 1986 levels and the rise in the crime rate was halted.

### The Rapid Growth of Violent Crime

Larceny/theft accounts for the largest share of all crimes (75% in 1993, 66% in 1994). However, as can be seen in Table 9.2, the number of violent crimes has risen most rapidly.

In relation to the total number of crimes committed, the share of robberies has increased most rapidly (2.2% in 1993, 2.7% in 1994). The share of crimes involving serious bodily injuries is also on the rise (1.4% in 1993, 1.7% in 1994). Although official statistics point to a decline in the murder rate, the number of murders per capita remains very high – one murder is registered every day. It is common knowledge that rapes often go unreported. Thus far, however,

neither criminologists nor women's organisations have conducted detailed research on this problem.

### Factors Facilitating Crime

Statistics demonstrate that over a period of three years (1992–1994) the number of crimes involving firearms has tripled, reaching 486 cases in 1994. This figure shows no tendency of falling and is closely related to the growing availability of firearms.

- / In accordance with the Law on Firearms, citizens of Latvia with no previous criminal record can purchase weapons for self-defense purposes.
- / Part-time home guards (citizens who perform military service in addition to other employment) have acquired thousands of weapons for personal use.
- / An uncontrollable black market in weapons was created through illegal commerce in weapons, ammunition and explosives during the withdrawal of the Russian army.

At present it is difficult to provide even approximate estimates as to the total number of firearms in Latvia. Border guards, traffic police, and other law enforcement officials regularly confiscate illegal weapons. Possession and use of legally acquired weapons does not always take place in accordance with the law either. However, police statistics suggest that legally obtained and registered weapons are rarely used in committing crimes. Illegal weapons sold by Russian army personnel remain the primary problem.

Crimes connected with economic conditions also have social and legal dimensions. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Latvian society rapidly polarised into the wealthy and the destitute (see also the Chapter on Declining Incomes and Rising Poverty). The social and psychological consequences of this polarisation contributed to a rise in corruption, theft and extortion. Artificial prices and elements of the free market existed side by side, creating opportunities for earning enormous profits – profits that surpassed salaries of state sector employees by hundreds of times. This development was crucial in facilitating corruption and the expansion of organised crime (see below).

Under current legislation, regulations governing cash transactions and the process of ascertaining the origin of large sums of money are minimal. The extremely slow pace at which the system of tax collection and payment regulation are developing also facilitates economic crime. Rising unemployment is another factor facilitating property crimes, especially burglaries (see also the Chapter on Rising Unemployment). Measures to combat economic crime have been disastrously unproductive – of 860 cases of economic crime investigated in 1994, only 109 were sent to court.

Cases of recidivism, when crimes are repeatedly committed by previously convicted offenders, are also becoming more frequent. The share of repeat offenders among convicted criminals was 28.8% in 1988, 28.6% in 1989, 33.0% in 1990, 35.1% in 1991, 34.6% in 1992, 40.3% in 1993 and 40.0% in 1994. Of 2231 persons released from correctional institutions over the last year, 333 people have committed crimes again. The phenomenon of recidivism is linked with conditions in correctional institutions.

It was only in 1994 that a shift from camp-type prisons to prisons with cells began and legislative amendments introduced a progressive system of punishment. Data on crime in correctional facilities suggest that two-thirds of the perpetrators are young people between 18 and 29 years of age. The crisis in Latvia's prisons is reflected by the 16 cases of prison break-outs in 1994, including several mass break-outs: an unprecedented case of 89 prisoners from Pārlielupe prison, as well as 16 prisoners from Grīva prison. Many of the prisons in Latvia were

constructed at the beginning of the century, are dilapidated, and correspond to neither local nor international standards. Persons who reenter society after serving a prison sentence often run into difficulties with the state and local institutions responsible for overseeing the process of social rehabilitation (see also the Chapter on the Integration of Marginal/Vulnerable Groups).

The social and psychological roots of crime are reflected in the share of suspects who have committed crimes under the influence of alcohol: 50%. According to official figures, the share of crimes committed by juveniles is decreasing (18.9% in 1991, 12.5% in 1994). However, the high percentage of unsolved crimes bolsters the assumption that a relatively high percentage of crimes is still committed by juveniles. Future prospects in this realm seem none too bright, given the fact that 44% of all reported crimes are committed by those between the ages of 18 and 29, including 28% by persons between the ages of 18 and 24.

### The Development of Organised Crime

The development of organised crime is intertwined with changes in the economy. On the territory of the former Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s, the emergence of organised crime was facilitated by the artificial ruble exchange rate, artificial prices and shortages. This led to the emergence of underground bosses who could not legalise their finances and protect them lawfully. Civil disputes were resolved with the help of "extortionists." The private sector expanded as a result of economic reforms, and this promoted the birth of racketeering or the so-called collection of "duty" from new private entrepreneurs, mainly those involved in trade (see also the Chapter on the Emergence of Civil Society). Armed racketeering groups were often formed among former athletes. A racketeering "roof" (or umbrella organisation) became an all-encompassing type of organised crime and a major source of income. There is reason to believe that 10% of turnover is paid by the majority of small and medium businesses in Latvia's largest cities, especially in spheres where accounting takes place in cash. In the event of resistance, racketeers threaten businesses or employ violence, as evidenced by the scores of

explosions in cafes and stores in Riga and other cities. With corruption in government, organised crime can employ funds acquired through racketeering to penetrate the business world, establish banks, and participate in the privatisation process. This, in turn, has highlighted the problem of money laundering.

Statistical data on organised crime are unavailable. Thus, in evaluating the development of organised crime, it is necessary to rely on the statements of law enforcement officials, other specialists, and journalists. Prostitution is another source of profit for organised racketeering groups. According to the Riga Police, there may be as many as 10 thousand prostitutes in the capital, and several thousand more in Jūrmala, the port cities of Ventspils and Liepāja, and other cities. Prostitution is illegal, but the establishment of a vice squad has done little to prevent it. While the maximum administrative fine levied on prostitutes is 0.50 lats or approximately one US dollar, prostitutes can earn 30 to 40 US dollars per hour. Imported illegal labour is also used in prostitution – police believe that up to 30% of all prostitutes come from Moldova, Belarus, Ukraine or other republics of the former Soviet Union.

Due to Latvia's geopolitical location, almost all the main forms of organised crime are transnational in nature and common throughout Europe. The main spheres of activity of Interpol's Latvian National Bureau are indicative: car robbery; illegal acquisition and smuggling of drugs; prostitution and the organised sending of women to other European states; forgery of documents and hard currency; thefts of art and antique objects; and the illegal sale of radioactive substances.

Cooperation with the police forces of several European states resulted in the detention of several drug traffickers in 1994. Marijuana has been smuggled into Latvia from the Commonwealth of Independent States (last year almost two kilograms were confiscated on the border). The first case in which heroin was confiscated in Latvia took place in February 1995, though a person smuggling heroin from Latvia was already detained in Oslo last year. This suggests Latvia is becoming a transit country in the drug trade.

Illegal immigration should be mentioned as an especially rapidly developing trend in international crime. Latvia is a transit point to Scandinavia for Kurdish, Iraqi, Afghan, Palestinian and other asylum seekers. Since 1992, more than 1000 illegal immigrants and asylum seekers have been detained attempting to reach Sweden through Latvia. There is reason to believe that the real number of illegal immigrants and asylum seekers is much greater and that their passage through Latvia is organised and coordinated by "agents" or middlemen permanently residing in the country. The end of 1994 witnessed the detention of the largest group to date – 149 people – as well as the arrest of a Latvian citizen who had attempted to ferry them to Sweden by fishing boat.

### Preventing and Combating Crime

According to official statistics, only half of all murders and other crimes involving serious bodily injuries are solved. As can be seen in Table 9.3, for other types of crime, the rate of unsolved crimes is higher.

However, the number of crimes solved has not decreased in absolute terms (see Table 9.1). There is reason to believe that the situation will not worsen in this realm.

In 1994 reforms were carried out in the court system and law-enforcement agencies. In spring 1995 a three-tiered system of courts began functioning, which should facilitate the independence of the judiciary. Moreover, an ethics code for judges should be adopted this year.

Table 9.3

The Distribution of Solved and Unsolved Crimes by Type of Crime, 1994

Type of Crime	% Solved	% Unsolved
Murder	53.3	46.7
Aggravated Assault	51.3	48.7
Rape	46.5	53.5
Robbery	32.9	67.1
Thefts from homes	22.6	77.4
Car Theft	5.2	94.8

A special unit called the Bureau to Combat Organised Crime has been established under the auspices of the Criminal Police and a parallel unit is operating within the prosecutor's office. Under the auspices of the Criminal Police, the Economic Police and the Office to Combat Narcotics are working in tandem. The work of the Interpol National Bureau has rapidly expanded: in 1994, it received 3349 requests for assistance. The majority of the requests originated in Germany and Russia, followed by Sweden, Lithuania and Poland. This suggests that the process of exchanging necessary information is rapidly expanding. As in Europe, the defense and security of witnesses, a prerequisite for launching a full-fledged fight against organised crime, remains a problem.

A unified State Revenue Service was established in 1994 encompassing tax inspection, customs and financial reporting. In 1995 the State Revenue Service received income tax declarations from the population for the first time. In the future, it will be necessary to further develop tax collection agencies. A procedure for filing full bankruptcy would facilitate tax collection, but Latvia has yet to adopt such a procedure.

A Tariffs Unit has been set up within the Customs Department in order to improve tax and customs duty collection and combat smuggling. At the same time, further measures must be adopted to regulate cash transactions.

In 1994 the Saeima adopted a Law on Operative Activity and legislators are currently drafting a new Criminal Code, a Criminal Procedure Code and a Code of Administrative Responsibility. A Code on Sentences is being planned, as are tougher sentences for violent crimes, especially those involving the use of firearms or explosives.

The parliament-approved National Council on Crime Prevention and the Criminological Research Centre have been actively operating since October 1994. In order to make their work more effective, it is essential that theoretical research be used in devising concrete crime prevention measures.

Measures aimed at facilitating the reintegration of former prisoners into society could also

play a significant role in alleviating crime. To prevent recidivism, the process of social adaptation should begin in correctional facilities (see also the Chapter on the Integration of Marginal/Vulnerable Groups). Possible directions for future work in this sphere include:

- 1) humanising correctional facilities, guaranteeing the physical security of prisoners, the maintenance of basic health standards, and the observation of human rights;

- 2) raising the educational level of prisoners and providing opportunities for acquiring a specialty, which will bolster the chances of employment after a prisoner's release;

- 3) facilitating the maintenance of social ties with family members, relatives, friends, and colleagues at work to ease the adaptation process after imprisonment;

- 4) providing all the necessary information on opportunities to receive various forms of assistance after release from a correctional institution;

- 5) providing employment in correctional institutions, emphasising the role of work, and creating opportunities for prisoners to accumulate earnings for life after detention;

- 6) conducting psychological diagnoses of prisoners with the assistance of social workers, psychologists and psychotherapists, continuing group or individual therapy, and facilitating the acquisition of socially acceptable communication skills, behavior modification and changes in value orientations;

- 7) maintaining regular contacts with local governments near the place of detention, compiling information on potential social and employment problems encountered after release from the correctional facility.

In order to strengthen the rule of law, it is essential to continue reforms that have already been initiated in law enforcement institutions. This, in turn, will enhance public trust in these institutions and facilitate a decrease in crime. The public must also learn to overcome fear, assume an active role in preventing and combating crime, and assist in the process of strengthening human security in Latvia.