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József Kó ■**Crime statistics in Hungary, 1968–2017:
What is shaping the trend?****Statystyki przestępczości na Węgrzech w latach
1968–2018. Analiza i wyjaśnienie trendów**

Abstract: The study examines the development of crime statistics in Hungary. Data on registered crimes have been collected since 1968 using the same methodology. The long-term analysis reveals several trends. The first period, 1968–1989, was characterised by slow growth. The second phase started after the regime change: 1990–2000. There was a very significant increase and strong waves in the data. In the third phase, in the decade following the new millennium, the data appear to have stabilized at around 400,000 cases per year. Starting in 2012, a new trend of dramatic decline has emerged in the crime data. The study examines the evolution and possible causes of these diverse trends. It presents the social and political changes behind the trends. Particular emphasis will be placed on examining the causes of the period of the transformation from communism to liberal democracy and current trends. These are the most exciting stages of Hungarian criminal statistics. The relationship between social change and the evolution of the criminal situation is the basic question. A significant and lasting decrease in the number of registered crimes is a new phenomenon that has not been seen in processes since 1968. The number of registered crimes has decreased significantly in recent years. In analysing the causes behind this decrease, the combined effect of several factors can be detected. The most significant decrease was caused by the amendment of the legal regulations, modifying the legal situation of document abuse and raising the threshold for infringement. In addition, there is a downward trend at the international level. Significant emigration in recent years has also contributed to a reduction in the number of registered crimes.

keywords: crime data, trend, crime statistic, crime in Hungary, long-term analysis

Abstrakt: W artykule został przedstawiony rozwój przestępczości na Węgrzech na podstawie danych statystycznych. Ponieważ są one w ten sam sposób rejestrowane od 1968 roku, ich analiza pozwala zauważyć wiele trendów na przestrzeni lat. Pierwszy okres (między 1968 a 1989 rokiem) charakteryzuje się powolnym spadkiem przestępczości. Drugi (po zmianie ustroju w latach 1990–2000) to czas, w którym przestępczość znacząco wzrastała, ale w sposób niesystematyczny (duży wzrost w niektórych latach). Trzeci okres to etap stabilizacji, jaki nastąpił w latach 2000–2010. Liczba rejestrowanych przestępstw utrzymywała się wówczas na poziomie do 400.000 zdarzeń rocznie. Od 2012 roku możemy wydzielić okres czwarty, kiedy to w statystykach przestępczości widoczna jest nowa tendencja – znaczny spadek przestępczości. W artykule zostały omówione wyżej przedstawione trendy oraz zaproponowano ich wyjaśnienie wynikające m.in. ze zmian demograficznych czy społecznych. Szczególny nacisk został położony na wyjaśnienie zmian w przestępczości w okresie transformacji i przejściu od systemu komunistycznego do liberalnej demokracji oraz współczesnych trendów w zmianach przestępczości, które autor uznał za ciekawe. Podstawowym pytaniem, jakie stawia sobie autor, dotyczy związku między zmianą społeczną a przestępczością. Znaczący i trwały spadek liczby rejestrowanych przestępstw to nowe zjawisko, w zasadzie niewystępujące wcześniej (w danych zbieranych od 1968 roku). Można jedną wskazać co najmniej kilka czynników wyjaśniających znaczne zmniejszenie się liczby przestępstw rejestrowanych w ostatnich latach. Największy spadek wynika ze zmiany regulacji prawnej w zakresie nadużycia dokumentów i podniesienia progu, od którego to naruszenie jest karane. Ponadto istnieje tendencja spadkowa przestępczości na poziomie międzynarodowym. Znaczna emigracja w ostatnich latach również przyczyniła się do spadku liczby rejestrowanych przestępstw.

słowa kluczowe: dane o przestępczości, trendy zmian przestępczości, statystyki przestępczości, przestępczość na Węgrzech, analiza długoterminowa

In the 1990s, following the regime change, the statistical indicators of crime in Hungary showed an unprecedented increase. The figures became several times larger than those previously registered in the statistics. After a slight decline around the turn of the millennium, it was typical to have around 400,000 cases per year. In the last few years (from 2013 onwards), there has been an unprecedented spectacular decline in crime statistics. Currently, the numbers of registered crimes have fallen to the values typical of the 1980s.

Analysing data is an exciting challenge for all criminology professionals. The emergence of a new crime rate that is related to changes in the social and political order raises a number of questions: What caused such a significant increase in the crime statistics in the 1990s? Do the data adequately reflect actual changes in crime? Did the volume of crime increase so much, or were other factors contributing to the increase in the indicators? Was it a new growth path, or did the trends of the pre-1990 era continue to exist, though at a higher level? What is the reason for the current significant decline? There are many questions about the changes in criminal data. In this study, we will seek answers to these questions, based on an analysis of statistical data from the period between 1968 and 1999.

For a long time, the platitude that crime is a normal social phenomenon has existed in criminology. Since the time of pioneers such as Quetelet and Durkheim,

research has focused not only on the existence of crime, but on its extent, structure, and dynamics. Under normal social conditions, society can accept and live with existing deviant phenomena, including crime.

One of the most important elements of researching crime as a social mass phenomenon is research into crime statistics. Crime statistics record two elements of crimes: the number of detected offenders and the number of detected crimes. The first element records a criminal offence as human behaviour, while the other records people who violate a criminal law. The relationship between the two groups is obvious, but they differ in their content and numerical values.

Let us first examine the changes in the statistics on detected crimes. For this analysis, we relied on the ERÜBS¹ statistical data for the period 1968–2000. With regard to any research covering a longer period of time, the question of changes in the law is always raised. This is ignored when studying the whole period, and the changes with the greatest impact are taken into account when analysing each period.

Change in the number of detected crimes

Looking at the figures, crime statistics worldwide have seen an increase, roughly up until the end of the 20th century. Based on data from the 1990s, European countries experience almost the same growth trend. The number of registered cases has been growing slightly but steadily since World War II. The Hungarian data were also in alignment with this growth path. The difference was that while growth was steady until the late eighties, it was not dramatic, whereas the early nineties witnessed a dramatic increase. Until 1988, the rate of growth over the previous year did not exceed 10% in any year. Basically, it showed a slight upward trend (Table 1). The average annual growth in the 1970s was 1.4%, but in 1979 it was only 2.4% higher than in 1970. The upward trend accelerated in the 1980s, averaging 4.5% by 1988, when the number of detected crimes was already 42% higher than in 1980. We must separate the data for 1989, because the indicators soared that year to an unprecedented level; the number of crimes brought to the attention of authorities increased by 21.6% in 1989. The following year, though, surpassed even this record: 1990 saw the highest growth ever, at 51.3% over 1989, which itself was a year of significant increase compared to the year before.

¹ The Hungarian criminal data reporting system consists of two separate parts. One is the ERÜBS system, which reflects the activities of the police and prosecutors, and the other is court statistics. ERÜBS, currently called ENYÜBS, records criminal data based on data from investigating authorities and prosecutors. These are output statistics, where cases are recorded when the investigation phase of the criminal procedure is completed.

Changes in the pace of growth correlated with changes in the social system, so in this case we need to pay special attention to determining how much the change of pace can be attributed to the change of regime and to what extent the effects of the general trend were visible.

The changes to the statistics are actively influenced by the activities of law enforcement agencies. With the increasing effectiveness of detective work, more and more crimes are brought to the attention of the authorities, and more and more crimes are registered in the statistics without any increase in the number of actual crimes.

For example, a study in England showed that the 127% increase in burglary cases in crime statistics between 1972 and 1987 corresponded to an increase of only 17% in real life. The greater part of the growth was due to the higher number of reports as a result of the spread of home insurance policies and improved telephone coverage (Kertész b.d.: 123).

Changes in the proportion of latent and manifest crimes may not have a significant impact on the actual state of crime, but they do impact the statistics. Actual police behaviour is the result of a combination of many factors. The willingness of the police to translate calls or requests for intervention from the general public into crime reports or to initiate and register procedures following such reports depends to a significant extent on the evolution of procedural rules as well as on the system by which police work is evaluated.

During the socialist era, the police were burdened by high expectations, mainly for political and ideological reasons.² The police evaluation system was also adapted to this, and it was primarily the detection rate that determined the success of a police unit. Accordingly, the statistical data also developed extremely favourably. Compared to the pre-World War II era, the number of registered crimes decreased significantly, by about 100,000. Detection rates were also extremely favourable—there were no global records that could match, for example, a detection rate of 50% of all thefts; the European average was around 12% during that period. The validity of such indicators has been questioned by many, but most Hungarian criminologists agree that the criminological data before the regime change were somewhat manipulated. There are only estimates and speculations about the extent of the correction, but a downward trend in data manipulation was likely to occur with the socialist system becoming softer and with the change of regime, which may be one factor which contributed to the surge in registered crimes.

² There were efforts to justify the doctrine of the death of crime under socialism and communism, and the idea that the practice of committing crime was alien to the socialist type of man.

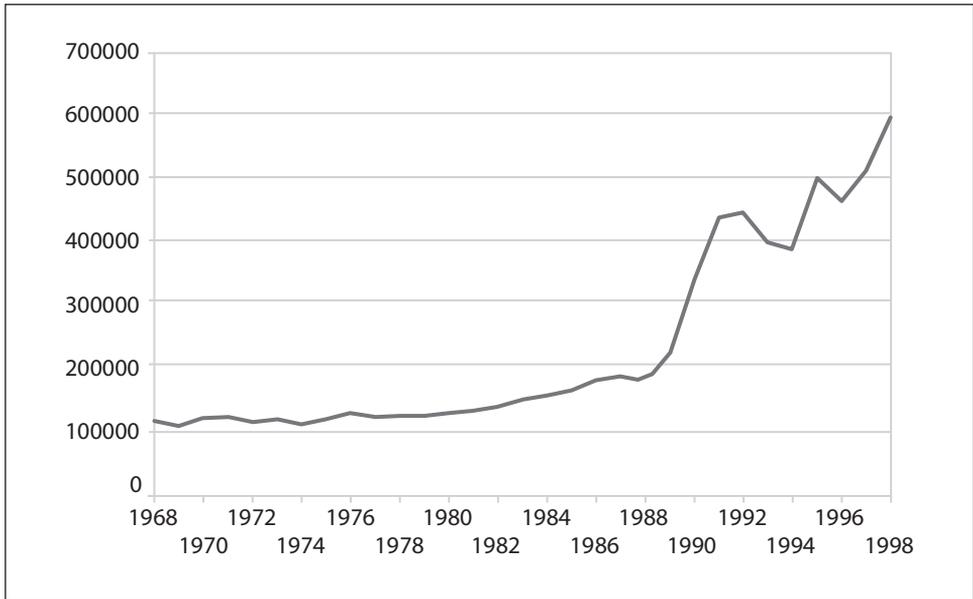
The criminology statistics indicating total crime were on a slow, upward trend from the 1950s onwards, with detection keeping pace with the increasing number of registered criminal cases until the mid-1980s, after which detection rates initially fell slightly and—following the change of regime—then dropped significantly. The 80% detection success rate of the 1970s fell to 52.76% by 1990. A similar phenomenon was observed in other former socialist countries. For example, data for the Czech Republic indicate that the detection rate of 77.5% in 1989 fell to 38.4% in 1990 and appears to have stabilised at around 30% (Niksowa 1997: 68–70), (Zapletal 1997: 80–88). The rapid change in the rather relatively favourable pre-1989 detection rates is rooted in the different characteristics of past and present social and political systems.

No matter how much data manipulation occurred, however, without a doubt public security was generally considered to be good or adequate during the period under review, and the high detection rate—and the social environment—did not allow anyone to accumulate significant wealth by committing crimes without the very real danger of being caught. The detection of crime and the likelihood of being caught play an important role in the development of citizen behaviour towards crime, and if we assign effectiveness data to indicators measuring the magnitude of total crime, the paradox found in spatial analysis becomes understandable.

As a reminder, public surveys reported on the worsening crime situation in Budapest, even though the rate of crimes per capita changed only slightly or not at all, whereas the rural population was less dissatisfied with the situation despite a significant deterioration in the indicators. An analysis of the crime detection data may explain this situation, because in Budapest the detection indicators dropped even though the number of criminal cases did not change significantly, while in the countryside detection rates did not change significantly—despite a 20% increase in crime rates. In smaller settlements, the effectiveness of police work seems to have a stronger impact on citizens' attitudes than the number of crimes committed. Stronger social control makes crime and law enforcement information find its way more easily to residents.

Looking at the time series, it seems that there are several distinct trends in the data. The first slow growth trend lasts until the early eighties; the second faster growth trend characterises data from the 1980s; and the third, new growth path of the 1990s had a much faster growth rate. Let's examine more closely whether these trends can actually be distinguished. We can observe how the data behave when the data series are broken up by growth rate. Visualising the first two phases in a coordinate system makes it clear that, after 1980, the graph rises steeply.

Figure 1. Trends in the number of registered crimes, 1968–1998

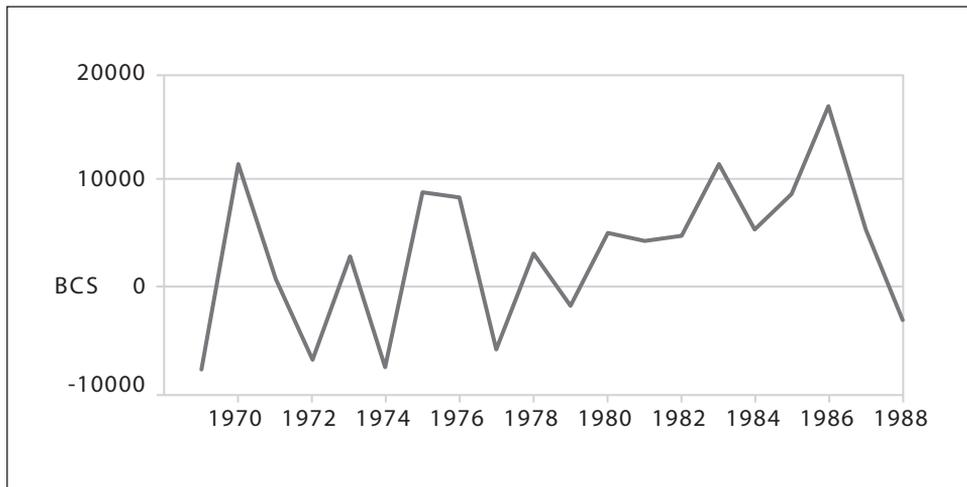


Source: ERÜBS-ENYÜBS system, Attorney General’s Office IT Department 2019. Budapest

The data series from 1968–1988 can be easily portrayed as a linear trend. However, the later data do not follow this trend at all. The entire dataset can be modelled using a curve that cannot be interpreted in terms of content. (A quadratic polynomial yields a good approximation ($R^2 = 0.9825$), but practical experience contradicts this.) The dataset between 1989 and 1998 displays a characteristic that justifies separating it from the previous trend.

To determine if this is indeed a new growth path, let’s look at the rate of growth. We can study the changing rate of growth by looking at the first derivative of the dataset, as in

Figure 2. The growth rate of crime, 1968–1988



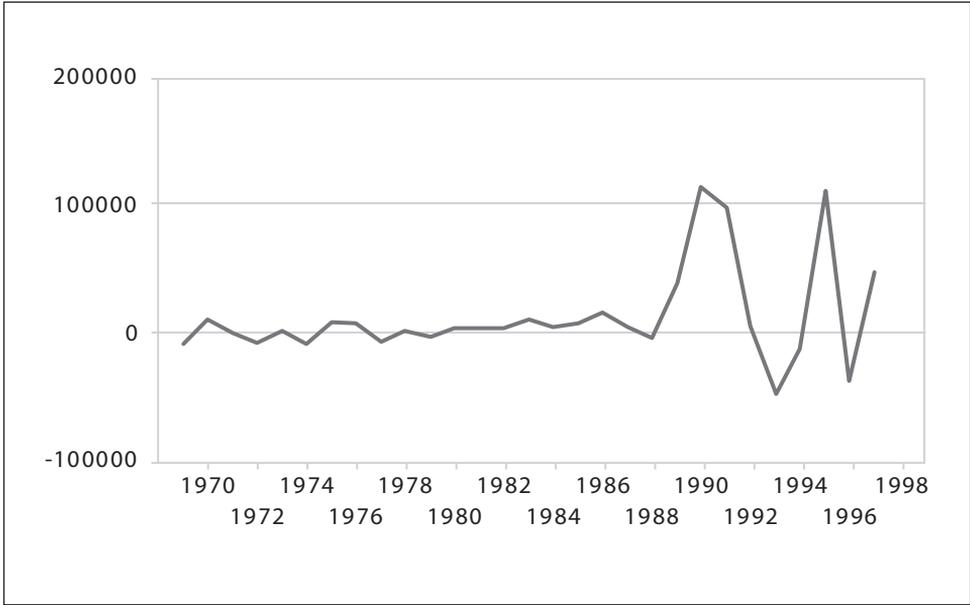
Source: ERÜBS-ENYÜBS system, Attorney General's Office IT Department 2019. Budapest

Here we can see that, after the fluctuating growth of the seventies, the data showed a distinct increasing trend in the eighties, even though it was not a clear departure from the earlier trend. Looking at the data of the time series between 1968 and 1988, the picture looks quite different.

Figure 3 clearly shows that the post-1988 trend is different from the previous period. The rate of change increased exponentially, and the figures appear more volatile. The data show an average growth rate of 27% over the period 1990–1998, and the rate of change also accelerated. The data is characterised by unprecedented changes. Based on the graph, we can safely say that some new phenomenon began in 1989. Either a new factor unlike anything before appeared among the background variables influencing the development of the number of crimes, or one or more of the existing influencing factors now had a different impact. A targeted investigation should be carried out to identify the changing factors. Based on the analysis of the data, only the fact of change and the appearance of a new trend can be detected.

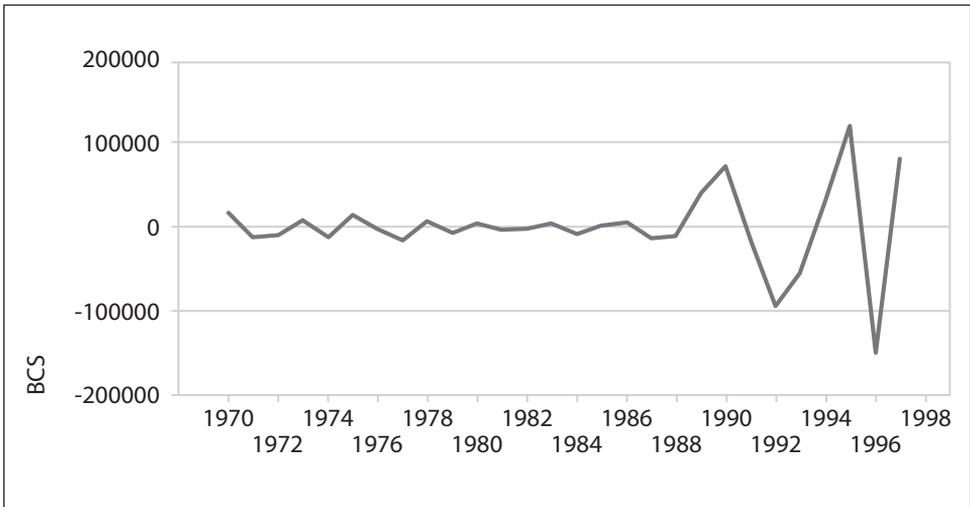
Quantitative changes in the number of crimes also affected the rate of change. The new growth path is characterised by greater and faster changes.

Figure 3. Growth rate of detected crimes, 1968–1998



Source: ERÜBS-ENYÜBS system, Attorney General's Office IT Department 2019. Budapest

Figure 4. Changes in the growth rate of detected crimes, 1968–1998



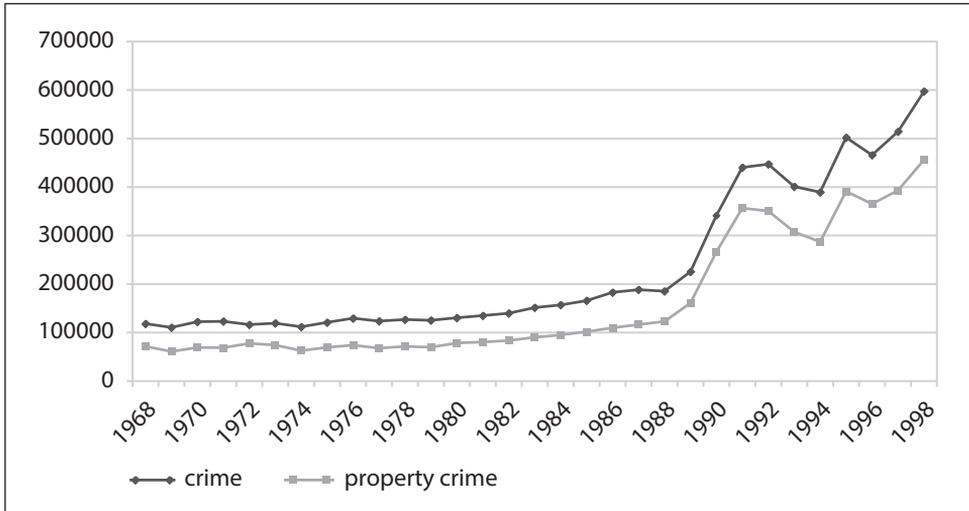
Source: ERÜBS-ENYÜBS system, Attorney General's Office IT Department 2019. Budapest

The role of crimes against property in shaping the crime trend

The most significant group of detected crimes is crimes against property. The criminological definition of this type of crime is based on the definition of criminal law, and comprises those crimes that criminal law declares as property crimes. The exceptions are those crimes associated with violence; therefore, criminology does not classify robbery, mugging, or extortion as property crimes, unlike the other crime categories in Chapter 18 of the Criminal Code.

Property crimes account for the largest proportion of all crimes, with a marked increase in total crime over the last 20 years—though not a steady one—until 1991, when the proportion of such crimes among all crimes reached a peak at 81%. In 1997, the rate was 76.4%, representing 393,003 crimes. Comparing the changes in the number of crimes and, in particular, the number of property crimes, it can be concluded that the trend is essentially determined by the latter. This is illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Trends in crime and property crime, 1968–1999



Source: ERÜBS-ENYÜBS system, Attorney General’s Office IT Department 2019. Budapest

The development of the two graphs is practically the same; the difference between them was decreasing until 1991, since then it has been slightly increasing, but the difference has been less than 5% of total crimes. The change in the number of other crimes, therefore, has no significant impact on the change in aggregate data. Property crime can be considered dominant at all times, so as it decreases, overall crime decreases; as it grows, it triggers an increase in total crime.

Therefore, in order to examine the long-term evolution of total crime, it is sufficient to analyse the changes in crimes against property. The number of property crimes has increased by a factor of 5.5 over the last 20 years. However, the growth was not linear: the number only doubled until 1989, and by 1995 it had reached the current level, with a slight increase in 1992 after an extremely high jump of 100,000 cases in 1991, and then for two years the figures were slightly lower. Hence, the growth rate changed for the first time between 1989 and 1991, which was the period that produced the most growth. The radical change in the number of registered crimes at that time can be fully accounted for by the increase in property crime. This was when the proportion of property crime within total crime reached its peak (81%), and its rate of growth was higher than that of any other types of crime.

During the period under review, there was a significant change in the proportion of crimes against property to total crime. The average proportion of property crime in the 1970s was 57.9%, which then increased to 62% in the 1980s, and—based on the currently available data—eventually jumped to 77.4% in the 1990s. This confirms the findings of the trend: the period from 1968 to the end of the 1980s was essentially a time of slow growth and, in particular, a slight increase in the proportion of property crimes. In the 1990s, the number of crimes increased dramatically, mainly due to the increasing number of crimes against property, and, as a result, the internal proportions shifted towards property crime.

The increasing importance of property crime is also indicated by the increase in the damage caused by it. In 1988, the total damage caused by property crimes was 2.75 billion HUF, but in 1991 it increased to 21 billion HUF. This growth rate is also higher than that of crime, and even if we take into account that inflation 'broke loose' during that time, the data still show significant growth. In and of itself, not even the 30% annual inflation rate justifies a nearly tenfold increase in value. The increase in the amount of damage per crime, from 22,427 HUF in 1988 to 59,100 HUF in 1991 (Crime monitor 1997), also indicates that the range of assets affected by crime had increased dramatically.

The next growth wave started in 1995 when, after two years of decline, crime began to increase again. In this new wave of growth, quite uniquely, the growth rate of property crimes lagged behind the increase in the number and proportion of public order offences. The proportion of these two types of crime within total crime increased. Changes related to the change of regime may have provided a convincing explanation for the increase of crime rates in the period 1989–1991, but other factors have to be identified as the reasons for the increase from 1995 to 1997.

Within property crime, which accounted for the largest share of the rising crime rate, there was not only an increase, but also a shift in proportions at the same time. Typically, almost half of all crimes against property are cases of theft, though their proportion within the specific group of crime changed cyclically over the period under review. Registered at 34% at the beginning of the period,

the proportion of thefts doubled in 1972, reaching 66.31%, the highest rate ever recorded. The theft rate then took a slow downward trend to reach 60% by the end of the 1970s. This trend has continued, and while overall crime increased in 1998, thefts made up only 44%.

The rate of burglaries within crimes against property also showed an upward trend, and the increase lasted until 1991; since then, the proportion within total crime has been steadily decreasing. Although the number of burglaries is widely considered a characteristic of the wave of crimes after the regime change, the numbers do not support this train of thought. The increase in burglary cases was essentially a trend from 1968 to 1989. Recorded only at 9% at the beginning of the period under review in 1968, the proportion increased to 25% by the 1980s. In 1988, the burglary rate was 25.2%, then it rose sharply to 30.85% in 1990 and 1991, but in the subsequent years it returned to its previous level—24.7% in 1997—whereas the number of crimes continued to rise. The number of burglaries thus essentially increased at the same rate as the number of property crimes. In absolute terms, the growth is significant, but in terms of proportions it is by no means an extra source of crime, but rather a characteristic of the new trend of the 1990s.

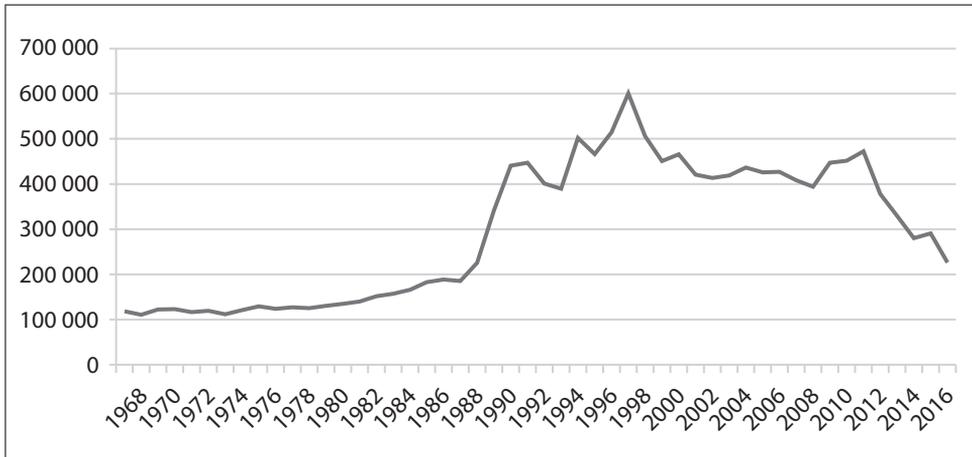
Compared to other property crimes, the most significant change occurred in the number and proportion of cases of fraud. While the proportion of fraud was less than 5% in 1988 and 1989, this indicator rose with significant fluctuations to over 10% in the 1990s and appears to be stabilising at around 15%, representing between 45,000 and 55,000 crimes. The exception was 1995, the peak crime year, with 112,592 cases of fraud accounting for 28.8% of total crime. Hundreds of thousands more property crimes were recorded that year, half of which were due to fraud. In fact, this significant increase can be attributed to two series of frauds and indicates problems with the registration of multiple offences.

The downward trend of the 2010s

According to ENYÜBS, the Hungarian crime statistics, the number of registered crimes has fallen significantly over the last few years. The dynamic increase in crime at the end of the 20th century, following the change of regime, and the record-breaking crime figures have all but disappeared into the past. The highest value ever of 600,621 cases was reported in 1998 (Figure 6).

In the years following this peak, the data showed a rapid decline and, after the turn of the millennium, the number of offences in the statistics stabilised at around 400,000 annually. In 2009, the figure was already below the 400,000 mark; then the upward trend started again, and 2012 was a new 21st-century peak with 472,236 cases.

Figure 6. Trends in the frequency of registered crimes according to ENYÜBS statistics, 1968–2017



Source: ERÜBS-ENYÜBS system, Attorney General's Office IT Department 2019. Budapest

After that, however, a dramatic decline began. The number of registered crimes decreased by 100,000, then by another 50,000, and by 2017 the number of registered crimes had reached the level of 1989. Instead of the 400,000 or so cases of the previous years, the number is currently approaching 200,000. What has happened in the last five years? Why have the numbers dropped so drastically?

Before we try to answer these questions, some additional questions need to be clarified. The most important characteristic of crime statistics, which is regularly forgotten even by professionals and which always misleads laypeople, is that crime statistics do not directly reflect the changes in actual crime. There may even be opposing trends at the same time in crime as a whole and in the crime statistics. The increasing numbers in crime statistics do not necessarily mean that the number of crimes committed is also increasing. This may be the case, but the number of offences actually committed may decline even though the statistics show increasing values. Of course, the reverse can also happen.

Criminology textbooks usually list three factors that directly influence the development of crime statistics:

- the willingness to report a crime
- a regulatory environment
- the preferences and attitudes of the investigating authorities

Students are always surprised and complain that the changes in crime figures are not listed among the influencing factors. International experience shows that the numbers of crimes estimated on the basis of victimology surveys and those

appearing in statistics follow separate trends and do not necessarily change in the same direction.³

The willingness of the public and organisations to report crime

At times, we tend to forget that crime is not limited to individuals. Approximately forty percent of the victims of crimes registered in one year are organisations with legal personality. Crimes are also committed against business associations, institutions, churches, non-profit organisations, etc. According to a 2010 EU survey, one in four (25.7%) business organisations in Hungary had been a victim of crime in the twelve months before the survey (Ducato, 2013). Here too, there is considerable latency because, for example, in many cases when company employees commit offences, they deal with the case ‘in house’ via disciplinary action instead of contacting the authorities. Companies often have no interest in disclosing offences against them. In order to protect their reputation and avoid having incidents come to light, they often tolerate potential losses. A similar phenomenon can be observed in the case of institutions. The leaders of the institution, fearing any repercussions by the maintainer, tend to hide or attempt to solve cases “in-house”.

In the case of victims with legal personality, a proliferation of offences or significant damages may increase their willingness to report incidents.

There are several factors that influence the willingness of the population to report crimes. The type of offence is a key factor. Usually, violent acts are more often reported by victims, but, of course, there are exceptions. Sometimes the victims are so intimidated that they do not dare to contact the police. The extent of the damage suffered plays an important role. The greater the loss, the more likely one is to turn to the authorities. For example, car theft is almost always reported.

Previous experience and knowledge of the consequences of the procedure play a crucial role in someone’s decision of whether to report a specific crime. Favourable experiences obviously increase the likelihood of reporting. If events during the procedure or as a result of the procedure do not meet the victim’s prior expectations, then these adverse experiences will reduce their willingness to report. In the case of property crimes, the primary expectation of the victims is that they are compensated for their loss. However, this does not always happen. If people are not satisfied with the court’s ruling or if the police fail to find the perpetrator, then citizens feel it is not worthwhile to turn to the authorities after a crime, because ‘nothing will happen anyway’.

³ Unfortunately, domestic data cannot be relied upon in these issues because, despite several related governmental decisions, there are no regular victimological surveys in Hungary that could confirm or deny the experience from abroad.

In the course of victim-related research, the phenomenon of secondary victimisation has emerged. With secondary victimisation, the injury is not a direct consequence of the crime, but a consequence of the inappropriate attitude and behaviour of the authorities, NGOs, churches, and professionals who come into contact with the victim in relation to the crime.

Recalling the events, confronting the perpetrator, the treatment by the authorities, courts, prosecutors, and the defence of the accused can impose a significant psychological burden and, in many cases, may be humiliating for the victim. Thus, determining the criminal process-related situation helps to eliminate these negatives, or at least to minimise them. This is in the interest of the victim, but also of the proceedings, since the activity of the victim has a significant impact on the process of adjudicating the case. However, many victims do not report crimes, which makes it difficult to uncover the reality of crime, as well as to conduct legal proceedings (Korinek 2010: 381–382).

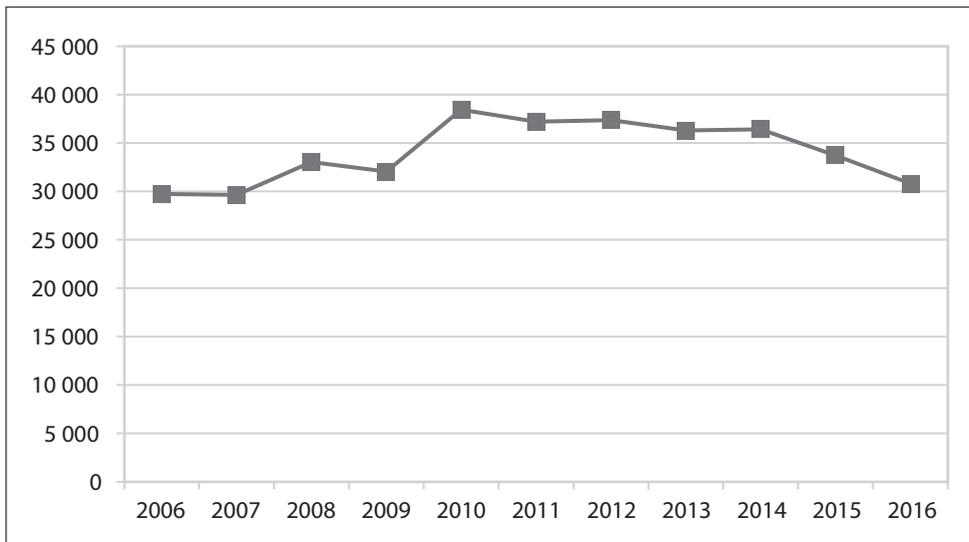
Primarily, these negative experiences may play a significant role in relation to sexual offences, but there are also other cases when victims may be subjected to further harm during the proceedings. These experiences clearly reduce victims' willingness to report crime to the authorities. Trust in the authorities and in the police may also be diminished for social and political reasons. Citizens tend to react to certain social and political changes and if these are perceived as unfavourable, they may significantly reduce trust in the authorities and, consequently, citizens' willingness to report crime. Experience shows that crime statistics in dictatorships indicate a significantly lower crime rate, which, in part, is certainly due to the fact that people do not want to come into contact with the authorities, even when they are the victims.

In the absence of specific empirical studies to this end, we can only indirectly determine how willingness to report crime has changed. One option is to use the results of opinion polls commissioned by the police. They do not directly inquire about what may have happened, but attempt to survey public attitudes towards the police and the investigating authorities. If the answers to trust-related questions are promising, then analysts can conclude that the relationship with the general public is good and that it triggers a greater willingness to report crimes. The data show an improving trend: in 2010, only 65% of the respondents were satisfied, while in 2017 this indicator increased to 78.6%. However, overall satisfaction is not necessarily accompanied by a high level of willingness. In addition to trust in the police, many other factors influence the willingness to report crimes.

If we could prove that willingness to report has not changed (or may even have improved), the decreasing number of cases in crime statistics would be more likely the result of an actual decline in the number of offences. Victimological data records, which are needed anyway, could easily provide answers to this question,

but without them we are left with only indirect methods. Let's look at how the numbers have changed over the period under review for crimes where the willingness to report is less of a factor. Typically, these are violent crimes, vandalism, and traffic offences. Figures 7 and 8 show their development during the period under review. Figure 7 clearly shows that there was no spectacular decrease in violent crime, as was observed for all registered crimes. The situation is similar for traffic offences (Figure 8).

Figure 7. Evolution of violent crime (2006–2017)

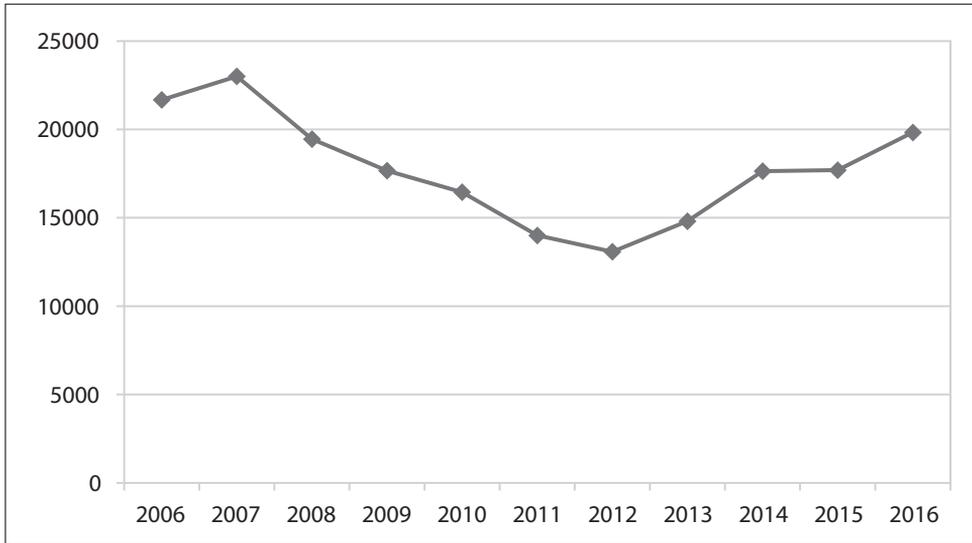


Source: ERÜBS-ENYÜBS system, Attorney General's Office IT Department 2019. Budapest

In the case of traffic offences, we can see the opposite of the overall downward trend. Contrary to all other detected crimes, where the 2013 figures show a significant decrease, the statistics on traffic offences actually show an increase.

According to the hypothesis based on the police confidence index, the willingness of the population to report crime did not change or even improved. The number of registered crimes decreased, though it is likely that fewer cases were registered due to fewer crimes being committed. Calculating using the same reporting ratio, fewer crimes were committed. Overall, crime decreased, but then there should also be a drop in those types of crime where the willingness to report plays a less significant role. However, the numbers of registered violent crimes and traffic offences did not decrease. These data contradict the hypothesis that the willingness to report crime remained unchanged. They instead reveal a decrease in the willingness to report crime.

Figure 8. Traffic-related crime (2006–2017)



Source: ERÜBS-ENYÜBS system, Attorney General's Office IT Department 2019. Budapest

The data suggest instead that crime as a whole did not decrease as significantly as the statistics on registered cases show. This possibility is also supported by the fact that the sharp increase in the number of registered crimes following the change of regime was associated with significant social changes. If we agree that crime is a social phenomenon and its causes are due to social factors and effects, then the significant changes in statistics—provided they reflect the evolution of actual crime—should result from significant social changes. In the 1990s, we find the social changes that triggered an increase in crime. If we look at what caused the increase at that time, then perhaps we can get an answer to what is now reducing the number of registered crimes. The factors that caused the increase after the regime change may account for the current decline, but in the opposite direction. If there were social reasons for the drastic growth, then we should be able to find the drivers for the significant drop. However, no such major social changes are visible in the period 2012–2016. In this case, there is more reason to believe the assumption that the significant changes in criminal statistics are not due to a decrease in crime as a whole. In the absence of social change, we need to find other reasons to explain the massive decline.

The preferences of investigative authorities

ENYÜBS primarily contains traffic statistics. It includes cases in which the investigating authority conducted some sort of procedure. It is often said to include cases brought to the attention of the authorities, but unfortunately this is not entirely accurate. In fact, there are ‘countermeasures’ with regard to the investigating authorities, which are used to exclude from the system cases considered hopeless or negligible, and these are not included in the statistics at all, even though the authorities dealt with the matter and decided it was not worth investigating. Such a loophole in Hungary relates to petty crime. If the act in question is not a crime but an administrative offence, the investigating authority will be relieved of further action and will not have to deal with the matter. So, for example, if someone reports to the police that his coat has been stolen, he can expect the following conversation:

‘How much?’

‘I paid sixty thousand forints for it two years ago.’

‘Then it is worth no more than thirty thousand forints.’

‘You’re right, actually.’

Case solved. An offence was committed, no further action is needed, and the case is not included in the criminal statistics.⁴

Unfortunately, crime statistics are still used by the investigating authorities to assess the performance of individual units. This serious problem is visible in the operation of the ERÜBS-ENYÜBS system, which the authorities unsuccessfully attempted to get rid of from the beginning. The work performance of the police as a whole and individual police organisations is appraised primarily through statistical data.

It has long been stated that efforts should be made to separate the evaluation of police work from the statistical recording system. Even today, the evaluation of police work relies to a great extent on the statistical and investigative efficiency indicators that appear in the ENYÜBS system. The problem with this is that the work of individual units of the investigating authorities is assessed on the basis of data from a system that they themselves produce. In that regard, István Vavró cautioned in 2002 that:

criminal statistics also include data relating to the activities of law enforcement agencies. Basically, the activities of these bodies provide an opportunity to learn about crime. However, it should not be overlooked that some performance is also measured here. Therefore, it is perfectly understandable from a human perspective if data providers act with due care when compiling data on their own activities (Vavró 2002: 17).

⁴ Of course, investigating authorities also carry out tasks in connection with administrative offences, and there may even be a prosecution, but these procedures do not affect the crime statistics.

Each investigative body and the investigators themselves must produce the statistical data, based on which their work is evaluated. There is motivation and opportunity to adjust or manipulate the data to some extent. If the police are aware that their work is evaluated on the basis of the data sheets they have filled in, they may, deliberately or unintentionally, distort the statistical data. There have been some examples of this recently.

The Commander of the National Police József Hatala, filed a report on falsifying statistics in the police departments of Gödöllő and Budapest's 3rd District. Tamás Kovács, the former Prosecutor General, wrote in a letter to Sándor Pintér, Minister of the Interior, last summer that criminal prosecution was unavoidable because of false statistical reporting (Csikász 2011).

Some police departments withheld unsolved cases for a more favourable end-of-year evaluation. It may happen that cases which are already considered to be hopeless are removed in some way by the authorities during the early stages of the investigation. Investigating authorities have an interest in increasing the rate of successful cases and have therefore developed and applied a variety of methods to remove hopeless cases. The most common method for dealing with lesser crimes against property is taking advantage of the flexible treatment of the offence threshold. If the estimated value of the damages is successfully kept below the threshold, then one can get rid of a case that is no longer a crime, but an administrative offence, to prevent it spoiling the statistics.

Sophisticated methods of manipulating crime statistics have evolved over time. Often, two cases were filed under the same case number where no successful discovery could be expected. If the prospect of detection was slim, the police suggested a making a statement instead of reporting it because that way it was not included in the crime statistics. It would be included in the crime data if the procedure was suspended without a substantive investigation; however, it was not included in the statistics of either successful or unsuccessful cases. According to a former police officer requesting his name be withheld, a new captain sent them to the local flea market almost immediately after the change, where hundreds of bootleg DVDs were seized. Each medium was considered as a case of its own, so hundreds of statistical sheets were filled out, even though it was only a single act. The captain significantly improved the number of cases detected in no time, and was able to prove that he was a good choice (Sereg 2015).

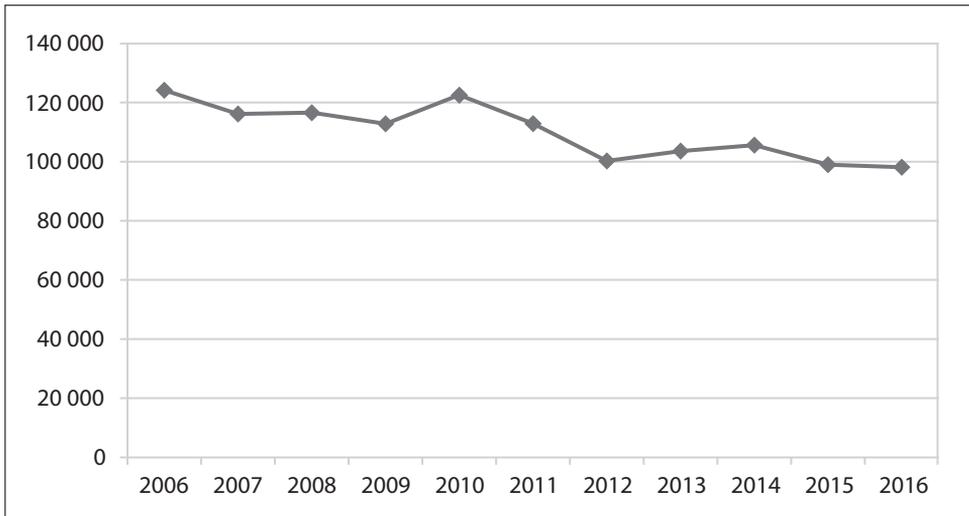
The Prosecutor General's Office launched a national investigation to determine the exact extent to which police officers falsified the investigating authority's and the prosecution's criminal statistics. The investigation

identified tens of thousands of errors, omissions, and intentional distortions. With a crime rate close to 400,000 a year, this amount of false data calls into question the credibility of the statistics as a whole (Ihárosi 2011).

We may not have to draw such a far-reaching conclusion yet, but the problem is present in the criminal data reporting system.

It may help to assess the situation objectively by examining the trend in the number of offenders identified rather than by investigation success rates (Figure 9). In fact, the success rate of investigations is very sensitive to changes in the number of all registered crimes. If fewer cases appear in the statistics, the success rate improves regardless of all other factors, such as the actual work completed. The number of offenders found is a better reflection of the effectiveness of the investigating authorities' work, as it shows only the actual results, and the number of cases in which the offender was not identified can provide information on the workload. In this case, if there are more such cases, the investigating authorities had to work on more cases, while the lower total number of registered crimes suggests a lighter workload.

Figure 9. The number of criminal offenders detected, 2006–2017

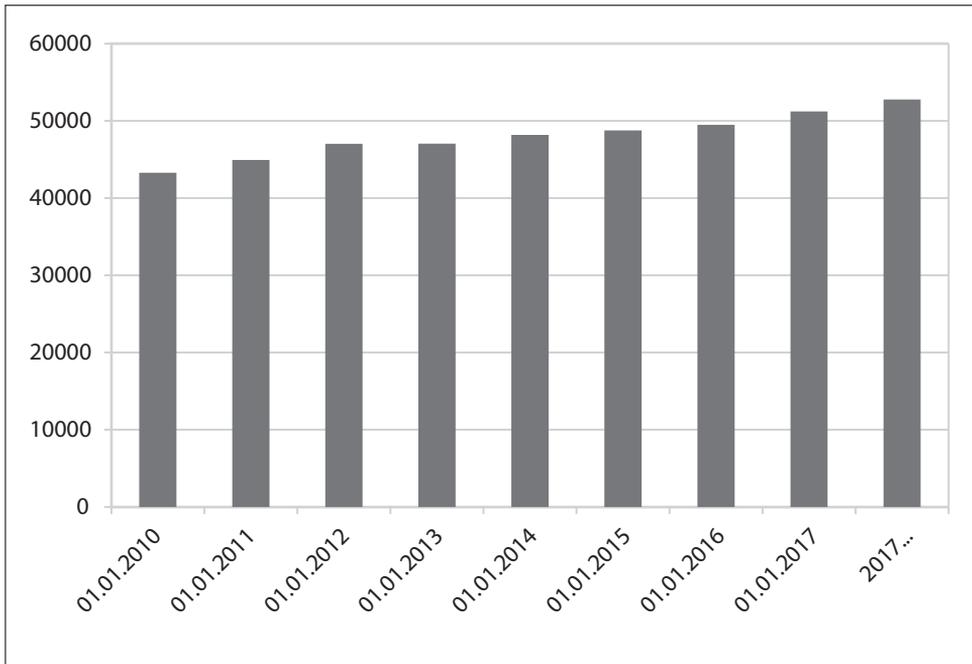


Source: ERÜBS-ENYÜBS system, Attorney General's Office IT Department 2019. Budapest

The significant decrease in the total number of registered crimes in 2013 had no effect on the number of offenders identified. Essentially, either the investigating authorities solved just as many crimes or there were instead slightly fewer cases than before.

At the same time, the number of police officers increased steadily during the period under review (Figure 10). Compared to the 2010 figures, there are about fifteen to twenty percent more police officers on duty. True, the criminal service branch has not been affected by the increase in the number of police officers, and since 2002 they have had the same number of officers, whether they must deal with 200,000 or 400,000 cases.

Figure 10. Report on the development of the police force employee headcount between 1 January 2010 and 1 November 2017



Source: National Police Headquarters Personnel Department 2018.

Evolution of the legislative environment

Acts that are included in the Criminal Code are considered to be crimes. Criminal legislation determines the scope of crimes, so if the law changes, the number of crimes will also change. Decriminalisation obviously reduces the number of crimes. Cases that were previously criminalised are no longer included in the statistics. If new criminal offences are introduced into the Criminal Code, the number

of violations of the law will increase. Thus, changes to the law either increase or decrease the statistics on crimes committed. The new Criminal Code, which came into force on 1 July 2013, contains an amendment that has had a significant impact on the number of registered crimes. This amendment affected the legal situation of the abuse of deeds (Table 1).

Table 1.

Registered crimes of abuse of deeds (2010–2016)							
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Abuse of Deeds, Section 277 (old Criminal Code)	39,110	58,067	83,881	14,233	706	146	42
Abuse of Deeds, Section 346 (new Criminal Code)				636	1654	3228	1221
Total	39,110	58,067	83,881	14,869	2360	3374	1263

Source: ERÜBS-ENYÜBS system, Attorney General’s Office IT Department 2019. Budapest

The data show that until 2012, the number of abuse of deeds cases was significant, but only a fraction of these numbers appears in the statistics after the law was amended. This one legislative amendment alone reduced the number of registered crimes by about sixty to seventy thousand per year without any change in crime as a whole.

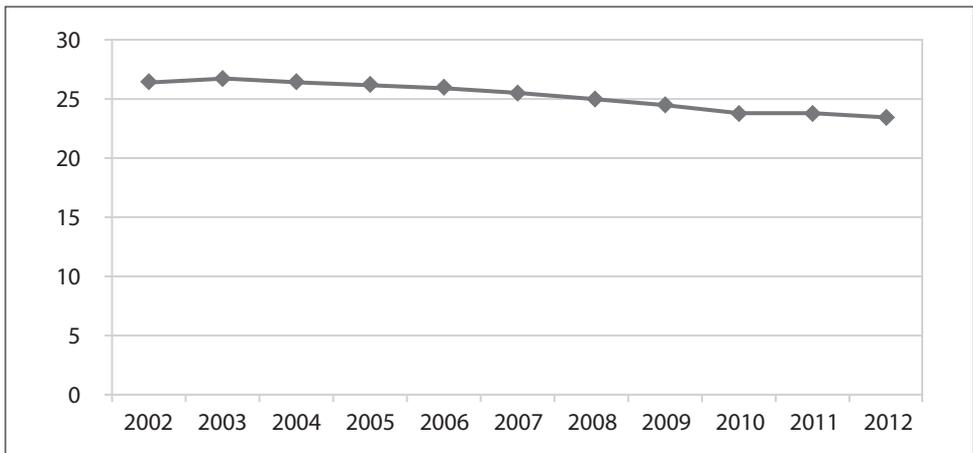
Changing the offence threshold can also have a significant impact on the number of registered crimes. The most common crime is theft of a lesser value. Changes in the threshold affect the judgment of many property crimes. The most recent amendment (Act C of 2012) entered into force on 1 July 2013. This increased the threshold from 20,000 HUF to 50,000HUF. Such a significant change in the threshold had not been made before. As a result of this change, crimes against property worth less than 50,000 HUF have been removed from the criminal statistics, since the statistics only list crimes. Unfortunately, national statistics are not compiled on administrative offences, so we do not have information on the changing number of petty crimes. As a result of this measure, some 60,000 crimes appearing in the crime statistics in previous years are no longer included in the crime data. This amendment, therefore, reduced the number of registered crimes by approximately 60,000 per year. The effect was not visible immediately, as the change came into force on 1 July 2013, so the old regulation was still in effect in the first half of the year, and thus only about half of the reduction occurred in 2013. The number of violations presumably did not change due to the change in the threshold, but crime statistics recorded fewer cases.

International comparison

The number of crimes recorded in the 28 Member States of the European Union has been steadily decreasing since 2003, with 12% less crime recorded in 2012 than nine years earlier.

In recent years, there has been a general trend towards decreasing numbers of reported crimes: the number of cases reported by the police in EU countries fell between 2007 and 2012 in most crime categories (Figure 11).

Figure 11. Number of registered offences in the 28 EU Member States, 2002–2012



Source: Eurostat (crim_gen)

In Germany, according to statistics published by Welt am Sonntag, in 2017 9.6% fewer crimes were registered than in the previous year, totalling 5.76 million. There was a drop in the number of cases of theft (11.8%), burglary (23%), pick-pocketing (22.7%), and violent crime (2.4%), and fewer cars and bicycles were stolen than in 2016 (8.6% and 9.8%, respectively).

What did increase slightly, however, was the number of homicides (3.2%, totalling 785 in 2016), while the number of drug-related offences decreased by 9.2%. Crimes committed by non-Germans fell by a total of 22% last year, which Oliver Malchow, head of the German police trade union, says may also be the result of fewer immigrants arriving in the country in 2017. For the time being, Malchow does not want to draw any serious conclusions from the statistics, but he also notes that there has been no such statistical improvement in the country since 1993 (Lutz 2018).

Looking at international data, we can see that the trend of slow growth since World War II has essentially been reversed and that the number of registered crimes

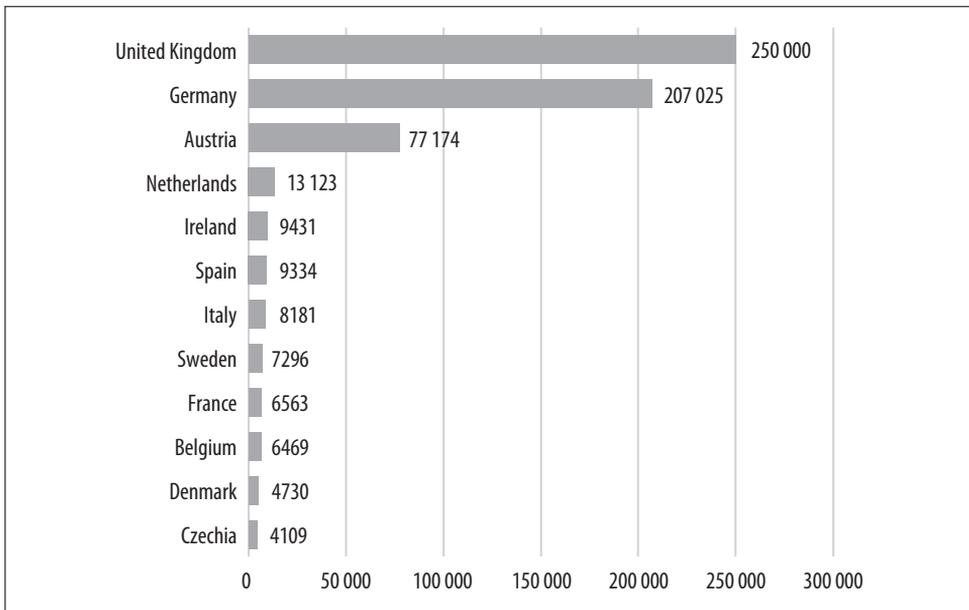
in most European countries has been declining since the turn of the millennium. The decline is not as dramatic as in Hungary, but the data still show a steady downward trend. Hungary is also a member of the European Union and is unlikely to escape the general trend. Part of the decline in Hungary (10%–15%) can be attributed to the international trend. The major difference is the extent of the decrease: in most European countries, the decline is 5%–10% per year.

The population with the capacity to commit a crime

There is one more important factor to consider in relation to the significant reduction in registered crime, which is the change in the proportion of the population with the capacity to commit a crime. In several studies, István Vavró analysed the relationship between changes in the number of individual cohorts and changes in the number of registered crimes. He pointed out that when cohorts with lower birth rates and numbers had reached the age of capacity to commit a crime, it caused a detectable change in the number of registered crimes.

As many as 600,000 Hungarians may currently be living in other European Union countries, and this figure is significantly higher than earlier estimates,

Figure 12. The number of Hungarians living in EU Member States

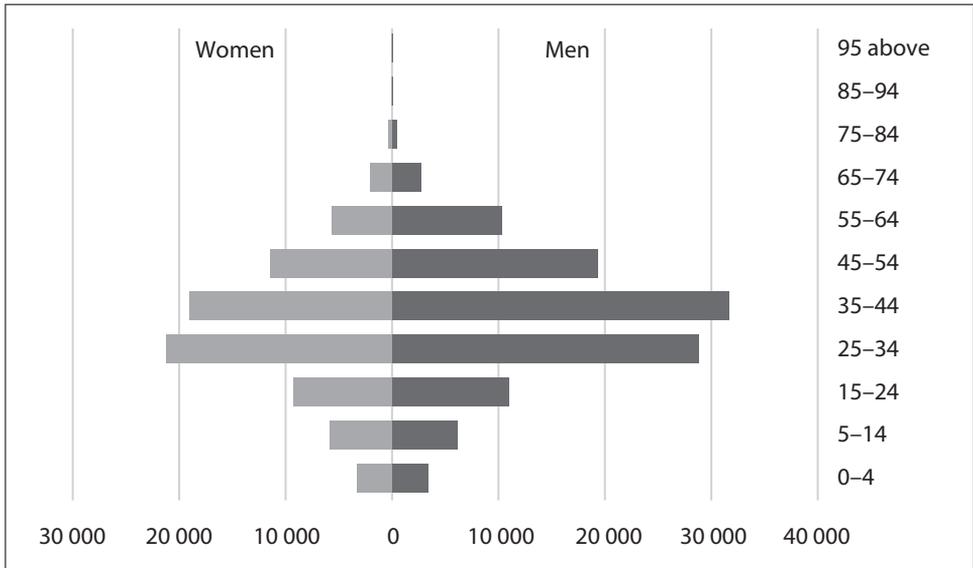


Sources: Eurostat, national statistical offices, portfolio.hu

according to portfolio.hu (Beke 2018). Most officially reside in Germany, but even Denmark hosts more than 5,000 permanent Hungarian workers (Figure 12).

When examining the effect of changes in birth rates on the development of crime, István Vavró concluded that ‘in times when the proportion of the group of people within the overall population of the age group that is dominant in terms of crime increases, the volume of crime increases even with the same age-specific crime rate’ (Vavro 1994: 38). Obviously, the reverse context may also be true: if the population with the capacity to commit crime and the age group dominant in crime both decrease, we will also see a decrease in total crime. There were differences of 50,000–60,000 in the birth rates studied by Vavró. If the difference in the few tens of thousands can cause significant differences in crime across the relevant age groups, then the current wave of emigration must also have an impact on crime, as there is now also a difference in the hundreds of thousands. If we look at the age distribution of expatriates, we can see that the majority of them are from the age groups most affected by crime (Figure 13) (Beke 2017).

Figure 13. The population pyramid of Hungarians living in Germany



Source: German Statistical Office, portfolio.hu

The age distribution in Germany may be a good starting point for examining the age composition of all Hungarians living abroad. The age distributions of those living abroad and of offenders show a very similar picture. If we assume there are equal proportions of offenders who remain at home and those who go abroad. We

then can make an approximate estimation—based on the crime rates per 100,000 residents—as to the drop in the number of crimes registered in Hungary by the 600,000 people who have gone abroad. The estimate is rather uncertain because it also depends, for instance, on the frequencies we are calculating with as well as on the period taken into account. We are talking about between roughly 14,000 and 30,000 registered crimes. This is the number by which registered crimes may decrease due to emigration. The exact figure is debatable, but some decline will certainly be caused by emigration.

Conclusion

Having examined the reasons behind the sharp decline in rates of registered crimes since 2013, we can conclude there are several factors to which the drop in the number of cases can be attributed. Changes in legislation have played the largest role in the emergence of this new trend. As a result of new legislation changing the threshold for abuse of deeds and administrative offences, the number of registered crimes has been reduced by 120,000. This reduction, however, only affected the statistics and was unlikely to change the frequency of the actual offences committed. To a lesser extent, social effects and phenomena have also contributed to the decline in recent times. Since the turn of the millennium, a decline in the number of registered crimes has been a general international phenomenon. There is a slight downward trend in the Member States of the European Union and in developed, industrialised countries. Hungary is likely to be affected by this international trend. In the countries concerned, the decline has been between 15 and 25 percent over the last ten to fifteen years since the turn of the millennium. If this trend is also prevalent in Hungary, it could mean a reduction of about 60,000 cases.

We have no direct information on people's willingness to report crime, but a study on the frequency of less relevant crimes suggests that it has declined somewhat in recent years. The extent of this decrease would be difficult to quantify in the absence of targeted studies.

Large-scale emigration of the workforce and population has also contributed to a reduction in the number of crimes registered, which may have reduced the number of offences actually committed, i.e., latent crimes.

Overall, this unprecedented, steep decline in domestic crime statistics is the combined result of administrative and social changes.

Appendix

Table 2. Data of Hungarian criminal statistics

Year	Number of crimes	Percentage of the previous year	Number of offenders	Percentage of the previous year
1968	118,254	98.65	68,447	93.68
1969	110,622	93.55	71,510	104.47
1970	122,289	110.55	66,677	93.24
1971	123,147	100.70	76,974	115.44
1972	116,373	94.50	78,040	101.38
1973	119,290	102.51	76,017	97.41
1974	111,825	93.74	69,517	91.45
1975	120,889	108.11	72,049	103.64
1976	129,424	107.06	76,577	106.28
1977	123,623	95.52	78,556	102.58
1978	126,907	102.66	79,516	101.22
1979	125,267	98.71	73,838	92.86
1980	130,470	104.15	72,880	98.70
1981	134,914	103.41	77,649	106.54
1982	139,795	103.62	77,174	99.39
1983	151,505	108.38	83,324	107.97
1984	157,036	103.65	83,493	100.20
1985	165,816	105.59	85,766	102.72
1986	182,867	110.28	93,176	108.64
1987	188,397	103.02	92,643	99.43
1988	185,344	98.38	82,329	88.87
1989	225,393	121.61	88,932	108.02
1990	341,061	151.32	112,254	126.22
1991	440,370	129.12	122,835	109.43
1992	447,215	101.55	132,670	108.01
1993	400,935	89.65	122,621	92.43
1994	389,451	97.14	119,494	97.45
1995	502,036	128.91	121,118	101.36
1996	466,050	92.83	122,221	100.91
1997	514,403	110.38	130,962	107.15

Table 2. Continue

Year	Number of crimes	Percentage of the previous year	Number of offenders	Percentage of the previous year
1998	597,281	116.11	140,076	106.96
1999	505,716	84.67	131,658	93.99
2000	450,673	89.12	122,860	93.32
2001	465,694	103.33	120,583	98.15
2002	420,782	90.36	121,885	101.08
2003	413,343	98.23	118,145	96.93
2004	418,883	101.34	130,182	110.19
2005	436,522	104.21	133,790	102.77
2006	425,941	97.58	124,171	92.81
2007	426,914	100.23	116,161	93.55
2008	408,407	95.66	116,584	100.36
2009	394,034	96.48	112,830	96.78
2010	447,186	113.49	122,529	108.60
2011	451,371	100.94	112,895	92.14
2012	472,225	104.62	100,239	88.79
2013	377,829	80.01	103,572	103.33
2014	329,575	87.23	105,588	101.95
2015	280,113	84.99	98,987	93.75
2016	290,779	103.81	98,137	99.14
2017	226,452	77.88	90,364	92.08

source: ERÜBS-ENYÜBS system, Attorney General's Office IT Department 2019. Budapest

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