

Societal Disintegration in Northern Ireland: a Five-Year Update

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Abstract: The hypothesis that society in Northern Ireland is in imminent danger of collapse as a consequence of the prolonged conflict there is tested using trends in crime from 1960-1983 as an index of such an occurrence. Comparisons between trends in crime in Northern Ireland with those in the Republic of Ireland and England and Wales are made. In addition, trends in crime in the cities of Belfast and Dublin are compared. As in an earlier study employing the same method on crime data up to 1978, no evidence emerges to support the hypothesis and a remarkably close relationship between trends in crime in the three areas and two cities is observed.

I INTRODUCTION

In a previous study, the hypothesis that "the fabric of society" in Northern Ireland is disintegrating was examined, using levels of indictable crime as an index of such disintegration (Heskin, 1981). Within the limits of its measures and premises, the previous study found no evidence to support the disintegration hypothesis. However, the question raised is of sufficient importance to warrant its re-examination from time to time. The present study will look again at the disintegration hypothesis with the benefit of a further five years' data and with an improvement in the accuracy of some of the data previously reported, as a result of information which has subsequently become available.

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To reiterate, the previous study had taken note of the comments of a number of individuals professionally concerned with monitoring the behaviour of members of society in Northern Ireland. These individuals included the then Taoiseach, Charles Haughey, the Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, John Hermon, and prominent researchers in the area of social behaviour, all of whom effectively predicted or believed to be current a widespread anti-social climate in Northern Ireland as a consequence of the conflict in the province, with respect for law and order greatly diminished throughout the community.

This hypothesis was examined by comparing rates of indictable crime in Northern Ireland with those in the Republic of Ireland and in England and Wales. These three areas have very comparable legal systems and definitions of indictable crime. A subsidiary test of the hypothesis was conducted by comparing the trends in indictable crime in the cities of Belfast and Dublin.

The pros and cons of the approach have been argued in the previous study and perhaps it is sufficient to note that while no serious researcher would doubt that official statistics are a considerable underestimate of actual criminal behaviour, none the less various studies have shown that the relative frequency of crimes known to the police corresponds closely to the relative frequency of crimes mentioned in victimisation surveys (Nettler, 1974). As Gurr (1976) notes, "the various sources of official and unofficial information on crimes of violence and acquisition all seem to reflect the same underlying behavioural realities" (p. 17).

Gurr (1976) also makes the point that the official crime statistics are both a consequence and a cause of public and official concern. For example, as public concern increases more crimes will be reported and as official concern intensifies, so will police activity. Despite the difficulties which this reality creates for estimating the "real" amount of crime in a given society, Gurr concludes that these changes in crime statistics are extremely valuable indicators of the magnitude of public order problems and of changes in policies for dealing with them. Hence, for these reasons and the reasons advanced in the 1981 paper, trends in the rate of indictable crime in Northern Ireland, tempered by the comparison of trends elsewhere in Britain and Ireland, provide a particularly useful index of the validity of the hypothesis in question.

II RESULTS

The details of indictable crime known to the police in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and England and Wales for the years 1960-1983 are given in Table 1. Figure 1 plots graphically the rates of crime per year in the three areas. It should be noted that there are variations in some instances

between the rates presented here in Tables 1 and 3 and official rates. In addition, because of new census information and revised population estimates, there are discrepancies in some instances between the rates presented here and the corresponding rates in the previous paper. These adjustments have been made in the pursuit of accuracy and details of the estimation of rates of crime in this study are given in an appendix.

The data on indictable crime in the three areas were correlated and the results of this analysis are given in Table 2.

A subsidiary and parallel test of the hypothesis was conducted on indictable crime data for the cities of Belfast and Dublin. Table 3 sets out the details of indictable crime known to the police in the Dublin Metropolitan Area and the Greater Belfast Police Area for the years 1964-1983. Because of boundary changes, the two are not comparable for 1960-1963. Figure 2 plots graphically the rate of crime per year in the two cities.

Table 1: *Indictable offences known to the police x areas*
(Rates per 1,000 population in parenthesis)

	<i>N. Ireland</i>	<i>R. of Ireland</i>	<i>England & Wales</i>
1960	8,460 (5.96)	15,375 (5.46)	744,000 (16.25)
1961	9,850 (6.90)	14,818 (5.24)	807,000 (17.47)
1962	10,286 (7.16)	15,307 (5.39)	896,000 (19.22)
1963	10,859 (7.50)	16,203 (5.68)	978,000 (20.85)
1964	10,428 (7.15)	17,700 (6.18)	1,068,000 (22.62)
1965	12,846 (8.75)	16,736 (5.83)	1,134,000 (23.85)
1966	14,673 (9.94)	19,029 (6.60)	1,200,000 (25.09)
1967	15,404 (10.35)	20,558 (7.08)	1,207,000 (25.09)
1968	16,294 (10.84)	23,104 (7.91)	1,289,000 (26.66)
1969	20,303 (13.41)	25,972 (8.83)	1,499,000 (30.88)
1970	24,810 (16.25)	30,756 (10.39)	1,568,000 (32.21)
1971	30,828 (20.04)	37,781 (12.69)	1,666,000 (34.10)
1972	35,884 (23.23)	39,237 (12.96)	1,690,000 (34.47)
1973	32,057 (20.72)	38,022 (12.36)	1,658,000 (33.73)
1974	33,314 (21.54)	40,096 (12.83)	1,963,000 (42.84)
1975	37,239 (24.23)	48,387 (15.25)	2,106,000 (42.84)
1976	39,779 (25.95)	54,382 (16.88)	2,136,000 (43.47)
1977	45,335 (29.50)	62,946 (19.24)	2,637,000 (53.68)
1978	45,335 (29.46)	62,000 (18.68)	2,562,000 (52.16)
1979	54,262 (35.17)	64,057 (19.02)	2,537,000 (51.60)
1980	56,316 (36.40)	72,782 (21.44)	2,688,000 (54.59)
1981	62,496 (39.96)	89,400 (26.00)	2,964,000 (59.72)
1982	62,020 (39.58)	97,626 (28.03)	3,262,000 (65.76)
1983	63,984 (40.78)	102,387 (29.19)	3,247,000 (65.36)

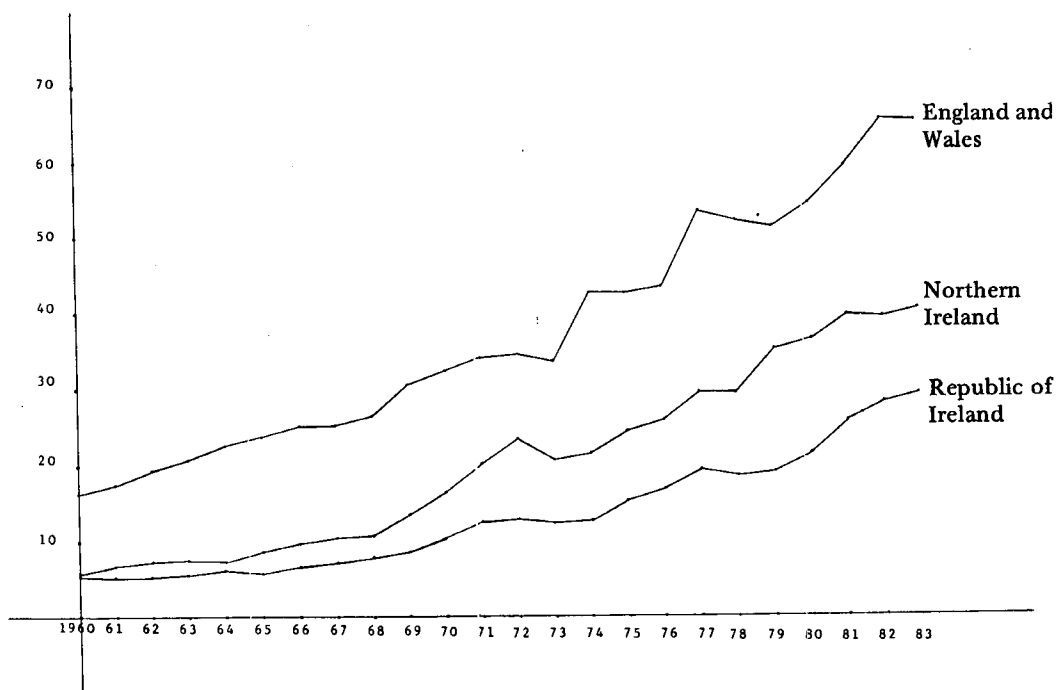
Figure 1: *Indictable offences per 1,000 population, 1960-1983*

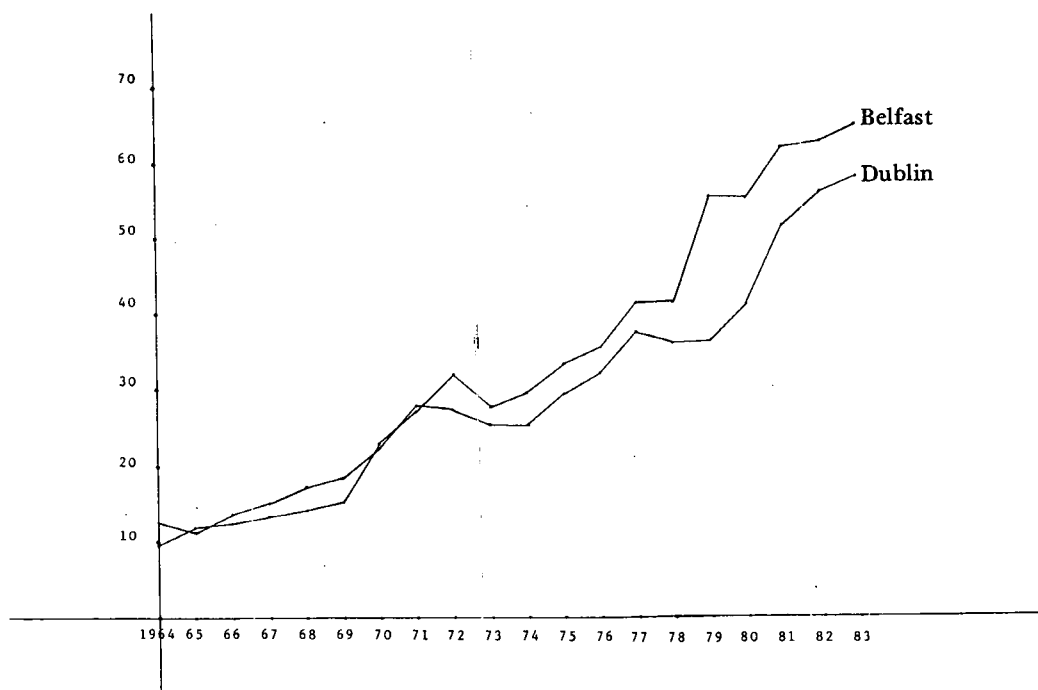
Table 2: *Product-moment correlations between indictable crime data (1960-1983) in N. Ireland, the R. of Ireland and England & Wales*

<i>Total number of offences</i>		<i>Rate per 1,000 population</i>	
N.I./R. of I.	= .9786	N.I./R. of I.	= .9827
N.I./E. & W.	= .9834	N.I./E. & W.	= .9812
R. of I./E. & W.	= .9823	R. of I./E. & W.	= .9830

Table 3: *Indictable offences known to the police x cities
(Rates per 1,000 population in parenthesis)*

	<i>Belfast</i>	<i>Dublin</i>
1964	5,844 (9.74)	10,211 (12.84)
1965	7,165 (11.94)	9,192 (11.50)
1966	7,677 (12.80)	11,166 (13.91)
1967	8,164 (13.61)	12,170 (15.08)
1968	8,454 (14.09)	13,985 (17.24)
1969	9,169 (15.28)	15,270 (18.74)
1970	13,790 (22.98)	18,318 (22.37)
1971	16,384*(27.31)	23,085 (28.00)
1972	18,977 (32.03)	23,254 (27.54)
1973	16,325 (27.91)	21,957 (25.38)
1974	17,226 (29.84)	22,557 (25.46)
1975	18,996 (33.34)	26,807 (29.56)
1976	20,062 (35.69)	29,872 (32.20)
1977	23,030 (41.54)	35,899 (37.85)
1978	22,898 (41.87)	35,024 (36.13)
1979	30,042 (55.71)	36,156 (36.51)
1980	29,494 (55.48)	41,778 (41.29)
1981	32,626 (62.26)	52,845 (51.92)
1982	32,524 (62.98)	57,752 (56.02)
1983	33,144 (65.15)	60,602 (58.36)

*Actual figure unavailable. Estimated as (1970 + 1972)/2.

Figure 2: *Indictable offences per 1,000 population 1964-1983*

The correlation between the total numbers of indictable crimes in Belfast and Dublin is .9635 and between rates of crime, .9735.

III DISCUSSION

Figure 1 shows that, apart from the 1969-1972 period when there was a dramatic increase in the trend of crime in Northern Ireland, attributable to the momentous events of that particular period, the province has remained very much in step with the trend of crime in England and Wales and in the Republic of Ireland. This is reflected in the correlations between rates of crime in the three areas, which are very high indeed, all in excess of .98.

It is instructive to examine the percentage increases which have occurred in rates of crime in the three areas between specific dates in the past and 1983. Taking 1968 as the baseline, the percentage increases in rates of crime are: Northern Ireland, 376 per cent; Republic of Ireland, 369 per cent; England and Wales, 245 per cent. In other words, since the Troubles began, the two parts of Ireland have experienced very similar increases in their rates of crime and these increases are substantially larger than the increase in England and Wales over the same period. One has to take account, however, of the fact that the rate of crime in 1968 in England and Wales was very much higher than in either part of Ireland.

Taking 1972 as the baseline, then the percentage increases in rates of crime are: Northern Ireland, 176 per cent; Republic of Ireland, 225 per cent; England and Wales, 190 per cent. Since the peak of the Troubles, 1972, the year which saw most conflict-related deaths in Northern Ireland, the percentage increases in Northern Ireland and England and Wales have been very similar, while the Republic has experienced a somewhat higher percentage increase. Again, however, one has to take account of the high rate of crime in Northern Ireland in 1972, relative to previous years.

If we look at the situation in the 1980s, taking 1980 as the baseline, then the rates of increase in 1983 are: Northern Ireland, 12 per cent; Republic of Ireland, 36 per cent; England and Wales, 20 per cent. On these recent figures, the percentage increase in the crime rate in the Republic is three times as high as the percentage increase in Northern Ireland and almost twice as high as the increase in England and Wales, indicating a current surge in the Republic's crime problems, and a deceleration of the rate of increase in Northern Ireland.

The picture that these data paint is very far from the picture of a disintegrating society in Northern Ireland as a consequence of the conflict there. The overall trend of crime over the 24 year period in question is very much in step with trends elsewhere in Ireland and Britain. Northern Ireland's crime rate remains well below the rate in England and Wales and, although

there was a widening of the gap with the Republic in the late 1970s, that divergence appears to be diminishing on the later figures.

If we consider the similarity in trend between the three geographical areas in terms of variance and prediction, as expressed by the square of the correlation, coefficient r^2 , then the following values emerge: Northern Ireland x England and Wales, $r^2 = .9628$; Northern Ireland x Republic of Ireland, $r^2 = .9657$; Republic of Ireland x England and Wales, $r^2 = .9623$. Effectively, these figures denote that we can predict, on average, to an accuracy in excess of 96 per cent the rate of crime in one area from a knowledge of the rate of crime in either of the other two. Conversely, there is less than 4 per cent of the rate of crime in any of the three areas that is not predictable from a knowledge of the rate of crime in either of the other two areas. However, if we take the case of Northern Ireland, for example, it is not possible to assume that even this 4 per cent is entirely due to the Troubles *per se*, since it could be due to error or to other local conditions which slightly blunt the precision of predictions.

The subsidiary test of the disintegration hypothesis, conducted on crime data from Belfast and Dublin, confirms its lack of credibility. Figure 2 shows that the two cities have rates of crime which are on a very similar course, both relatively and absolutely. The correlation coefficient between rates of crime in the two cities reflects this state of affairs, being in excess of .97. It might be argued that these data do not contradict the idea of societal crises in both Belfast and Dublin, but the data do not support the contention that Belfast is suffering a unique fate as a consequence of the conflict.

Correlations, of course, denote functional relationships and not necessarily causal ones. In the previous paper, it was argued that while it might be tenable to attribute some small amount of the increase in crime in the Republic to the Troubles in the North, it is hardly tenable to argue that there is a causal link between the conflict in Northern Ireland and rates of crime in England and Wales. However, given the hypothesis in question and the approach taken in this study, there are three logical possibilities suggested by these correlations:

- (i) that the rate of crime in Northern Ireland is a causative influence on the rate of crime elsewhere in Ireland and in Britain;
- (ii) that the rate of crime elsewhere in Ireland and in Britain is a causative influence on the rate of crime in Northern Ireland;
- (iii) that some third factor or complex of factors is influencing rates of crime in all three areas.

As indicated above, the first possibility is not really very plausible, despite some small "spillover" effect in the case of the Republic. The second possibility seems equally difficult to square with reality although one could

imagine a hard-line Unionist politician making an emotionally strong but rationally weak case for it as regards the Republic of Ireland.

This leaves us, for all intents and purposes, with the third possibility, namely that some factor or complex of factors may be influencing rates of crime generally in Britain and Ireland. As argued previously (Heskin, 1981) one can perceive certain contextual factors that seem likely to produce a similarity of effect, were we able to identify a broad and uniform cause. Among these are geography and climate, language, economic interdependence, physical proximity, shared legal frameworks and a long history of migration between the three areas, particularly marked from both parts of Ireland to Britain. Geography and historical and cultural legacy, it can be argued, have conferred a similarity of day-to-day values in Britain and Ireland, despite what the cultural purists on each side might proclaim.

The relationship between economic conditions and crime is a curious one because although the link between unemployment and crime has often been noted (e.g., Glaser and Rice, 1959), in fact the long-term trend in Western society has been for the steady improvement in the standard of living to be accompanied by a steady increase in the rates of crime, including property crime (Walker, 1965). Walker argues that affluence increases the awareness of material possessions, particularly through the media, as well as increasing the opportunities of gaining these possessions illegally — as valuable goods become more generally widespread, the greater the motivation and opportunity to steal them. It is to the role of the media, and television in particular, that I would like to turn briefly at this point, since it has been identified as a variable co-acting with others to influence the motivation towards and perceived opportunity of criminal activity.

There has been a great deal of research into the effects of television viewing on aggressive behaviour, particularly as it affects children and young people. The landmark publication in the United States, where most of the research was conducted, was the Surgeon General's Report on Television and Social Behavior (1972). This report tentatively concluded that there was an association between television viewing and later aggressive behaviour. In a 10-year update of the Surgeon General's report by the National Institute of Mental Health in the United States (Pearl, Bouthilet and Lazar, 1982), the authors confirmed the conclusions of the earlier report in relation to television-viewing and aggression. Reviewing the 1982 report by the National Institute of Mental Health, Rubinstein (1983) notes that there is evidence of the widespread influence of television, not only on social learning, but also on social institutions such as the family, the law, politics and religion although there are many unanswered questions in these areas and an overall conceptual framework to encompass the findings is lacking.

In terms of the link between television and crime, the concept that best

bridges the gap between the medium and eventual criminal activity by some subset of the population is that of relative deprivation. The concept of relative deprivation is used by sociologists to denote the feelings of an individual who lacks some status, conditions or material possessions that he thinks he should have, these standards being determined by reference to what some other person or group has (Gurr, 1970). The concept has been applied as an explanatory mechanism to the onset and development of the conflict in Northern Ireland (Birrell, 1972), although the argument here is that it may have been a factor in influencing the values and attitudes of people generally in Britain and Ireland and that that influence took a particular shape among some in Northern Ireland because of the particular circumstances there.

Given the essentially similar television diet available in Britain and Ireland, the suggestion here is that perhaps we should not overlook television as an influence on the pattern of crime over the past quarter of a century when its power has been so widespread, especially in view of the contextual similarities noted above. Its established capacity to increase aggressive tendencies and its suggested capacity to increase relative deprivation seem unlikely to be irrelevant to the incidence of crime in these islands. However, it is no part of this argument that television is responsible in any direct sense for the general increase in crime, but rather that it has a catalytic influence, in combination with other circumstances, perhaps particularly economic and political factors, on anti-social behaviour. The main purpose of drawing attention to television in this discussion has been merely to highlight a factor which is often disregarded in the discussion of social problems despite, or perhaps because of, its pervasive and familiar influence.

IV CONCLUSIONS

The data presented here strengthen and confirm the conclusions reached in the previous study (Heskin, 1981) that the conflict *per se* has not been responsible for a disintegration of society in Northern Ireland, with peculiarly high and widespread anti-social tendencies among the population. Evidence of such a general effect should be found in the trend of indictable crime known to the police, where comparable "normal" variations are taken into account, but no such trend is evident in these data.

Of course, it is clear that Northern Ireland, along with its neighbours, has experienced an increase in the prevalence of crime over the years and it is not unreasonable to hypothesise from that to a general decrease in respect for traditional societal values and so forth. That is not the issue in this study but rather whether Northern Ireland is exceptionally unfortunate in this respect as a result of the political and security situation there since 1969.

Clearly, in view of the comparisons made here with neighbouring societies, and within the limitations of the variables studied as indices of such an occurrence, it is not.

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APPENDIX

Notes on the estimation of rates of crime in this study.

1. Table 1

(a) Northern Ireland

(i) The rates of crime for Northern Ireland are not indicated in the RUC Chief Constable's Reports. The rates given here are simply the result of dividing the total number of indictable offences known to the police by the number of thousands of total population as determined either by census or official estimate (the standard method).

(ii) Due to an error on my part, the 1978 figure for the total number of indictable crimes in Northern Ireland was incorrect in the 1981 paper. The basis of the error was the improbable fact that Northern Ireland had exactly the same number of indictable crimes in 1977 and 1978.

(b) Republic of Ireland

Census figures are available for the years 1961, 1966, 1971, 1979 and

1981 for the Republic. Prior to 1979, the population was here taken as having increased by the same amount annually between census dates. The 1979 census revealed that the population of the Republic had increased considerably above official predictions. Consequently, although the Garda Commissioner's Annual Reports had published official rates of crime for the Republic as a whole since 1968 (except for 1978 and 1979), the figures prior to 1979 have been revised in this study to take account of the new information on population. In addition, the Garda Commissioner's Reports for 1982 and 1983 made no allowance for estimated increases in the population since 1981. The figures presented here for these years do take account of this. The effect of these adjustments in all cases are that the revised rates of crime were slightly lower than the official rates.

(c) England and Wales

The rates of crime for England and Wales were calculated by the standard method. Figures for 1980 and following years are not precisely comparable because of new counting rules introduced at the beginning of 1980, but the effect on the picture of total indictable crime is very slight.

2. *Table 5*

(a) Belfast

(i) In recent years, the RUC Chief Constable's Reports have published details of indictable crime by division, enabling the Greater Belfast Police District total (Divisions A-F) to be calculated. Earlier figures were obtained from the Statistics Branch of the RUC. The 1971 figures are unavailable as they have been misplaced.

(ii) The Greater Belfast Police District does not conform precisely to any census area, but closely approximates the Belfast Urban Area. During the 1960s, the population of Belfast is thought to have been very stable and the 1971 census figure (600,166) was therefore used to calculate rates of crime in the 1964-1971 period. In the 1981 study, a 1978 official estimate of the population of Belfast was used to arrive at figures for the population of Belfast during the period 1972-1978. However the 1981 census, although far from satisfactory because of non-returns, indicated that the 1978 figure was an overestimate of the Belfast population. Consequently, an official estimate of population derived from the 1981 census was used in place of the 1978 estimate and rates of crime for the period 1971-1978 recalculated, the population taken as having decreased by the same amount annually, and projecting this rate of decrease to 1982 and 1983.

(iii) Due to a reorganisation of the Greater Belfast Police Area, no divisional figures for Belfast were published for 1983. However, the Belfast total for indictable crime is a very consistent percentage of the provincial

total and hence the 1983 Belfast figure was calculated as 51.8 per cent of the total figure for that year, this being the average Belfast percentage of the total during the ten-year period 1973-1982.

(b) Dublin

(i) The Dublin Metropolitan Area (DMA) does not approximate any census area. In the 1981 study, the rates of crime published for the DMA in the Garda Commissioner's Reports since 1971 were used, these being based on estimates of the population of the DMA. However, as a result of information from the 1979 census, the 1979 Garda Commissioner's Report provided an estimate of the DMA population which exceeded the 1978 estimate by 160,000. Consequently, in this study, the DMA rates of crime for 1971-1978 were recalculated, taking the population as having changed by the same amount annually. The effect of these adjustments was that the rates of crime presented here for Dublin prior to 1979 are lower than the officially published rates, the differences being quite substantial in the later years.

(ii) The Garda Commissioner's Reports for 1982 and 1983 give the same DMA estimate of population as that of the 1981 report, which was based on the 1981 census. However, official estimates of the population of the Republic are available for 1982 and 1983 and the DMA population was estimated for these years as 29.6 per cent of the total population, the percentage of total population for which the Garda Commissioner's 1981 DMA estimate accounted. The effect of these adjustments was, again, that the rates of crime presented here for 1982 and 1983 are slightly lower than the official rates.

(iii) Between 1960 and 1971, the population of the Republic increased by approximately 0.5 per cent per annum. The population of the DMA during this period was taken as having similarly increased. The DMA population prior to 1971 was therefore estimated back from the Garda Commissioner's 1971 estimate of the DMA population, reducing the figure by 0.5 per cent per annum, and the rates of crime calculated accordingly.

(iv) Two typographical errors escaped my attention in the earlier paper, hence the slightly different figures for the total number of indictable crimes in Dublin for 1966 and 1971 in this paper.