

The rates of crime

While "organized crime" has practically disappeared, crime as an everyday threat to the property and life of the average citizen—robberies, burglaries, assaults—seems to

have risen. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, in his 1954 semi-annual report, noted that "major crimes" had risen 8 per cent over the comparable period in 1953.*

Mr. Hoover's statement was based on crimes reported to the FBI by municipalities. But how significant are such reports? The U.S., says Thorsten Sellin, professor of criminology of the University of Pennsylvania, "undoubtedly has the poorest [criminal] statistics of any of the nations of the free world."

For one thing, local police frequently fake their reports. Take Philadelphia. Police Commissioner Thomas J. Gibbons, who assumed office in 1952 as part of the reform administration of Mayor Clark, found that for years records had been distorted in order to minimize the amount of crime in the city. One center-city district in one month handled 5,000 more complaints than it had recorded. When a new central reporting system was installed, the number of "crimes" went up from 16,800 in 1951 to 28,600 in 1953—on the record an increase in "crime" of over 70 per cent. In New York a similar faking had gone on for years. In 1950 the number of property crimes reported by the police was about half those investigated by insurance companies. Following a survey by police expert Bruce Smith, a new system of central recording was installed. In 1952 assaults rose 47 per cent, robberies 73 per cent, and burglaries 118 per cent over 1951 figures. As Smith concluded, "such startling rises . . . do not in themselves represent an increase in crime, but rather a vast improvement in crime reporting."

In the last three years the Middle Atlantic States have shown startling statistical increases for all major offenses. But New York and Philadelphia account for 53 per cent of the urban population covered by the reports. Do we then have a crime wave, or a "statistical reporting" wave? And how many other cities still understate the amount of crime?

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*FBI estimates for the first half of 1954: 3,400 murders and cases of non-capital manslaughter, 86,000 robberies, 48,000 assaults, 283,000 burglaries, 207,000 larcenies. But the urban crime rates were below the national level.

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What Crime Wave?

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There are other statistical pitfalls. There are no estimates for city populations for the inter-census years. Since FBI crime rates are computed on the basis of the populations of the reporting cities, toward the end of a decade inaccuracies occur. For example, from 1940 to 1950 the population of the three Pacific coast states increased about 40 per cent. In effect, the larger number of crimes in 1949 were charged to only 60 per cent of the population, overstating considerably the rate of criminality.

Even if one granted the adequacy of specific crime rates, the criterion of a "crime wave" remains undefined. For example, in the first half of 1954 robberies and burglaries rose steeply over the same period in 1953—a sign, apparently, of increasing lawlessness—but murders were practically stationary and auto thefts were down. How does one weigh these facts?

A check shows amazing variations by cities. In Los Angeles and New Orleans all crime was on the rise. Portland showed decreases in assaults, but larcenies, burglaries, and robberies rose. Seattle reported assaults up, but auto thefts down. In Miami larceny and burglary increased. In Cleveland and Chicago offenses mounted except for assaults in both cities and auto thefts in the latter. Detroit showed a rise in property crimes. Birmingham reported an over-all improvement. Memphis and Dallas showed rises in murder, but other crimes in Memphis were down. Analysts were hard put to find convincing explanations.