

Mr. Michael McDowell, T.D.,
Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform,
72/76 St Stephen's Green,
Dublin 2.

27 July 2004.

Dear Minister,

I enclose a copy of the report of the Expert Group on Crime Statistics which outlines the conclusions and recommendations of the Group for improvements in the quality of the reporting of national crime statistics. The report takes into consideration feedback received from a public consultation process which was undertaken last year.

The recommendations fall into two distinct categories. The first set proposes a number of changes to be made to the current crime statistics produced by An Garda Síochána based on the PULSE system. Most of these are capable of immediate implementation. The second set of recommendations contains changes to the compilation of national criminal justice statistics (ie. not confined to crime statistics) which the Group believes are capable of implementation in the medium term.

1. Recommendations for improvement to current system

The Group has made a number of recommendations in respect of, inter alia, the following:

- Frequency and timing of reports on crime statistics
- Additional background information on methods of compilation
- Improved consultation with users
- Additional information required on victims and offenders
- Production of crime statistics by county

The Group has reviewed the issue of the quality of the data produced by PULSE. The introduction of this system in 2000 represented a significant step forward but created a discontinuity in the recording of national crime statistics with figures produced from the previous manual system. The Group endorses the emphasis being placed by An Garda Síochána on data quality through such measures as the introduction of a Quality Assurance Board, internal audit, extensive training in the use of PULSE for all staff and detailed operating protocols.

The Group is not however in a position to provide a blanket endorsement of all aspects of PULSE throughout the Garda network. To have done so would have required a major research project in a range of Garda stations throughout the country tracking over time a large sample of interactions between the general public and the Force. The majority of the Group concluded that this would have excessively delayed the completion of the rest of its work but are recommending that this exercise be undertaken in the future. Three members of the Expert Group have indicated in a minority report that they would have wished this exercise to be carried out before submission of the Report to the Minister. The Expert Group is also recommending that Garda management take advantage of an offer from the Central Statistics Office

to provide professional advice on an ongoing basis in internal audit and quality review processes and in data presentation.

The Group also notes the view widely accepted internationally, that in order to obtain a reasonable assessment of the level of crime in a particular society, police statistics need to be supported by the conduct of a National Crime Victimization Survey. The Group therefore endorses the recent decision of the Government to conduct such a survey in 2004.

The Group is not proposing any changes in the counting rules used by An Garda Síochána or in the categorisation of crimes between headline and non-headline. The counting rules in use (including the principal offence rule and detection rules) are regarded as a sensible and prudent statistical convention similar to those in use in England and Wales. With regard to crime categorisation, there are at present no uniformly agreed methods internationally and different approaches can be argued to be equally valid. In the light of this and given the undesirability of creating a further discontinuity in the statistics so soon after the introduction of PULSE in 2000, the majority of the Group believes that the present system should be bedded down for a number of years without any further major changes (although the minority report argues that alternative approaches should have been examined further).

2. Recommendations for changes in the reporting system

The Group has concluded that there are a number of shortcomings in the current system of criminal justice statistics which it believes cannot be addressed without structural change. These include the absence of linkages between different components of the criminal justice system, the unavailability of any data related to crimes prosecuted by authorities other than An Garda Síochána, the absence of a criminal history repository to provide comprehensive data across the system, the need to link crime victimisation surveys to other statistical data and the absence of any mechanism to improve the quality and scope of the statistical systems. The present statistical system based on PULSE provides data useful to An Garda Síochána for operational purposes and in particular for crime detection and the internal allocation of resources, but their value as an aid to policy development is limited. Accordingly the Group is recommending that a central unit be established to assume responsibility for the development of enhanced crime statistics and criminal justice statistics across the criminal justice system.

This unit would carry out, inter alia, the following functions:

- Publishing quarterly and annual criminal justice statistics (based initially on PULSE and extending to into other areas as data become available)
- Reviewing with An Garda Síochána enhancements to the scope and quality of current crime statistics
- Developing recording systems for inclusion of data on the principal crimes prosecuted by agencies other than An Garda Síochána
- Reviewing the quality of the primary sources of all statistics produced
- Advising the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform on developments to enable linkages for the tracking of offenders through the system

- Providing data to assist policy formation within the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform

The strongly held view of the majority of the Expert Group is that central direction from such a dedicated entity is essential as a means to improve, over time, the quality of criminal justice statistics and address the gaps in the present system. The minority report expresses the view that this proposal may be premature pending the completion of further work on data quality in the PULSE system.

The Expert Group considered three possible models for the location of this unit: (a) an independent agency; (b) the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and (c) the Central Statistics Office (CSO). The establishment of a new independent agency was ruled out on the grounds that it would entail the creation of a new bureaucracy which would have the additional disadvantage of being a step removed from the agencies with whom it would be working. The choice of location between the Department and the CSO was a fine balance between, on the one hand maximising administrative efficiency and on the other hand assuring its credibility and conveying a clear perception to the public of professionalism and objectivity. The Expert Group favoured locating the Unit within the Department within a structure designed to emphasise its autonomy but acknowledges that there are also cogent arguments in favour of asking the CSO to assume this responsibility.

The Group has recommended that the proposed Unit should contain high level professional statistical skills and IT expertise supported initially by the secondment of members of An Garda Síochána with experience of the PULSE system. The unit would in due course publish data drawn from developing IT systems in criminal justice agencies other than An Garda Síochána (the Prison Service, the Courts Service, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions and the Probation and Welfare Service) as well as data drawn from prosecuting agencies other than An Garda Síochána.

Although Ireland appears to be in a relatively backward position with regard to criminal justice statistics at present, the Group believes that a major step forward is now possible. Technological advances and in particular the major investments in IT systems for An Garda Síochána, the Prison Service and the Courts Service all make it possible to provide the infrastructure on which a modern criminal justice system can be established. This impetus now needs to be directed and driven forward and the Group believes that implementation of its recommendations will enable this to be achieved with modest resource implications and significant benefits particularly in improved policy formulation.

On behalf of all members of the group, I would like to express our thanks to our two secretaries, David Walker (who acted until July 2003) and Gerry Hayes (who succeeded him) whose commitment and willingness to take on any work or duties requested by the Group have been exemplary.

Yours sincerely,

David Kennedy
Chairman of the Expert Group on Crime Statistics