Issue

Brief

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Crime in India: A Critical Review of Data Collection and Analysis

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Abstract

Safe countries bestow multiple social and economic benefits on the individual and larger community. Therefore, crime levels must be controlled. While India is a relatively peaceful country by global standards, there is significant scope for improvement in terms of policing, the national criminal justice system, and how data on crimes is collected and analysed. Amid India's rapid urbanisation, it is crucial to study the various facets of criminality from the city perspective to foster safe and productive environments.

Introduction

Countries that are peaceful, orderly, and have a safe environment enable their communities to enjoy a sense of security about life and livelihood. Safe countries allow individuals to participate in leisure and productive activities without fear, accruing substantial social and economic benefits for the state. Industry, commerce, and businesses typically prefer to be located in areas with low crime rates and, consequently, low costs associated with criminal activities (such as insurance premiums and losses from theft or damage).[1]

Conversely, violent crimes such as murders, rapes, grievous hurt, and robberies have significant impacts on society—an economic impact on survivors, their families (especially in instances of death), and the community and country due to the emotional and physical toll.[2] Communities suffer the consequences of lower property values, higher insurance premiums, and reduced investment in high-crime areas.[3] Apart from incurring economic losses due to lower productivity, the state also spends more on the criminal justice system (policing, operations, investigations, courts and prisons).[4]

India established the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) in 1986, a national system for collecting and collating crime statistics.[a] It provides a fair degree of information on crime, the nature of crime, and crime rates in the country. Given the enormous size of the Indian population and its socioeconomic evolutions, India has a comparatively low crime rate by global standards and its unique context.[5] Even so, India—and indeed all other countries—must closely monitor crime trends and rates as the criminal world is dynamic and constantly engineering new forms of wrongdoing. Tackling such activities requires robust and agile policies based on extensive data.

This brief presents an overview of crime in India, particularly in urban areas, based on the annual report prepared by the NCRB titled *Crime in India*. The latest edition was published in 2023 (pertaining to 2022).[6] This comprehensive database is immensely valuable for policymakers, law enforcement agencies, researchers, and citizens to understand the nature, volume, and dynamics of crime in India.[b]

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a   The NCRB is an official organ of the Ministry of Home Affairs and is India's storehouse of information on crimes and criminals.

b   As a government entity, the NCRB is well positioned to access information from the State Records Bureaus, District Records Bureaus, and police commissionerates in metropolitan cities.

Understanding the NCRB Data

Among the vast volume of data presented in its reports, the NCRB provides separate statistics on specific wrongdoings that are considered cognisable crimes as per the Indian Penal Code (IPC).[7] The NCRB also takes cognisance of cases under special and local laws,[c] tabulating these separately. This brief is focused on serious crimes and not the latter set of delinquencies, which may be milder in nature. The NCRB report also includes a dataset on crimes in states and union territories, and a similar set on crimes in 19 metropolitan cities with populations over two million[d]—Ahmedabad, Bengaluru, Chennai, Coimbatore, Delhi, Ghaziabad, Hyderabad, Indore, Jaipur, Kanpur, Kochi, Kolkata, Kozhikode, Lucknow, Mumbai, Nagpur, Patna, Pune, and Surat.[8] Such bifurcated data enables an assessment of crime in states and crime in urban or rural areas.

The NCRB also provides crime rates for each head (type) of crime. Crime rate is the ratio between the number of crimes recorded and the population in a given area.[9] Globally, the crime rate typically refers to an instance of a particular crime per 100,000 people. If the number of such instances is added, larger geographical entities with higher demography will produce more crimes than the smaller ones. However, the crime rate is a proportioned measuring tool, enabling an assessment and comparison of different statistics across countries and regions.

The NCRB collects and presents data on only cognisable crimes, not non-cognisable offences. The first schedule of the Criminal Procedure Code classifies IPC-related crimes into cognisable and non-cognisable offences: cognisable cases are those where a police officer *may* arrest without a warrant, while non-cognisable cases are those where a police officer *shall not* arrest without a warrant.[10] In essence, cognisable crimes are those on which the police can act (making an arrest or beginning an investigation) even without a court order. These include offences such as murder, attempt to murder, rape, and theft. On the other hand, non-cognisable crimes are not actionable by the police and must be pursued by the affected parties in the courts.[11] Examples of such crimes are assault, cheating, forgery, and defamation.

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c   Unlike the laws in the penal code that apply to the entire country, special and local laws are made to handle criminal activities in a specific state or area of a state. They address the unique needs, customs, and cultural practices that are issues within that state or area.

d   The NCRB report uses the population and area of urban agglomerations larger than the municipal limits of the cities for its assessments. As such, for Delhi, it considers the entire National Capital Region (which includes neighbouring such as Faridabad, Ghaziabad, Gurgaon, and Noida). While some urban agglomerations only marginally satisfy the two million criteria, others have large populations (some even upwards of 20 million).

To assess how crime has evolved in India over the years, this brief studies the NCRB reports of 1953, 1963, 1973, 1983, 1993, 2003, 2013, and 2023, enabling a 70-year overview. India's population has grown substantially, from 36.1 crore in 1951[12] to 120.01 crore in 2011.[13] Although India has not conducted a census since 2011,[e] the NCRB used other sources to estimate India's population as 137.97 crore in its 2023 report.[f] This brief studies nine specific serious crimes: murder, kidnapping and abduction, offences against public tranquillity, crimes against women, crimes against children, crimes against senior citizens, property offences, economic offences, and cybercrime.

Although the NCRB has collected and presented data since its inception, the early reports contained sketchy statistics. Over the years, data quality has improved—both in the extent of data collected (across more districts and states) and how it is collected, collated, and analysed, especially with greater technology integration. A notable point in how the NCRB defines—and thus collects, collates, and assesses data—is its use of the 'principal offence' rule[14] when classifying crimes. The rule stipulates that if multiple offences are registered under a single first information report (FIR)[g] case, only the most heinous crime is counted as a unit.[15] This effectively means that other lesser crimes bundled with the most serious ones are reflected in the NCRB statistics.

Observations in the 1953 Report

The 1953 NCRB report, the first edition of the *Crime in India* report, provides insights into the changes that occurred following India's independence with regard to tackling crime. The 1953 report records that as economic conditions improved in independent India, the police were able to devote more time to enforcing law and order, leading to a decline in the annual volume of crime in the country, from 6.54 lakh cases in 1949 to 6.01 lakh cases in 1953 (a 7.95 percent reduction).[16] However, criminal activities recorded at that time appear to be more 'traditional' in nature and were recorded under only a few heads: murder, kidnapping and abduction, dacoity, robbery, breaking into a house, theft, and rioting.

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e   The decennial Census was scheduled to be conducted in 2021 but was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

f   The NCRB has used the following sources to estimate India's population in 2022: the report of the technical group on population projections (July 2020), under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare's National Commission on Population (estimates are based on the 2011 Census). However, for the 19 metropolitan cities, it uses the actual population as per the 2011 Census.

g   A written document prepared by the police when they receive information about a cognisable offence.

Understanding the NCRB Data

Notably, the report also detailed several handicaps in police work—the lowest number of policepersons per 100,000 population compared to advanced countries, a drop in the quality of recruitment, and a decline in fear of the police among criminals. Additionally, the quality of the police system was poor on account of archaic methods of investigation, lack of forensic science laboratories, poor medico-legal examination, and case disposal delays in the courts. The report suggested quality recruitment, tighter laws, establishing more forensic science labs, and better capacity in medical jurisprudence.[17]

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Cognisable crimes in India rose 9.67 times between 1953 and 2023, from about 0.6 million to about 5.8 million, while the population grew 3.82 times during the same period (see Table 1). Notably, the crime rate more than doubled during this period, from 160 in 1953 to 422.2 in 2023. Data for the years between 1972 and 2023 reveals that while India's population increased by 2.45 times, the volume of crime increased by 3.62 times and the crime rate by 1.47 times. The crime rates for the decades between 1953 and 1993 appear stable. However, the years between the 1993-2003 and 2003-2013 periods show a sharp rise in the crime rate, with the two decades appearing as the most crime-infested in the country. The situation seems to have improved between 2013 and 2023, with a drop in the crime rate, from a high of 540.4 in 2013 to 422.2 in 2023.

Table 1: Crime in India

Year	Total Cognisable Crimes	Population (Million)	Crime Rate
1953	6,01,964	361.0	160
1963	6,58,830	458.9	143.5
1973	10,77,181	573.4	187.9
1983	13,49,866	720.4	187.4
1993	54,33,574	883.8	184.4
2003	54,94,814	1,068.2	514.4
2013	66,40,378	1,228.7	540.4
2023	58,24,946	1,379.7	422.2

Source: NCRB Annual Reports

A general inference from the NCRB reports is that crime has risen faster than India's population has grown, resulting in a higher crime rate. However, a deeper data analysis indicates several potential explanatory factors for the rise. First, the basket of cognisable crimes has widened over the years as newer crimes, such as economic offences, are now included alongside the traditional ones. In 1973, the NCRB collected data for murder, rape, kidnapping and abduction, dacoity, robbery, burglary, thefts, riots, criminal breach of trust, cheating, counterfeiting and others.[18] By 2023, in addition to the traditional

types of crimes, it also collected data on deaths by negligence (especially road accidents), dowry deaths, acid attacks, assault on women, sexual harassment, offences relating to religion, economic offences, and cyber-crimes, among others.[19] Additionally, the progressive introduction of technology and improved access (in terms of transportation and means of communication) has led to better collection and reporting due to improved transportation.

Another potential cause for India's increased crime rate is socioeconomic factors such as poverty, unemployment, and the rampant consumption of alcohol and drugs.[20] Global research has established that poverty tends to aggravate illegal activities, and unemployment results in financial difficulty and reduces social integration, thereby making the unemployed more susceptible to crime. Similarly, inequality breeds resentment because of the uneven distribution of resources and may drive criminal behaviour in some individuals. Understanding these relationships is critical for crafting holistic and effective crime prevention strategies. Equally important is concentrated action to eliminate poverty, unemployment, and inequality.[21] In India, research has found links between crime and income inequality, poverty rate, low literacy rate, macroeconomic factors such as gross state domestic product per capita, and demographic factors such as population density.[22]

Urban crime in India

Conducting a historical analysis of crime in Indian cities is somewhat challenging since the 1953 report did not include any urban-specific data. This was perhaps because of the low level of urbanisation at that point (17.3 percent), with over 80 percent of the national population living in villages.[23] Although the 1963 report included separate data on cities, it was only for eight million-plus cities: Ahmedabad, Bangalore (Bengaluru), Bombay (Mumbai), Calcutta (Kolkata), Delhi, Hyderabad, Kanpur, and Madras (Chennai). The 1973 report included separate data for the same eight cities. However, the 1983 report contained data for four more cities (Jaipur, Lucknow, Nagpur, and Pune).

The 1993 report included a chapter on urban crimes for the first time.[24] The chapter was essentially a trend analysis of metropolitan cities and noted that the number of cities with populations exceeding one million had increased from 12 to 23 by 1991. The 2003 report recorded that the number of million-plus cities had risen to 35 by 2001, and the 2013 report shows a further increase to 53. However, during the decade between 2013 and 2023, the process of

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reporting crimes in urban areas was revamped, with 19 metropolitan cities with populations above two million being recorded. Many of these cities are urban agglomerations; Kozhikode, Coimbatore, Kochi, Ghaziabad, and Patna have populations under two million (as per the 2011 Census) but cross that mark as urban agglomerations when the larger urbanised area around their municipal limits is considered.

Notably, there is a vast difference in the population sizes of the 19 metropolitan regions now being recorded in the NCRB report. While Kozhikode, Kochi, and Coimbatore have populations of 2.03 million, 2.11 million, and 2.15 million, respectively, Kolkata, Delhi, and Mumbai have populations of 14.1 million, 16.3 million, and 18.4 million, respectively.

This diversity in population numbers renders data comparison somewhat incongruous. However, it is possible to provide a general overview of crime in cities and how this compares with the rest of the country, affording some insights on comparative crime rates, the nature of crime, and contrasts in criminal behaviour across the country (see Table 2).

Table 2: Crime in Indian Cities

Year (Number of Cities)	Total Cog Crimes	Population Percentage	Crime Rate	National Crime Rate
1993 (23)	2,33,374	8.7	303.1	184.4
2003 (35)	2,91,246	10	270	160.7
2013 (53)	5,56,024	13.3	345.9	215.5
2023 (19)	6,20,356	8.12	553.70	258.1

Source: NCRB Annual Reports

As Table 2 illustrates, the total number of cognisable crimes in metropolitan cities has increased, especially in the last two decades (2003-2023). It can also be inferred that the share of such crimes in the cities under assessment is higher than the share of their population. According to the 2023 report, the 19 metropolitan cities are home to 8.12 percent of India's population but report 14.65 percent of all cognisable crimes. This also means that crime rates in large cities substantially exceed the national crime rate average.

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This corroborates the widely acknowledged finding by criminologists that crime rates are much higher in larger cities than in smaller towns and villages, and that cities are more prone to crime.[25] This is perhaps due to the greater opportunity to commit crimes on account of wider access to wealth, and the lower probability of recognition, detection, and arrest.[26] Global experiences corroborate this fact. For instance, the crime victimisation rate[h] in the US in 2021 was 24.5 for urban and 11.1 for rural areas.[27] Additionally, the number of violent crimes in urban areas is rising across the US.[28] Similarly, in the European Union, people living in cities across the 27 member states report three times more crime than those in rural areas.[29]

However, a more detailed look at city-wise data in India indicates that not all 19 metropolitan areas showcase the same patterns. According to the data in the 2023 report, the cities of Jaipur, Indore, Kochi, Patna, Mumbai, Surat, Ahmedabad, Bengaluru, Kanpur, Ghaziabad, Nagpur, and Lucknow exceed the average crime rate of their states. However, Kolkata, Chennai, Coimbatore, Pune, Hyderabad, and Kozhikode have lower crime rates than their state average.[30] As such, the NCRB data indicates two key points: the theory that urban centres have a greater propensity towards crime is not entirely true for all the 19 metropolitan regions recorded, while the assertion that larger cities have a higher crime rate than smaller ones holds in India.

According to the 2023 report, Delhi exceeds all other cities studied in terms of the crime rate, at 1832.6, which is 3.36 times the national city average of 544. Jaipur (916.7), Indore (767.7), Kochi (626.7), and Patna (611.7) have the next highest crime rates. Kolkata is the most peaceful city, with a low crime rate of 78.2. Additionally, Chennai (211.2), Coimbatore (211.2), Surat (215.3), Pune (219.3), Hyderabad (266.7), Bengaluru (337.3), Ahmedabad (360.1), Mumbai (367.3), Kozhikode (397.5), Kanpur (401.4), Ghaziabad (418.0), Nagpur (516), and Lucknow (521) have crime rates lower than the national city average.

The murder rate was highest in Patna (5.2 per lakh population), followed by Lucknow (4.5), Jaipur (4.3), Indore (3.3), and Ghaziabad (3.1). Kolkata (0.2), Kozhikode (0.3), Mumbai (0.7), and Kochi (0.8) have less than one murder

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h   Crime victimisation is a survey process in which individual citizens voluntarily disclose if they have been the targets of criminal acts. The rate is calculated as total victimisations per 1000 persons.

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per lakh population. As a percentage, the 19 urban agglomerations accounted for 7.12 percent of all nationwide murders, lower than their total average population percentage (8.12). The rate of kidnapping and abduction was highest in Delhi (34.2), followed by Patna (32.4), and Indore (31.1). Chennai (0.4), Coimbatore (0.4), and Kochi (0.9) had the lowest rates of kidnapping and abduction per lakh population. The 19 cities recorded higher kidnapping and abduction rates as a percentage of their population than the rest of the country (12.99 percent).

Crime rates against women were the highest in Jaipur (239.3), Delhi (186.9), and Lucknow (161.4). According to the 2023 report, gender crime increased by over 12.3 percent over 2021.[i] A total of 48,755 cases were registered in 2022; this figure was 43,414 in 2021.[31] Coimbatore (12.9), Chennai (17.1) and Kolkata (27.8) emerged as the most women-friendly cities. Delhi recorded the most crimes against children (7,400), followed by Mumbai (3178) and Bengaluru (1578), while Coimbatore (83), Patna (127) and Kochi (206) were at the bottom of the list. Additionally, 3,996 cases of crimes against senior citizens were registered in the 19 cities, with Delhi (1313), Mumbai (572), and Bengaluru (458) accounting for the most cases, while Patna, Lucknow, Ghaziabad, and Kanpur had no recorded cases.

In the area of economic offences, 40,760 cases were registered in the 19 metropolitan cities, a jump of 15.8 percent over 2021. Of these, 88.4 percent of cases were of forgery, cheating, and fraud, with the 19 cities responsible for 21.07 percent of all such cases recorded countrywide. Additionally, the 19 cities recorded 37.06 percent of all cybercrimes in India, with a total of 24,420 cases registered.

Table 3 illustrates the number of crimes in the 19 Indian cities compared with the rest of the country (as per the 2023 NCRB report). While the population percentage of the reported cities was 8.12 percent, every major crime, except murder and offences against public tranquillity, was higher than the population percentage. The figures on property-related offences could explain why there are more gated communities in large cities nationwide.[32]

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i   Assessing 2021 data alongside 2022 data (as presented in the NCRB's 2023 report) allows a direct comparison, as the number of cities reported on and the format of reporting were the same for both years. It also shows the sharp increase in crime against women, necessitating a more concerted attempt to take remedial steps.

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Table 3: Major Crimes in India and Cities (2023)

Crime	All india	Cities	City percent
Murder	28,522	2,031	7.12
Kidnapping and Abduction	1,07,588	13,984	12.99
Offences Against Public Tranquillity	57,082	3,457	6.05
Crime Against Women	4,45,256	48,755	10.94
Crime Against Children	1,62,449	20,550	12.65
Crime Against Senior Citizens	28,545	3,996	13.99
Economic Offences	1,93,385	40,760	21.07
Cybercrime	65,893	24,420	37.06
Offences Against Property	8,39,252	2,76,830	32.98

Source: NCRB Annual Reports

Notably, the performance of India's criminal justice system was found to be lacking. The conviction rate for major heinous crimes was poor: for murder, it was 42.5 percent; for rape, 17.9 percent; and for kidnapping and abduction, it was 38.6 percent.

"The NCRB's 2023 report corroborates the widely acknowledged finding by criminologists that crime rates are higher in larger cities than in smaller towns and villages, and that cities are more prone to crime."

The Need for Better Data

While the NCRB data is the most comprehensive set of statistics in India, it has some deficits that should be rectified. Firstly, the NCRB data is entirely secondary, a mere collection of statistics on crime as supplied by the State Crime Records Bureaus. The NCRB does not independently verify any data by conducting its own research. For instance, the US Bureau of Justice Statistics (the country's primary statistical agency) conducts an annual 'National Crime Victimization Survey' covering around 150,000 households.[33] The NCRB does not undertake any such survey. Consequently, data reliability is a pressing issue.[34]

Secondly, not all crimes are reported. Criminologists have stated that people's reporting behaviour impacts crime statistics in India.[j] They also suggest that higher literacy rates lead to higher reporting.[35] The state-wise literacy rate in 2023, based on the National Statistical Office Survey, varied from 66.4 percent (Andhra Pradesh) to 96.2 percent (Kerala).[36] This is not captured in India's crime statistics, leading to distortions and erroneous inter-state comparisons.

Thirdly, in some instances, police officers are known to practice what is called the 'burking of crime,'[37] a term indicating the practice of not registering an FIR on a crime, which allows the local police to present a better picture of crime rates (essentially, lower rates) in their jurisdiction. Fourthly, the NCRB follows the 'principal offence rule'.[38] This means that if there is a combination of offences in a single FIR, such as murder and rape, the offence that is recorded is the more heinous crime (in this case, murder)

These factors reduce the total volume of reported crime, especially since there is no cross-verification mechanism to check field data. These factors need to be examined closely to establish a reworked system that allows for a more comprehensive and accurate reporting of crime.

Notably, the NCRB states that the gravity or nature of the crime does not receive any weightage and that all crimes are treated equally.[39] This may lead to unfair conclusions about the safety of a state or a city where the volume of petty crime is higher than another state or city where the number of total crimes is comparatively low, but the number of grave crimes is high.

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j   This is the propensity of a person to report a crime that has been committed.

The Need for Better Data

Another area for improvement is the unavailability of data on all urban areas in the country. Capturing data on all urban areas will require an enormous effort. A starting point is to collect and compile the data generated by the 71 police commissionerates across the country that have been established over the years in the larger urban areas.[40] Later, data collection could be expanded to cities with populations above one lakh and other smaller cities in stages.

Furthermore, the nature of crime is evolving; newer kinds of crime are emerging, and more laws are being enacted, resulting in more heads of crime under which data is collected. More research must be conducted on the causes of crime in India. As the country urbanises, the nature and complexity of crime will likely evolve while the instances of crime increase. The NCRB, therefore, must continuously examine how it collects and organises crime data.

> " The NCRB does not independently verify any data collected by conducting its own research. Consequently, data reliability is a pressing issue. "

Conclusion

While crime rates in India are rising, it is still a reasonably peaceful country. According to one assessment of crime rates by country (2024), India ranks 79th among 197 countries.[41] According to the Global Organized Crime Index, a tool to measure levels of organised crime in a country, India ranks 61st among 193 countries.[42] Still, India must maintain a constant vigil to achieve and maintain a low level of crime across the country. Given the linkages between crime and poverty, unemployment, and inequality, the country must focus on significantly curbing or eliminating such weaknesses in the domestic socioeconomic profile.

Notably, given the dynamics of urban crime and since India is set to urbanise rapidly in the coming years, greater stress on addressing crime in cities is needed. The NCRB analysis is wanting on this front, and more needs to be done in urban crime analysis beyond mere data collection. For instance, some areas that require further study are the criminal behaviour of different sets of people, and migratory populations and whether they have a propensity towards particular crimes. Additionally, the country must also consider ways to improve the quality of policing and reforming processes in the criminal justice system for the faster closure of cases. Finally, the NCRB must seek to improve data reliability by undertaking a nationwide crime victimisation survey that will lend greater authenticity to crime statistics collected nationwide. ORF

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Endnotes

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