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Sharp drop in reported crime

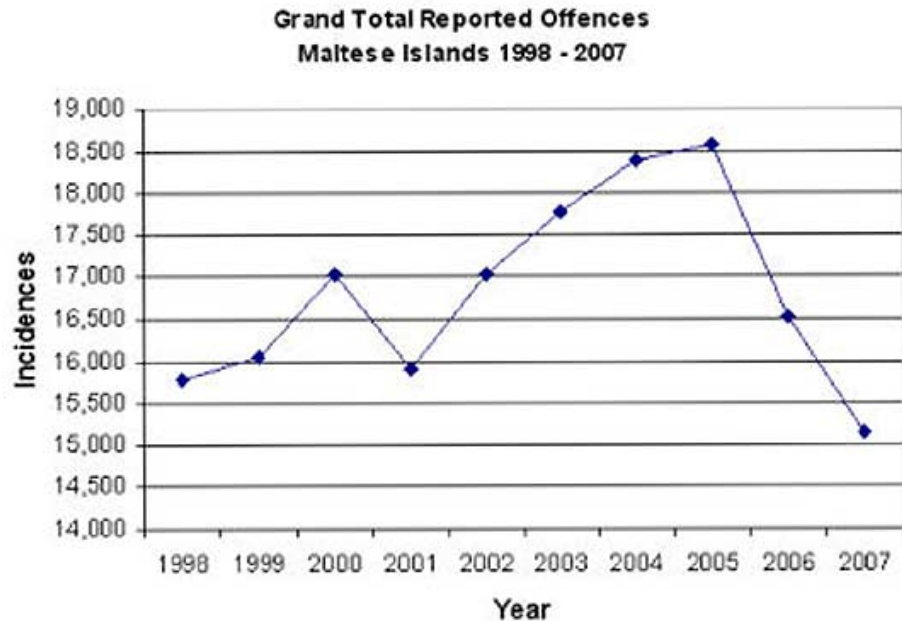
'This is too drastic and ought to be investigated' - Criminologist

Claudia Calleja

Criminologists are investigating a drastic drop in reported crime rates in the past two years, after a consistent increase over the past decade.

Since 2005, there has been a decrease from 18,579 reported crimes in 2005, to 16,538 in 2006 and 15,150 last year. These statistics contrast sharply with the years 1998 to 2005 when there was a consistent increase in reported crime, except for a drop in 2001.

The figures are derived from research criminologist Saviour Formosa's PhD thesis entitled 'Spatial analysis of temporal criminality evolution: an environmental criminology study of crime in the Maltese Islands'.



A graph reproduced from Dr Formosa's thesis shows a consistent rise in reported crime from 1998 to 2005.

"Scientifically-speaking, this drop was too drastic and ought to be investigated. We are left with a question: Why?" Dr Formosa said, adding that a national survey on unreported crime, known as the dark figure of crime, would assist in finding an answer.

Dr Formosa and criminologist Sandra Scicluna agree that the figures need to be probed. Speaking to The Sunday Times, they explained that the drop could have happened for various reasons ranging from effective enforcement on one hand, to a lack of crime reporting on the other.

From the scientific point of view, Dr Formosa said he was more inclined to think that the drop was a result of under-reporting - a phenomenon present throughout western countries where it is estimated that more than 50 per cent of offences went unreported.

The reasons for not reporting a crime could be several - the victim might deem the offence too trivial, it may be due to questionable police response, or the victim may feel that the police could not or would not want to deal with the offence.

"Policy is based on figures and, if we only stick to the official statistics, then the policy cannot be as good as it would be if based on a more complete picture," Dr Scicluna said.

Dr Formosa added that the survey would help gauge how victimology works: "We would be able to understand when people report crime, why they report it, and why they don't."

Dr Scicluna explained that in 1997 the Government and the UN Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute started working on a survey on hidden crime called the Crime Victimization Survey.

One thousand interviewees, selected through random sampling, were given a detailed standard questionnaire that was completed with the help of trained interviewers. The people were asked about whether they had been victims of various types of crime in 1996 and if they reported it.

Although all the data was collected, the final report was never published.

Dr Scicluna recalled one anecdote when one woman called the survey's offices after she had been interviewed to confess she had not been completely honest with her interviewer.

The woman explained that she was a victim of domestic violence but could not tell the interviewer because her husband was present. The Institute of Forensic Studies, within the University of Malta, is now trying to find sponsors and access funds to carry out an updated national survey, which is estimated to cost about €23,293 (Lm10,000).

Meanwhile, an online dark figure survey is being run by Crime Malta and may be accessed on the website www.crimemalta.com. Anyone interested in helping the Institute of Forensic Studies with funding for the national survey may send an e-mail to sandra.scicluna@um.edu.mt.