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THE STATE OF CRIME AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE WORLDWIDE

People living in low-income countries suffer the biggest threats to their security and well-being, according to the Secretary-General's 2015 report on the state of crime and criminal justice worldwide. The report gives an overview of the major global and regional trends for different types of crime and includes an analysis on intentional homicide, gender-based killings of women and girls, bribery, human trafficking and wildlife crime.

The report provides further compelling evidence that crime and criminal justice have a strong link to development. Corruption, in particular, has a negative effect on development through misuse of public funds, unfair competition and additional costs on service users, reduction in public trust and weakening of the rule of law.

International crime trends

There has been a global trend of stability or a slight decrease in some forms of violent crime (homicide, robbery and rape) with differences across regions and levels of economic development.

However, the killing of women by intimate partners is prevalent at similar levels in all regions of the world, irrespective of levels of other types of lethal violence.

Globally, property crimes have decreased, with motor vehicle theft almost halved and burglary reduced by more than a quarter. Criminal offences related to drug trafficking remained relatively stable while drug possession offences have increased markedly since 2003.

Low-income countries are disproportionately affected by corruption while illicit trafficking of people or endangered species typically originates in developing countries and is destined for richer countries.

Regional trends are mostly consistent with the global picture. In Europe over the decade 2003-2013, the decline of various forms of crime has been more pronounced, with the exception of the increase of offences

related to drug possession and rape. In Asia and Oceania, drug trafficking offences have increased in recent years.

Intentional homicide

Global rates of intentional homicide have decreased, but they still fluctuate regionally. The highest rates were consistently found in the Americas and the lowest in Europe, Asia and Oceania. Based on data for 219 countries and territories, The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates that in 2012 around 437,000 people across the world were victims of intentional homicide, corresponding to a global homicide rate of 6.2 per 100,000 people, significantly less than in 2004, when the rate was estimated to be 7.6 per 100,000 people.

The relationship between homicidal violence and levels of social and economic development has long been emphasized by criminological research, which shows that inequality, poverty and weak rule of law, among other things, are linked to conflict and non-conflict violence. Recent trends show homicide in high-income countries low and decreasing while it has steadily increased in low and lower-middle income countries.

Gender-related killings

Most homicide victims are male but female victims make up almost a third of all homicide victims in Asia, Europe and Oceania, regions with mostly low homicide rates. Gender-related killing of women and girls such as so-called "honour killings" or dowry-related murders, are all poorly documented. UNODC estimates that 43,600 women were killed by their intimate partner or a family member in 2012, which is 47 per cent of all women killed that year.

Lack of data

It is extremely difficult to measure the extent of some crimes, notably human trafficking and wildlife crime, because of the lack of data. The same problem makes it difficult to assess the performance of criminal justice systems, such as the ability of the criminal justice system to detect crime, and fairly investigate, prosecute and rehabilitate convicted offenders.

Prison populations

Globally, prison population rates have been stable over the last decade, with 148 prisoners per 100,000 people, which is 10.2 million people in the period 2011-2013. Trends diverge regionally. While prison population rates are declining in all African subregions, North America, Western and Eastern Europe, they are increasing in Central and South America and the Caribbean, in South Eastern and Western Asia and in Northern and Southern Europe.

Thirty-four per cent of the prisoners were serving sentences for violent offences (including intentional homicides), less than 30 per cent for property crimes, 20 per cent for drug law offences, 3 per cent for financial crimes or corruption and 14 per cent for other types of crime.

In the Americas, Europe and Oceania, most prisoners were incarcerated for violent crime, while in Asia the majority were serving a sentence for property or drug-related offences.

The number of children in detention is one measure of fairness in a criminal justice system. In line with international standards children should only be arrested and imprisoned as a last resort and for the shortest period of time. Globally between 2004-2006 and 2011-2013 the rate of children in prison fell from 12 to 10 per 100,000 children.

Pre-trial detention and prison overcrowding

According to the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for Non-Custodial Measures, all efforts should be made to reduce to the minimum the length of stay of people awaiting trial, while alternatives to pre-trial detention should be found as early as possible. Globally, more than a quarter of people in prison have not received a sentence or are awaiting trial. From 2011 to 2013, the highest rates were observed in Asia (approximately 40 per cent) and in Africa (35 per cent), but both have decreasing trends.

Pre-trial detention contributes to prison overcrowding, which is challenging in most regions of the world. Overcrowding seriously affects prison conditions, limiting the possibility for prisoners to have access to basic services including health care and for rehabilitation.

Conclusion

Several challenges remain in ensuring that all citizens in the world can live safely and in societies where the rule of law is respected and promoted. It is important to note the global progress in reducing certain types of crime (such as property crime), while homicidal violence remains higher and is increasing in certain regions and in countries with lower levels of income.

Gaps still remain in data quality and availability, and further work is needed to analyse the links between crime, criminal justice and development. Regular monitoring and analysis of crime trends and the operations of criminal justice systems is important for measuring progress in strengthening the rule of law and advancing towards sustainable development. ■