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► **To cite this version:**

Elisa Garcia-España, Jose Luis Diez-Ripolles, Fatima Perez, Maria Jose Benitez, Anabel Cerezo. Crime trends through two decades of social changes in Spain. *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 2010, 54 (5), pp.359-380. 10.1007/s10611-010-9262-5 . hal-00642406

**HAL Id: hal-00642406**

**<https://hal.science/hal-00642406>**

Submitted on 18 Nov 2011

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# CRIME TRENDS THROUGH TWO DECADES OF SOCIAL CHANGES IN SPAIN<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Over the last two decades, the Spanish social fabric has undergone a variety of profound changes, which in turn may explain the rise in police-recorded crime and prison population figures. Although the rise in crime reported to the police has been higher for common offences – misdemeanors -, the mainstream media concentrates overwhelmingly in serious violent crimes – felonies -.

Spain does not have an official agency responsible for conducting victimization surveys to measure crime trends as directly experienced by the citizens. Based on this methodology, our study shows that contrary to information gathered from police data, and despite social fabric changes, crime in Spain is decreasing. The present study also reveals the distorted public perception of this trend, which seems to respond to a repetitive coverage of serious crime by the mainstream media.

**Key words:** Crime trends, social changes, mainstream media, social perception of crime

## 1. SOCIAL CHANGES AND THE TREND IN POLICE RECORDED CRIME IN SPAIN

### 1.1 Social changes

Spain has undergone considerable social change in the last decades. In this study we emphasize changes in the family structure, the role of women in the society, economic improvement, population growth and immigration, and drug use.

According to criminological knowledge, of all the social changes mentioned above two of them have particular correlations with crime: Family structure [29, 25, 31] and population growth [26].

#### (a) Economic improvement

Undoubtedly, the Spanish economy has undergone a positive evolution over the last two decades giving rise to a dynamic modernization process. This, in turn, has enabled average income levels in Spain to approach those of the richest EU countries.

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<sup>1</sup> This study has been conducted within the framework of the Project PUBLIC SECURITY AS AN INSPIRATIONAL CRITERIA FOR CRIMINAL INTERVENTION [*LA SEGURIDAD CIUDADANA COMO CRITERIO INSPIRADOR DE LA INTERVENCIÓN PENAL*] (SEJ2006-07242/JURI), financed by the National Program for Scientific Research, Development and Technological Innovation at the State Secretariat of Universities and Research from the Ministry of Education and Science.

However, in contrast with what took place in the first stages of economic expansion in Spain, income inequality has experienced an increase in recent years. In the early 1990s Spain was in a situation similar to that of Ireland, Italy and the United Kingdom with regard to both income growth and reduction in income inequality; as of 1998 the trend shifted, “with behavior that is less favorable towards equality” [17].

#### (b) Women and the labor market

One of the greatest changes carrying important economic and social implications for the Spanish society in the past two decades has been the widespread incorporation of women into the labor market. In fact, there has been a steady increase in female employment rates: Seventeen points in the last twenty-five years, although unemployment has also affected this sector.

The nature of economic growth in Spain in the years prior to the crisis favored the enlargement of female employment: The services sector experienced the highest increase and produced the highest employment sector for women [27].

The factors that gave rise to this very important change were women’s access to education and job continuity after childbirth. Nowadays young women stay in the education system longer than men; in fact, 60% of students who complete their university studies are women. Furthermore, in the last thirty years the employment rate for Spanish women between the ages of 25 and 54 years has risen thirty-six percentage points, which confirms that motherhood no longer implies leaving paid employment [18].

#### (c) Family structure

At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s the vast majority of Spaniards lived in the family home, which could not be said for a good part of the population in the rest of Western Europe. The proportion of family households in Spain was 86.5%, notably higher than the European average. The reason was that at that time divorces, unmarried couples and people living alone remained at relatively low levels [28].

Many changes have taken place in the Spanish family in the last few decades: There has been a rise in single-parent households (especially those headed by women), and an increase in the number of people living alone, of families with only one child, of separations and divorces, of delayed childbearing, of non-formalized unions along with a decline in religious behaviour [6].

These conclusions are corroborated by data facilitated by the National Statistics Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística or INE*). Information related to the main indicators of the Spanish family and households and of the types of households in Spain in 2001 and 2007 is given in the following tables [3,4].

Table 1 shows that the average household size decreased during the period studied and the age at marriage was delayed, for both men and women. With respect to marriage dissolutions, there were 137,510 in 2007, considerably more than in 2001, although 5.8% lower than in 2006, breaking the upward trend of prior years: The

economic crisis likely explains this change in trend, since with fewer economic resources available it is more difficult to cope with divorce. With respect to the average number of children per each reproductive-age woman, it should be noted that this figure reached 1.4 in 2007, that is, the highest rate since 1990.

Table 1: Family and households. Main indicators

Average household size (number of members)	3.3	2.74
Average age of men at first marriage	30.4	34.1
Average age of women at first marriage	28.4	31.1
Divorces, separations, annulments	105,534	137,510
Average number of children per woman	1.24	1.40

Source: National Statistics Institute. INE Bulletin 3/2009.

Table 2 shows that in 2007 the predominant family model in households is couples without children (21.5%), followed closely by couples with one child (21%). In 2001 couples with two children were the most representative (22.2%), but this model drops to third position (17.4%) in 2007. In 2007 there was also an increase in single-parent households and of individuals living alone, independently of whether or not they were over 65 years-old.

Table 2: Types of households

Couple without children	19.3	21.5
Couple with one child	18.5	21.0
Couple with two children	22.2	17.4
Couple with three or more children	3.7	8.05
One adult with children	7.0	7.9
Individual living alone, under 65 years of age	4.9	8.8
Individual living alone, 65 years of age or older	7.9	8.7

Source: Encuesta continua de presupuestos familiares (ECPF) [Continuous Household Budget Survey and Encuesta de presupuestos familiares (EPF) [Household Budget Survey]: National Statistics Institute

BERICAT explains the changes in family structure over the last few decades based on three factors: delayed childbearing, increase in marriage breakups and increase in life expectancy. A general view of all the above-mentioned factors enables the configuration of three main life stages of the Spanish population today, each lasting thirty years: During the first 30 years an individual lives with his or her parents (in fact, 80.4% of young people between the ages of 20 and 24 live in the family home); ranging from ages 30 to 60, Spaniards tend to live with spouse and children (although couples without children have increased considerably); and the typical Spanish family of Spaniards aged 60+ is either that of “empty nests” or that of single person households resulting from the death of a spouse. Taking this new Spanish household structure in account, it can be concluded that the extended family, that so characterised the Spanish social structure, has become extinct and has made way for a post-nuclear phase [2].

Furthermore, it is worth pointing out that, in 2007, the number of births to unmarried mothers was 30.2% of the total, a figure that has continued to increase in

recent years. Additionally, there were 204,772 marriages registered out of which 16.7% corresponded to couples in which at least one spouse was a foreigner. Marriage between individuals of the same sex, which was legalised in Spain in 2005, rose to 3,193, or 1.6% of the total [4].

#### (d) Population growth

In the early 1990s the Spanish population was just under 40 million inhabitants and the growth rate was approaching zero. At that time there was a prediction of a population decrease for the medium term. This prediction, however, did not occur and the population continued to increase resiliently until reaching 46,745,807 according to the National Statistics Institute (2010).

The cause of this sudden increase was the arrival of foreign immigrant population. The population pyramid indicates that the immigration phenomenon has been concentrated especially in the younger population, which has produced a deceleration in the process of population ageing. Furthermore, the natural increase has been driven by the increase in births to foreign mothers.

The population living in Spain is not distributed evenly across the territory. The highest population density is in the Community of Madrid, with 724 inhabitants per square kilometer. The average age of the population living in Spain is 40.42 years: 40.99 for Spanish nationals and 32.82 for foreign immigrants. According to the 2009 census the number of foreign immigrants living in Spain reached 5,648,671, that is, 12.5% of the population (INE, 2009). This means that foreign immigrants have increased five-fold in just under a decade given that in 2000 the town hall censuses reported only 923,000 foreigners. Owing to this figure, the number of foreign nationals holding a legal residency permit raised to 4,715,757, as of 30 September 2009, that is, the most updated figure from the Ministry of Labor and Immigration. For immigrants, registration in the municipal register of inhabitants, an administrative registry listing the residents of a municipality, is the key to accessing rights such as health care and education; they may register regardless of whether or not they are legal residents in the country. According to official figures, among those registered (5,648,671) 83.5% are legal residents and the rest remain illegally in the country. More than half of all foreign immigrants come from either Central and South America (35%) or the UE-25 (21%). The foreign nationals with the greatest presence are Moroccan followed by Romanian and Ecuadorian. Among foreign immigrants there are more men (52.9%) than women, although there are significant differences depending upon country of origin. In general terms, the provinces of the Mediterranean coast, the islands and the central region of the peninsula are the areas with the highest concentrations of foreign nationals. All autonomous Communities have experienced a rise in foreign immigrant population, but the highest has concentrated in Andalusia, Madrid and the autonomous Community of Valencia.

#### (e) Drug use

Of all decisions adopted by Spanish courts in 1999, more than one third were drug-related, predominantly those related to trafficking (62% of all drug-related sentences). Approximately 15% of all judgments passed are related to drug trafficking

and 20% to property crimes committed by drug addicts [33]. Data from this study points to drug use as a relevant factor in criminality.

After a decade of stability during the 1980's, characterised by the omnipresence of heroin consumption, the 1990s brought about diversification, not only in consumption, but also in habits and, more importantly, in the underlying cultural references [8]. The phenomenon of drug use transformed significantly as of 1992. Thereby, the decade of the 1990s gave rise to a different consumer profile from the one we were used to observe in the 1980s.

According to the results of an epidemiological study carried out in Galicia [15], three models of multiple drug use predominated in the decade of the 1990s: the most widespread model combined hallucinogens, amphetamines and synthetic drugs, and *cannabis*. The second model grouped heroin and other opiate-derivatives, cocaine and inhalants. The third group involved tobacco, alcohol and *cannabis* derivatives. By the end of the 1980s the second model was the most prominent, but in the 1990s it fell into the second position [34].

According to the latest report published in 2007 by the Spanish Drug Observatory (*Observatorio Español sobre Drogas or OED*), which includes data on the trends of various indicators, as well as the results of two population surveys<sup>2</sup>, the following was concluded regarding drug consumption in Spain at the beginning of the twenty-first century:

- 1) Tobacco consumption has declined, although the number of smokers continues to be high.
- 2) The proportion of alcohol users has decreased, although the frequency of episodes of alcohol intoxication (drunkenness) has increased.
- 3) The number of injection-drug users continues to decrease progressively.
- 4) Mortality directly related to illegal drugs has slowly declined, although an elevated number of deaths persist (almost 800 in 2004).
- 5) Injection-drug users continue to show high levels of HIV and hepatitis virus infection and high risk sexual behaviour, although the number of new diagnoses of HIV in this population has fallen progressively.
- 6) After many years of decline, heroin use appears to have stabilised, but may be on the rise.
- 7) Consumption of cocaine and cannabis is stabilising, or may have begun to decline, after many years of increase.

## 1.2 Official recorded crime in Spain

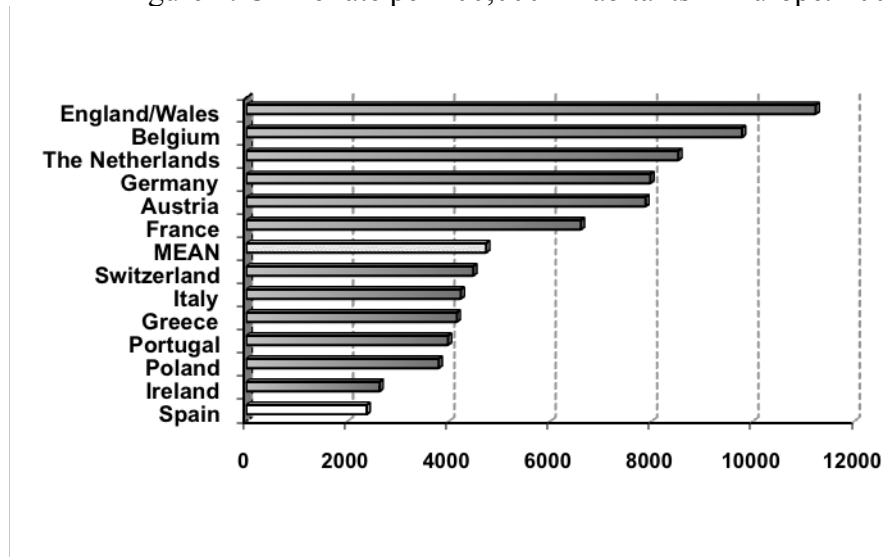
- a) Crimes known to the police

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<sup>2</sup> The Household Survey on Alcohol and Drug Use (*Encuesta domiciliaria sobre alcohol y drogas en España or EDADES*), conducted in 2005. And the State Survey on Drug Use in Secondary Schools (*Encuesta estatal sobre uso de drogas en enseñanzas secundarias or ESTUDES*), conducted in 2006.

If we look at the figures from the most recently published *European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics* (2006), which contains data from the year 2003 (Figure 1), it can be seen that the levels of officially known crime in Spain are situated among the lowest in Europe, clearly below the average.

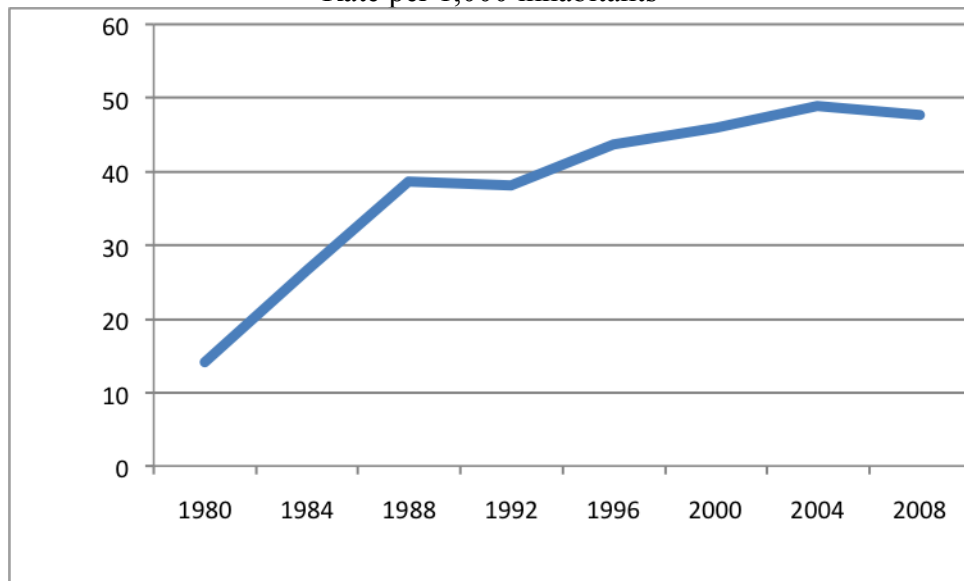
Figure 1: Crime rate per 100,000 inhabitants in Europe. 2003



Source: *European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics.2006*

Nevertheless, according to official data from the Ministry of the Interior (MIR), recorded crime in Spain has increased over the last two decades. Between 1989 and 2008 the total number of crimes recorded by the different police forces went from 1,030,996 (MIR Annual Report, 2004) to 1,858,196 (MIR Annual Report Preview, 2009). Figure 2 depicts the trend in crime density in Spain since the 1980s, according to recorded crime figures provided by the MIR. Crime density between these years, to which we will temporarily limit our work – 1989 to 2008-, rose from 26.07/1,000 inhabitants to 47.6/1,000 inhabitants (MIR Annual Report Preview, 2009). Therefore, both the absolute and the relative figures indicate that the trend for criminal offences recorded in Spain is steadily rising, although it has experienced a marked slowdown in the past decade.

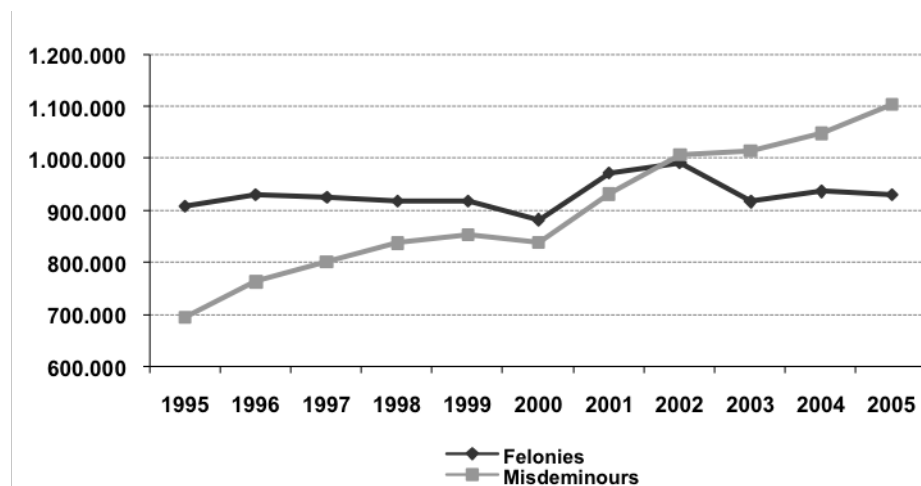
Figure 2: Trend in crime density in Spain.  
Rate per 1,000 inhabitants



Sources: Created by the authors based on data from MIR and INE

Further analysis of this data reveals the changes produced in the structure of crime in Spain over the last several decades: According to data from the MIR shown in Figure 3, minor offences (misdemeanours) have maintained constant growth since the 1980s. In contrast, levels of serious offences (felonies) have remained nearly the same in the last 15 years. In fact, for the first time in Spanish recent history, at the beginning of the 21st century the number of minor offences is higher than the number of serious offences, both in absolute and relative terms [20], as seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Trend in felonies and misdemeanours in Spain



Source: Created by the authors based on MIR data

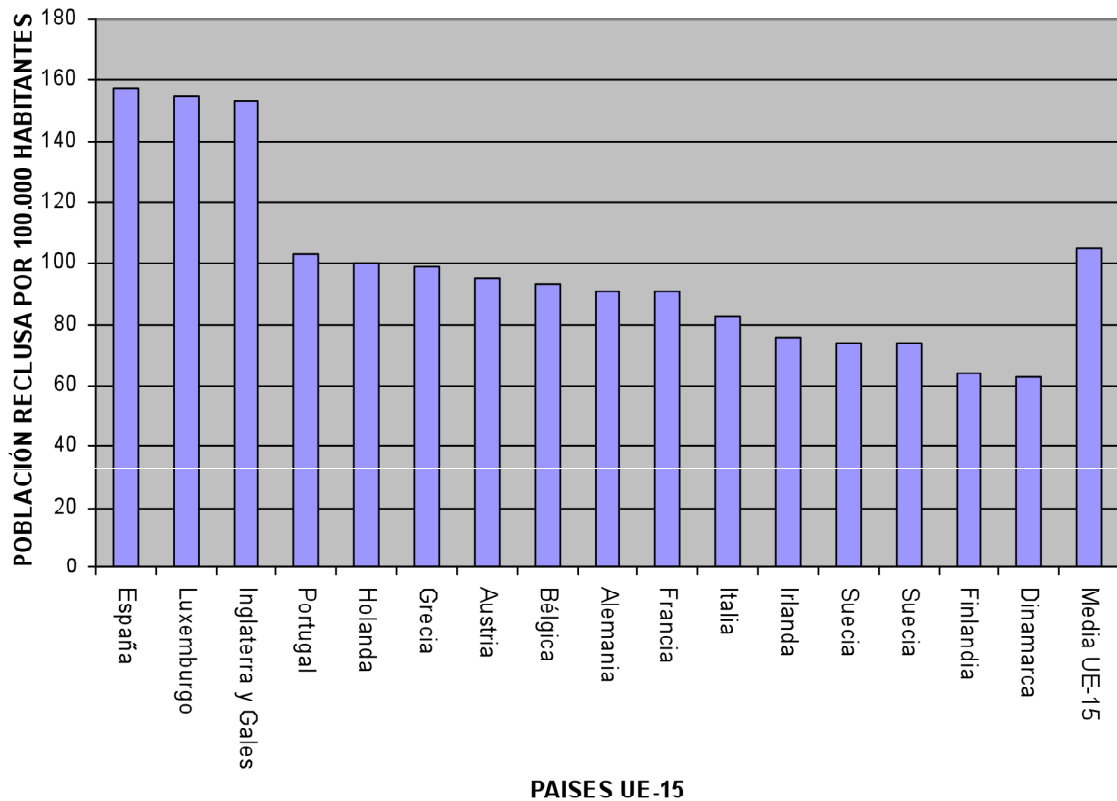
b) Prison population growth

Also, the last decades point to an important increase in the number of prisoners



incarcerated in Spain. In 1996 the prison population consisted of 44,312 inmates corresponding to a rate of 112 prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants. A decade later, the number of inmates in Spanish prisons reached 63,248, with a rate of 141 prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants. As shown in Figure 4, in 2008 Spain had the highest rate of prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants among the 15 countries of the European Union before its enlargement to the East.

Figure 4: Prison population per 100,000 inhabitants  
UE-15 (2008)



Source: Oxford Centre for Prison Studies

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The rise in crime in Spain reflected by official statistics – police and prison figures detailed above -, have justified severe criminal and prison reforms.

The changes that took place, particularly in the family, and the rapid increase of population provided an explanation for this raise, although it was never scientifically confirmed. Several Spanish authors have tried to show that the increase in official crime known to the police and published in official statistics may not be representative of the reality although this observation cannot be corroborated by adequate empirical studies. The objective of those contributions was to provide complementary information

to enable improved rationality in the legislative reform in process [12]. However, they were based on more in-depth analyses of police and prison statistics, and did not include complementary empirical data [among others, 19,11,7,24].

The importance of the present study stems from the fact that it is the first study that attempts to explain the crime trend in Spain, considering the social changes that have taken place and based on empirical data drawn from consecutive victimization surveys conducted in Spain by UNICRI in 1989 and 2005, and by the Spanish Crime Observatory (*Observatorio de la delincuencia or ODA*) in 2008.

It is well known that official crime data only gives us a partial understanding of a country's crime situation. Victimization surveys, on the other hand, are one of the best tools to obtain a more complete picture of the situation. In Spain, the availability of nationwide victimization surveys has always been very limited [1] given that no official entity has undertaken the task of performing them in a systematic manner. The Centre for Sociological Research (*Centro de investigaciones sociológicas or CIS*) is the institution that has given the most attention to this subject; nonetheless, from 1978 to date only five nationwide surveys have been carried out. These lack periodicity and use different methodology (sample selection, questionnaire, etc.) which in turn make international comparisons impossible.

In order to understand the volume and trend of crime in Spain, one had to rely upon police and judicial statistics despite well-known shortages in terms of data accessibility and the crimes which are never known or reported to these institutions [14].

Consequently, it was necessary to conduct an empirical study that could show the trend and volume of crime experienced and perceived from information other than the official statistics provided. The study carried out by the ODA pursued to achieve two objectives: First, to draw the crime trend in Spain over the past few decades following the social changes experienced; and second, to understand the social perception of crime in that same period.

The research team of the Andalusian Interuniversity Criminology Institute (*Instituto andaluz interuniversitario de Criminología or IAIC*) office of Malaga, conducted a survey in the city of Malaga in 1994 using the ICVS methodology [10]. The results of that survey were subsequently compared with results from a new survey carried out in Malaga in 2005 [21]. Additionally, under the auspices of the ODA, this same team has recently conducted victimization surveys in all the provincial capitals of Andalusia [22, 23], and thus providing a comprehensive view of urban crime in a highly populated region such as Andalusia, with a population exceeding 8 million inhabitants.

To date Spain has participated in two sweeps of the International Crime Victims Survey (ICVS), those conducted in 1989 and in 2005 (EU ICS). In order to improve the elements of comparison, and taking advantage of the experience gained in previous victimisation surveys, the ODA proposed conducting a nationwide survey in 2008 based on the internationally validated ICVS questionnaire.

Indeed, the ODA used the ICVS methodology to set up the victimisation survey on a national level. Not only did we implement the same survey model adapted to the

Spanish case, we also used Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) technology in fieldwork and data gathering. With regard to the size and selection criteria of the sample, there was a slight difference: In the 2008 sweep the ODA only conducted the survey in towns with populations greater than 50,000, whilst in the previous European sweeps in which Spain participated – 1989 and 2005 – the sample was selected taking into account the entire population. Another difference is that in the 1989 and 2005 sweeps the question “car vandalism” was not included in the questionnaire for Spain, a question that we did include in our 2008 survey. For this reason, in our data analysis we use the victimisation rates for 10 of the 11 crimes included on our survey, excluding data on car vandalism. Additionally, to perform a longitudinal comparison of crime reporting rates we had to disregard data pertaining to the offences “car vandalism” and “sexual assault” in order to make them comparable with previous international sweeps. Hence in the analysis of these rates the number of offences is reduced to 9.

Summarized below are the most significant features of our field work methodology:

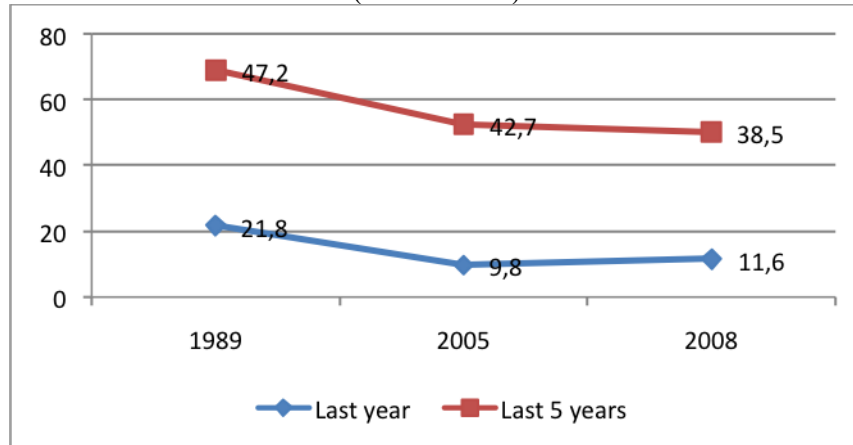
<b>Population and scope of study:</b>	Population aged 16 and over in provincial capitals and municipalities with more than 50,000 inhabitants. As a whole, a total of 23,494,676 persons as of 1 January 2007.
<b>Sample:</b>	1400 surveys
<b>Margin of error:</b>	The margin of error for the full sample is $\pm 2.62\%$ , with a 95.5% confidence level for $p=q=0.5$ .
<b>Field Work:</b>	Field work was carried out between 17 February and 1 April 2009 by trained interviewers from EDIS, S.A., at the EDIS offices in Madrid.
<b>Data collection method:</b>	Information was collected by telephone interviews using the CATI system.
<b>Type of data and period examined:</b>	Victimisation data relative to the 2004-2008 period and attitudes toward crime and police, courts, juvenile courts and prisons, attitudes towards punishment, opinion on judicial severity, perceived crime and the influence of the news media.

What follows is thereby an analysis of crime trends in Spain along with its social perception based on the national victimization survey and on the two previous European sweeps. Although in this paper we limit our analysis to crime experienced and perceived in Spain, the complete report containing a full analysis of the 2008 survey can be found in the 2009 monograph [13].

### 3. CRIME TRENDS IN SPAIN

Victimisation rates found in the three surveys show a downward trend for crime experiences occurring both in the year preceding the survey and within the five years prior to the survey. See Figure 5.

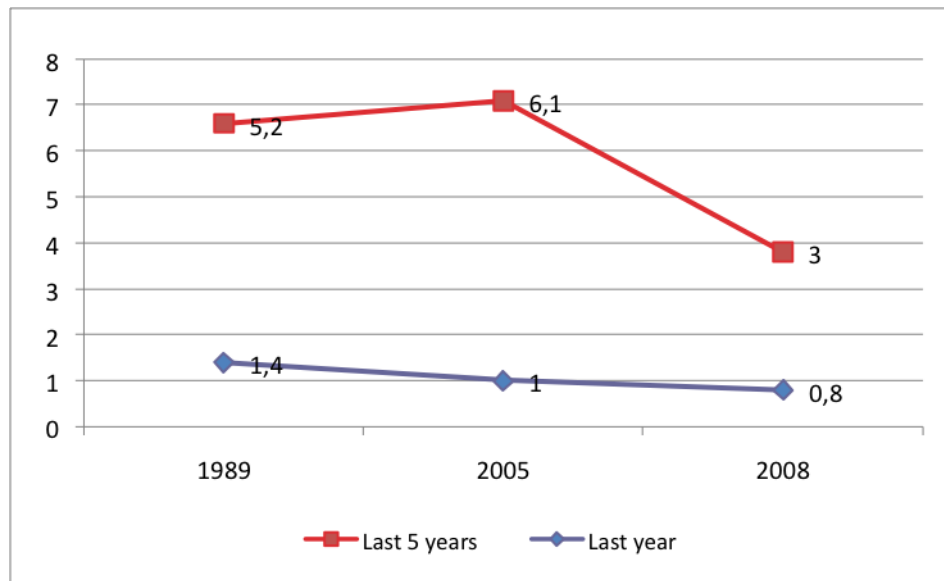
Figure 5: Trend pattern for victimization rates in Spain  
(10 offences)



Common crime in Spain has been decreasing steadily over the past 20 years according to figures resulting from victimization surveys. While these results are in line with those of the 2008 *National Crime Victimization Survey* carried out in the United States, which point to a clear decrease in violent and property crimes in the past decade [35], they contrast with the upward trend of Spanish police statistics (Figure 2), with social perceptions of crime – as will be confirmed below – and, above all, with the political discourse which has been using the alleged rise in crime to implement all kind of draconian populist initiatives.

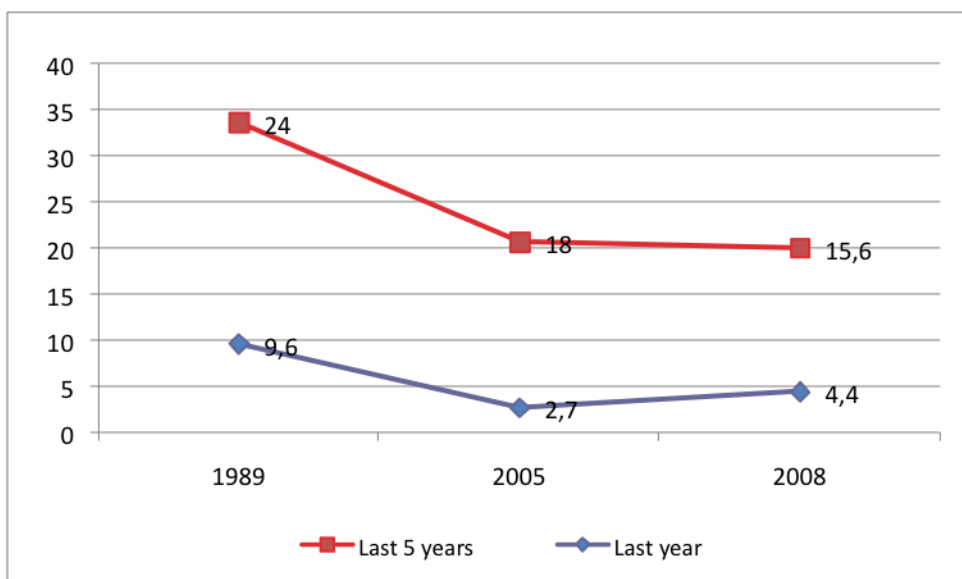
In the last twenty years it is apparent, upon comparing the series of international survey sweeps in 1989, 2005 and 2008, that the victimisation rate for *car theft* in the past five years has declined (Figure 6), but not the reporting rate, which increased more than eight points, becoming the crime most reported to the police [13].

Figure 6: Trend in car theft



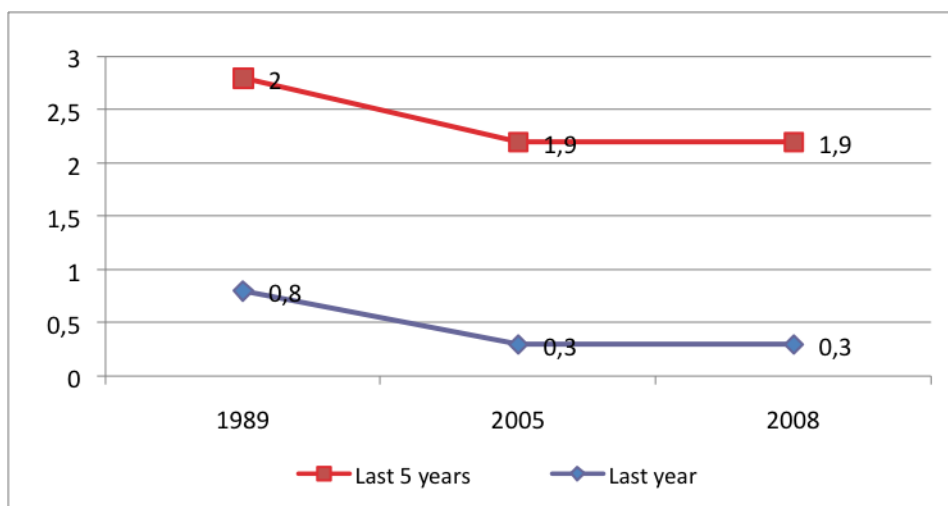
The victimisation rate for *theft from a car* is higher than that observed for car theft, both during the last five years and in 2008 (15.6%; 4.4%). Also, it is more common to be a victim of this crime on more than one occasion than of car theft. The victimization trend observed in the international surveys (Figure 7) for this particular crime within the previous five-year period is falling, whilst the one-year rate for 2008 is lower than in 1989 but not lower than in 2005.

Figure 7: Trend in theft from car



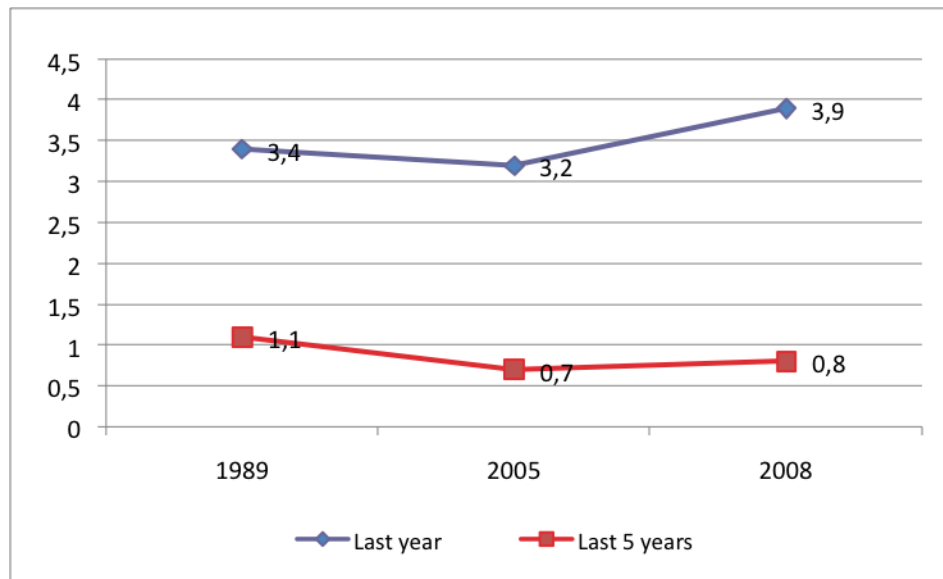
Victimisation rates for *theft of a motorcycle* over the past five years (1.9%) and in the previous year (0.3%) in 2008 match up with those obtained in 2005 (Figure 8). The reporting rate for motorcycle theft is very high over the past five years, reaching 76.9%, whereas in the previous year the rate is much lower, not exceeding 50% [13].

Figure 8: Trend in theft of motorcycles or mopeds/scooters



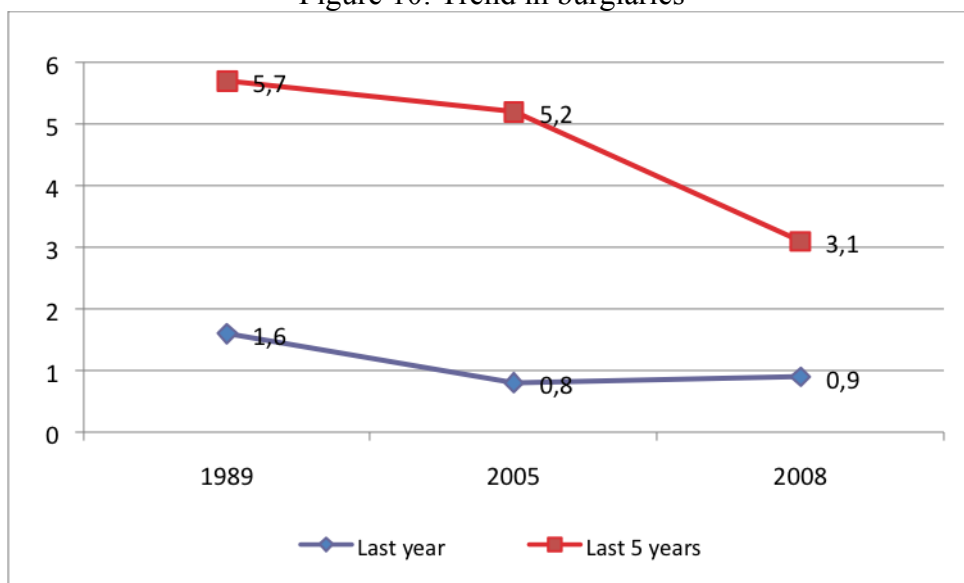
In the 2008 survey, the victimisation rate for *bicycle theft* in Spain was 3.9% over the five-year period, and 0.8% for the previous year. These rates are higher than those obtained by Spain in the international sweep of the victimisation survey in 2005, which were 3.2% and 0.7% respectively. As illustrated in Figure 9, there is a growing trend in this type of behaviour in the one-year time horizon for each round of surveys; but not for the five-year periods. The reporting rate for this crime is lower, in general, relative to theft of other vehicles, although in 2008 it is higher than the reporting rate for motorcycle theft (see section pertaining to *reporting rates*).

Figure 9: Trend in bicycle theft



Results from the 2005 EU International Crime Survey (EU ICS) highlight that, *burglary* has been declining across most EU countries, including Spain, within the past ten years prior to 2005. If we observe data from the five years prior to the 2008 survey sweep, it appears that this downward trend has continued in Spain. Data for the previous year remain stable (Figure 10).

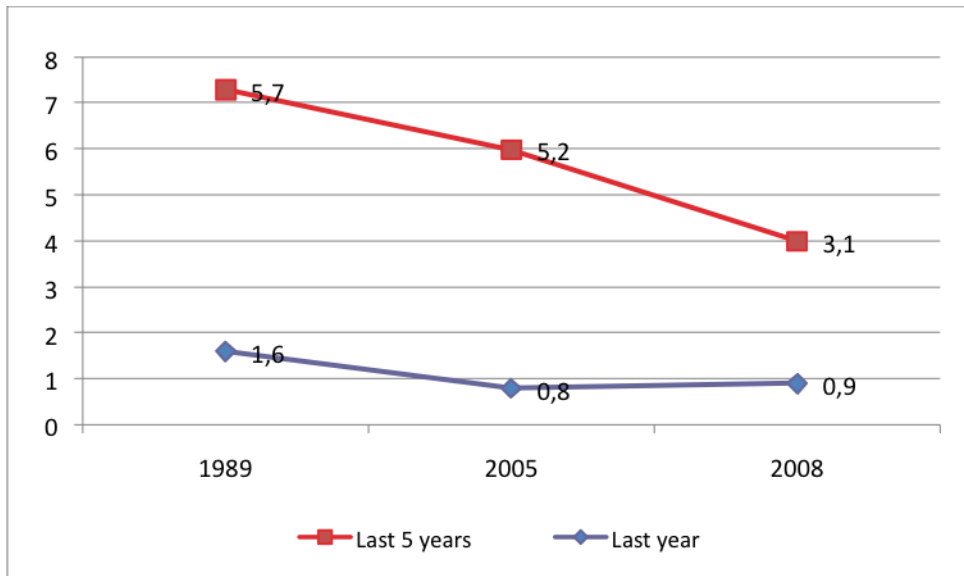
Figure 10: Trend in burglaries



If we look at incidents of *attempted burglary*, the victimization rate in 2008 stood at 0.8% for the previous year and at 3.9% for the past five years (Figure 11). Compared to previous surveys the downward trend seems to consolidate in data from the five years prior to the sweep while victimization during the last year showed a slight

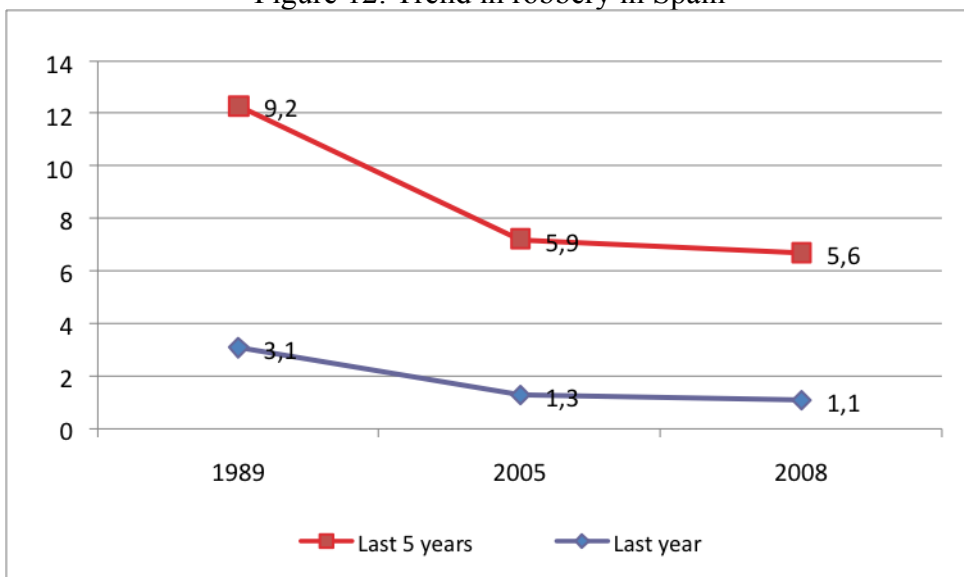
increase compared to 2005, although it was not very significant.

Figure 11: Victimisation rates for attempted burglary in Spain



The 2005 EU ICS report indicates that international levels of *robbery* are not very high and that the general trend is generally falling; Spain's position stands out in this dynamic, as the decline between 1989 and 2005 is striking [36]. If we add in the data resulting from the 2008 survey, it appears that the downward trend has remained stable in Spain both for the five-year period and for the one-year period prior to the sweep (Figure 12).

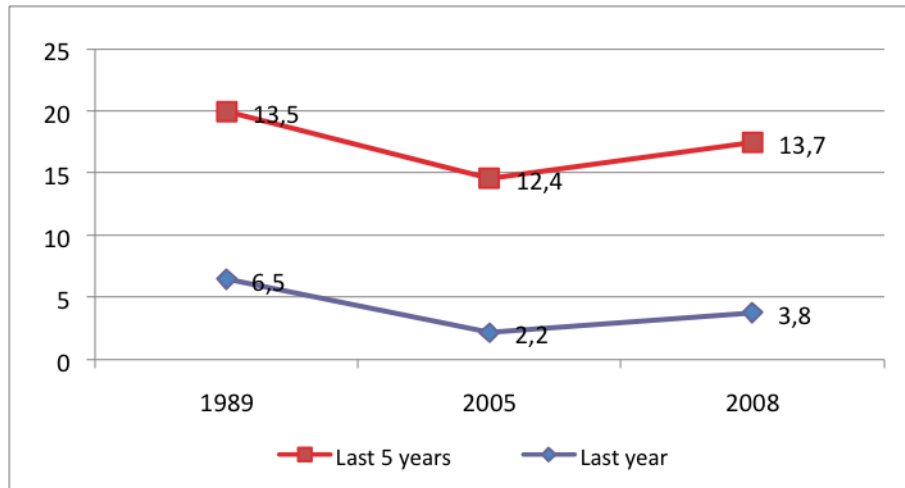
Figure 12: Trend in robbery in Spain





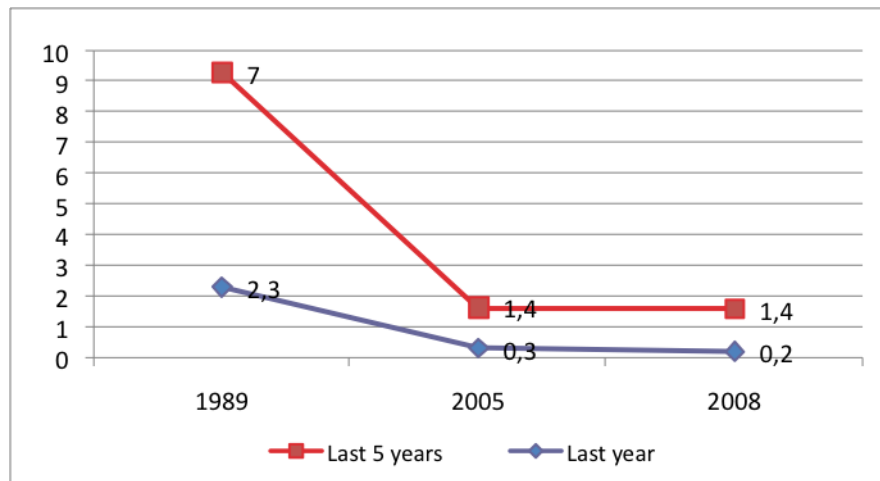
Victimization rates for *larceny* show that after a notorious decline in rates during the year preceding the 2005 sweep, the trend goes up again, although at lower levels than in 1989. The data reflecting the previous five years shows greater stability (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Trend in larcenies.



The series of *sexual offences* enable us to observe that victimisation rates remained stable in 2005 and 2008, with a sharp decrease in 1989 (Figure 14). In spite of this, the reporting rates in Spain for this crime have increased markedly in the last twenty years, leading to the positive result of a lower “dark figure” of crime.

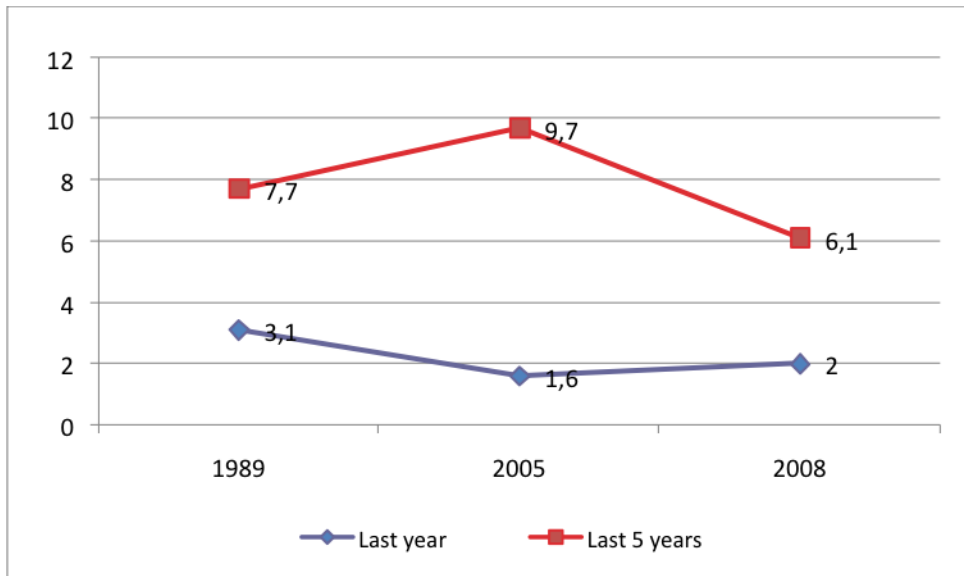
Figure 14: Trend in sexual offences



The comparison over time provides an interesting scenario of assaults and threats. On the one hand, data pertaining to the year preceding each survey shows that the level of assaults and threats is lower than in 1989, although with a slighter decrease when compared to 2005. On the other hand, the experience of victims in terms of crimes experienced over the five years prior to the survey is completely different, given that the current level of victimisation is the lowest of the three years of survey sweeps, after

having experienced a rise in 2005 (Figure 15).

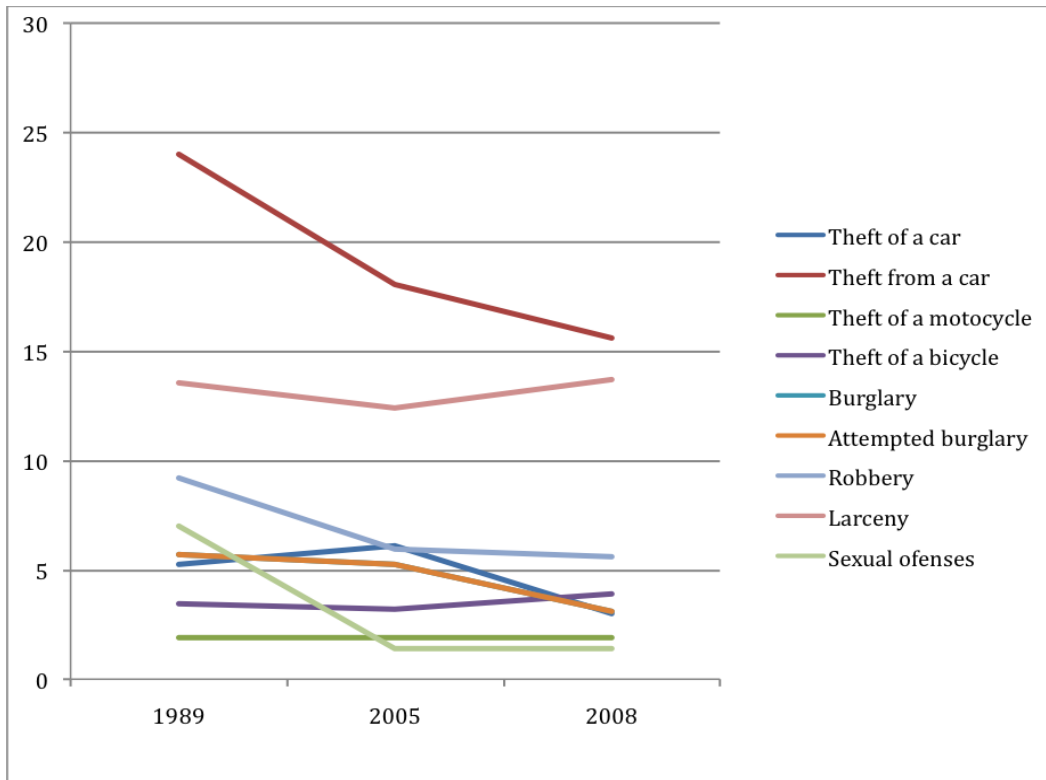
Figure 15: Victimization rates for assaults and threats in Spain



When we combine all crime trends into one figure we get two interesting pieces of information: The first is a comparison of the respective trends; and the second, the order of each crime type according to their frequency of occurrence.

As shown in Figure 16, the most frequent type of crime in Spain, despite an enormous decline over the past several decades, is theft of property from a car. Larceny ranks second and is escalating. Violent crimes, such as robbery with either violence or intimidation and assaults and threats, occur much less frequently, both showing a downward trend, despite the upturn in assaults and threats in 2005. Bicycle theft and sexual offences fall into last place after declining in 2005 and remaining stable in 2008.

Figure 16: Trends in crime rate by type of crime

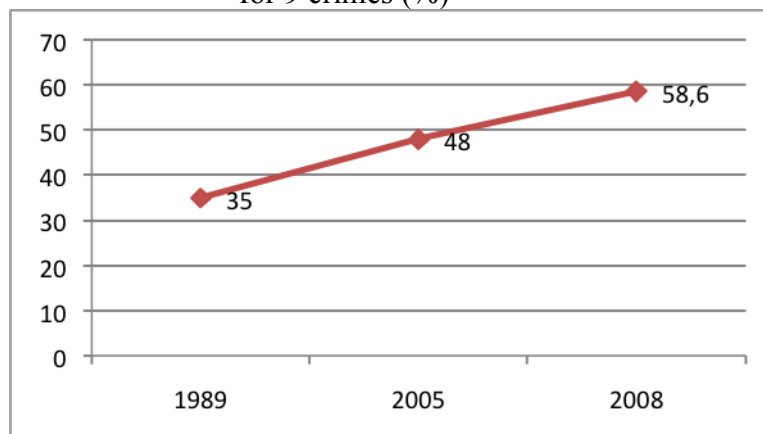


#### 4. INCREASE IN CRIMES REPORTED TO THE POLICE

Of the 682 victims from the 2008 sample, 326 reported the crime to the police in the past five years. This means that the reporting rate for this period is 47.9%.

In the international sweeps of 1989 and 2005 the reporting rate corresponding to the year prior to each survey sweep was used, and included only 9 of the 11 crimes from the ICVS questionnaire. In order to know the pattern of reporting rates in Spain, we estimated the reporting rate in 2008 for those 9 crimes, and we compared it with the rates from the 1989 and 2005 sweeps. The result is shown in Figure 17:

Figure 17: Trend in crime reported to the police in Spain for the past year for 9 crimes (%)



In addition to the rising trend shown above, it is interesting to point out certain findings concerning the relationship between victimisation and reported offences, as well as the reasons for reporting. These findings help us to understand the difference between the trend in crime reflected in official statistics and in victimisation surveys.

Offences most commonly reported to the police by victims over the five years prior to 2008 were car theft (90.5%), motorcycle theft (76.9%) and burglary (63.6%).

Figure 18 illustrates the distribution of victimisation rates for the most common types of crime and the comparison with Figure 19 which represents the most frequently reported crimes. The results of this comparison show that victimisation or crime prevalence does not correspond to reports or crimes made known to the police, since victimisation moves towards the right, covering specially car vandalism and thefts from cars, whilst police reports have a vertical distribution in the spider web structure.

Figure 18: Victimisation rates in the past 5 years in Spain (%)

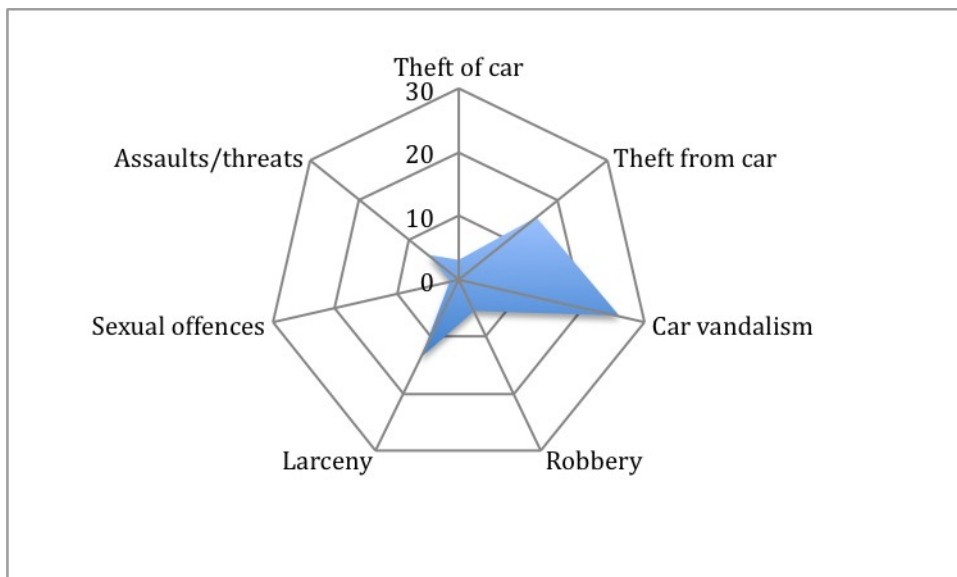
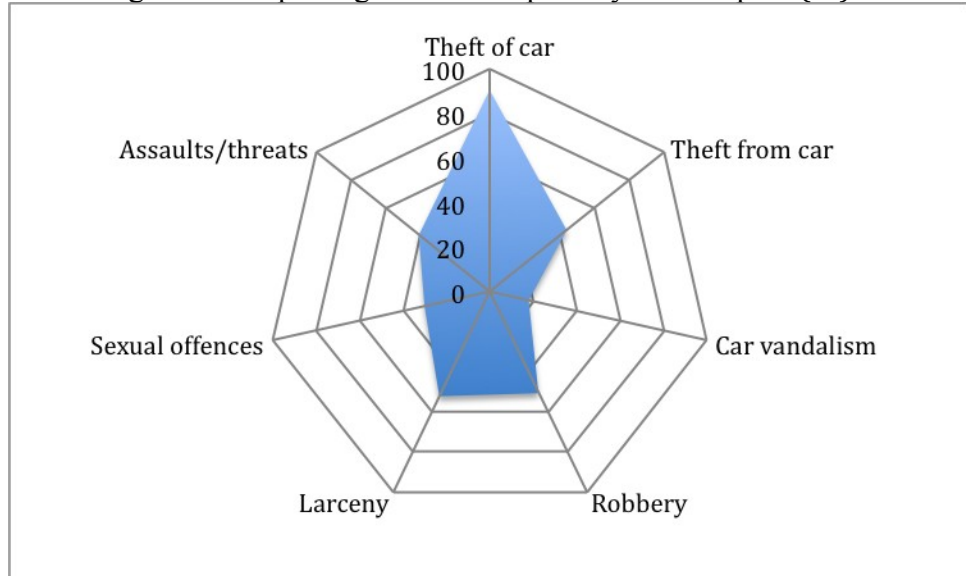


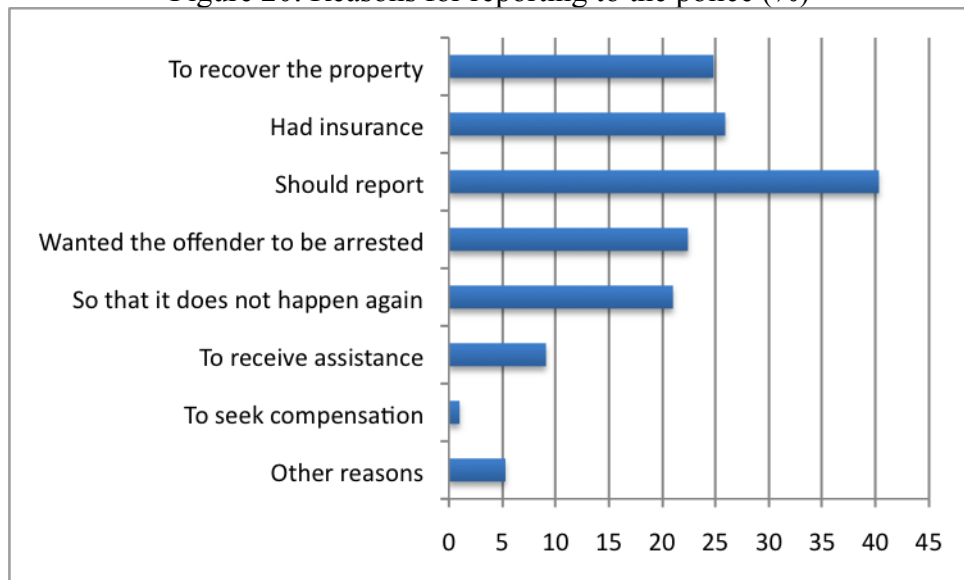
Figure 19: Reporting rates in the past 5 years in Spain (%)



For five of the eleven types of crime respondents were also asked about the reason for reporting the incident. These crimes were robbery, sexual offence, theft from a car, burglary, and assaults and threats.

Of the eight reasons recorded, most of the respondents reported an offence because they believed the police should be notified. This reason surpassed by far all other reasons (see, Figure 20).

Figure 20: Reasons for reporting to the police (%)

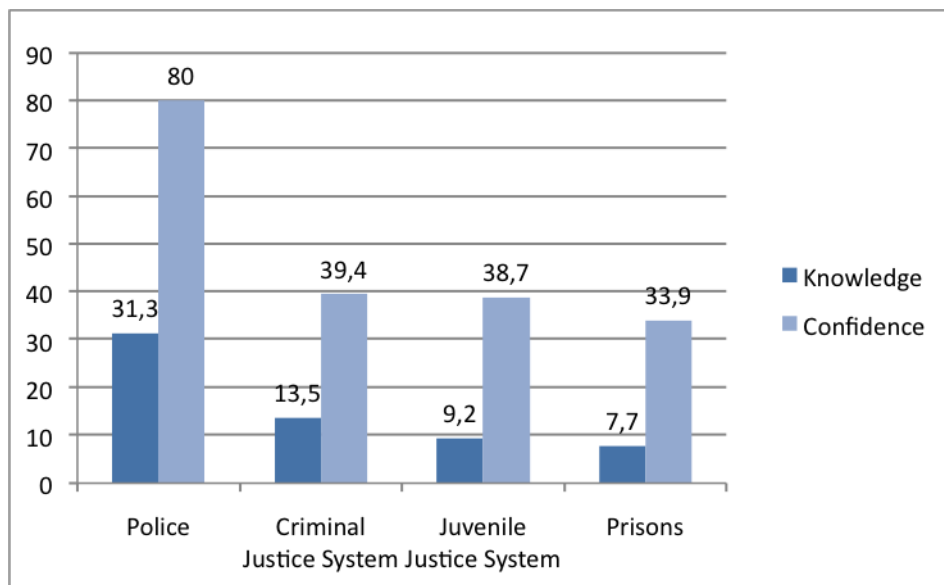


However the result changes slightly if we group the seven main reasons, excluding the category “others,” into three large groups: *Altruists*, encompassing “should report” and “so that it doesn’t happen again”; *economic*, which includes the answers “had insurance”, “to recover the property”, “to receive assistance” and “to seek compensation”; and *retributive*, which included the response “wanted the offender to be

arrested”. With this new grouping, the “economic” motivation, alluding to the victim’s interest in compensation for harm caused by the offence, becomes similar in importance to the “altruistic” motives, both having a much higher frequency than “retributive” motives.

The fact that most Spaniards believe that criminal offences should be made known to the police (altruistic motive) may stem from the fact that Spaniards observe the police force as the most trustworthy institution within the Spanish criminal justice system, according to the findings of this study (see Figure 21).

Figure 21: Degree of knowledge and trust in criminal justice institutions (%)



## 5. THE SOCIAL PERCEPTION OF CRIME TRENDS AND THE MASS MEDIA

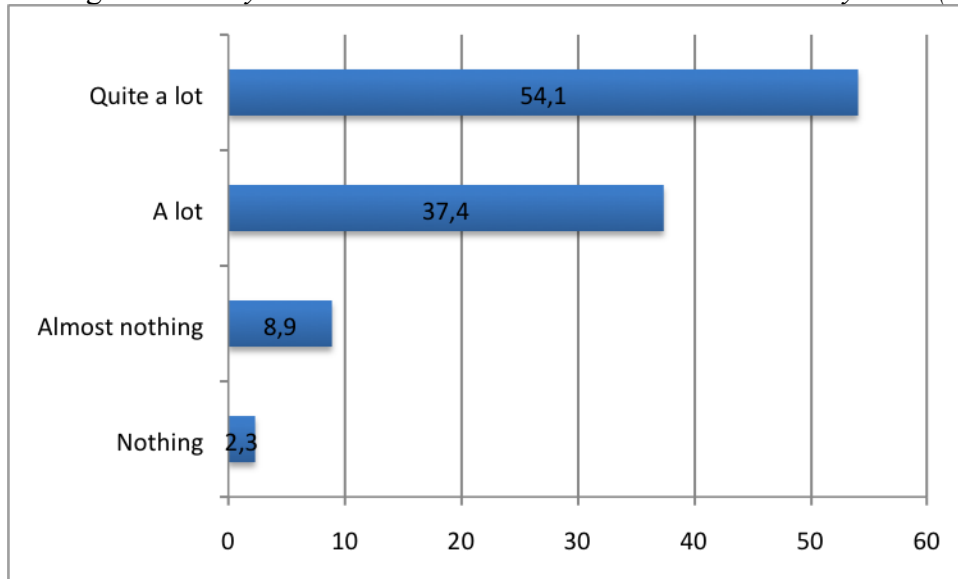
As we have pointed out, the victimisation surveys carried out in Spain demonstrate a significant decrease in crime. Nevertheless, public opinion seems to have a different perception of this trend, as we will show below.

Victimisation surveys are valid measurement tools to gain insight into public perception of crime trends, since among its specific objectives, in addition to providing information about the characteristics of offences, authors and victims, is carrying out research into the opinion of respondents to crime and the criminal justice system.

Hence, we proposed a second and double objective for this study: to determine whether the social perception of crime volume in Spain corresponds with the actual crime situation and whether an alleged erroneous public perception could be due to information received on a daily basis regarding crime in the news media.

According to our study, 88.8% of respondents believe that crime has increased quite a lot or a lot in recent years. See Figure 22.

Figure 22: *Do you believe that crime has increased in recent years? (%)*



This opinion differs considerably from our findings. As we have already seen, the results of our survey show, compared with the 1989 and 2005 surveys, that crime has decreased.

According to the results of our research, it does not appear that a distorted view of actual crime (cognitive level) in Spain is a direct and clear reflection of an extended fear of crime (emotional level). Actually, despite the fact that most of the respondents state living in areas where they have to fend for themselves (Figure 23), since there is little help from neighbours, they feel rather safe walking along in their local area after dark (Figure 24) and very safe at home alone after dark (Figure 25), regardless of the size of the town they live in.

Figure 23: *Do you live in an area where neighbours help each other? (%)*

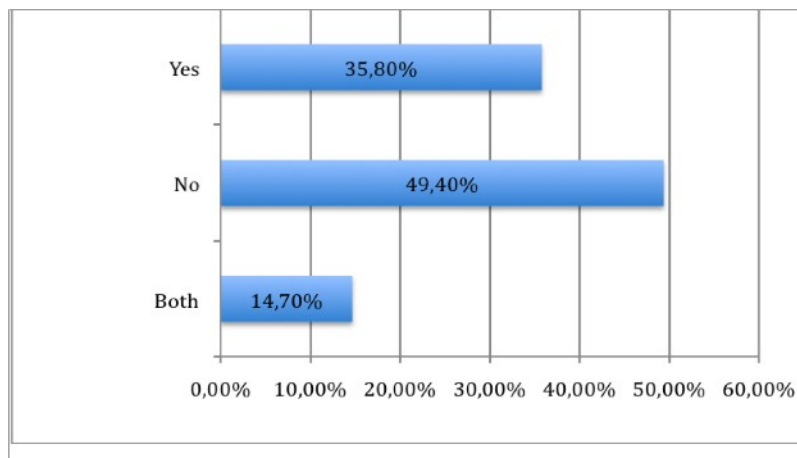


Figure 24: *How safe do you feel walking alone in your local area after dark? (%)*

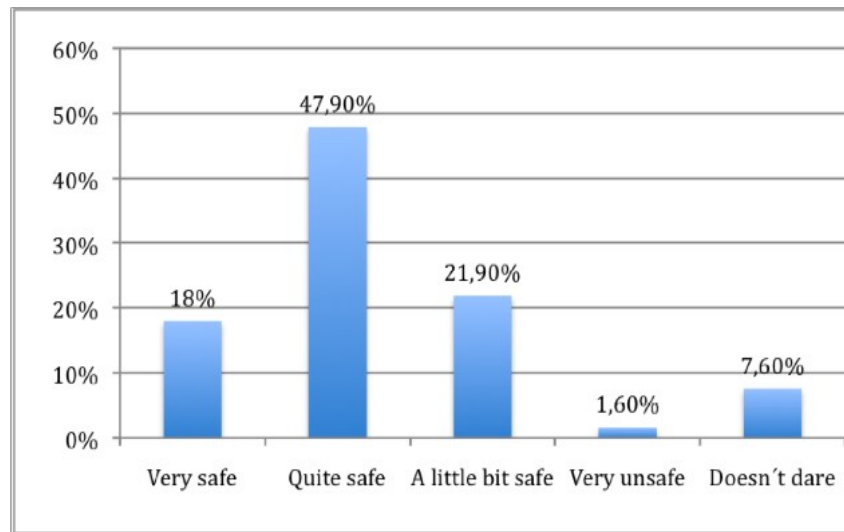
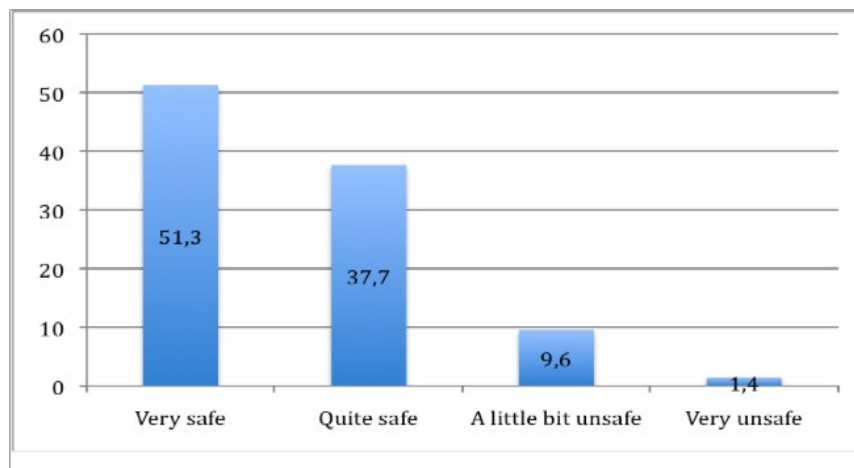


Figure 25: *How safe do you feel when you are alone in your home after dark? (%)*



Therefore, the erroneous perception of an increase in crime in Spain does not appear to have a positive correlation with the fear of crime.

Going thoroughly into the reasons that make citizens erroneously consider that crime has increased over the last decade, we have added new questions to the questionnaire in order to look for the correlation between the frequency of crime-related news covered by the mainstream media and the prevalence of perceived crime.

Thus, we asked *how frequently do you receive news about crime?* The results show that 92.8% of Spaniards receive news about crime almost daily, followed very distantly by those who receive news about crime once per week (5%), once per month (0.5%) or less frequently (0.7%).

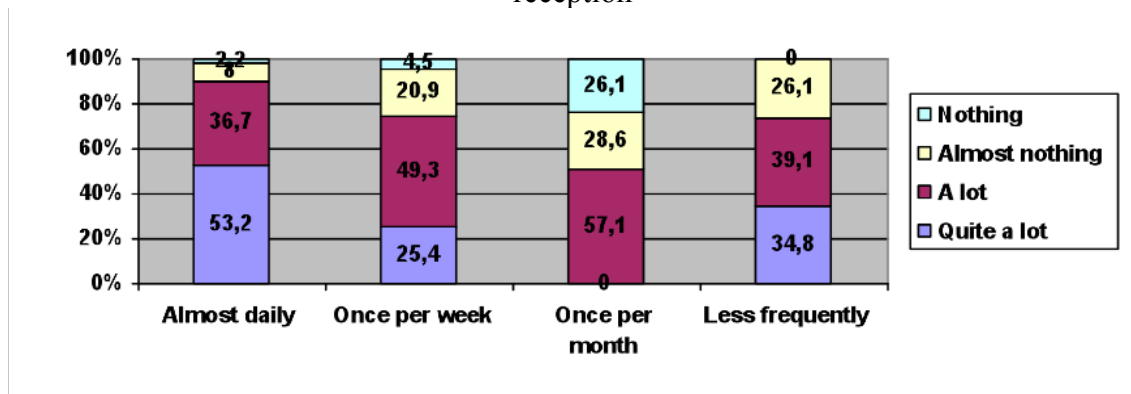
On correlating previous data (opinion on growth of crime and frequency of receiving news about crime), we find that individuals who receive news about crime on



an almost daily basis are those who, for the most part (53.2%), believe that crime has increased considerably, with the differences being statistically significant (Figure 26). In contrast, no significant differences were found that relate a pessimistic view of the frequency of crime with prior victimisation.

When we cross-correlate the above mentioned figures (perception on rise of crime and frequency of crime-related news reception) we observe that those who receive crime-related news on a daily basis are those who to a greater extent believe crime has increased considerably (53.2%), throwing statistically significant differences.

Figure 26: Perception of crime based on frequency of crime-related news reception



$$(x^2 = 46,561^a; gl = 9; sig = ,000)$$

The results, therefore, suggest that the distorted view of the amount of crime in Spain may derive, in part, to the recurring crime-related information the public receives through mainstream media.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Spain's social structure has changed dramatically in the past two decades: Strong economic growth at the beginning of the 1980s and the subsequent incorporation of women into the labour market have had important social implications, especially in the family environment. Perhaps the most prominent changes are delayed childbearing and having fewer children, which has considerably reduced the average size of Spanish households. On the other hand, although in the early 1990s the population growth rate in Spain was approaching 0 and thus predicting a population decrease, the arrival of immigrants in the mid 1990s reversed that trend.

Relevant social data also reveal that in recent years the reduction in the inequality of wealth distribution has reduced; the family structure has changed with a considerable rise of single-parent households; there has been a decline in religious behaviour; and the consumption of heroin, cocaine and cannabis has stabilised, after many years of heroin consumption decline and cocaine/cannabis consumption increase.

These changes, along with an upward trend in offences known to the police and an exorbitant increase in prison population, reflected in the official statistics, supported

the hypothesis that crime in Spain was increasing.

Nevertheless, the results of our study, based on a longitudinal comparison of data from three victimisation survey sweeps carried out in Spain using the ICVS questionnaire show a steady decrease in crime between 1989 and 2008. By crime type this decrease is seen in all criminal activity except for larceny, which after decreasing slightly in 2005 it surpassed the 1989 rate in 2008.

In contrast, the rate of crimes reported to the police by the surveyed victims show a steady increase in the last two decades. Examining the reasons for reporting, we found that the majority of those who reported a crime did so because they believed it was their civic duty. Another piece of information that provides insight into the rise in reporting rates is that 80% of Spaniards believe that the police is the most trustworthy institution within the Spanish criminal justice system.

Although the results of our study show a significant decrease in crime in Spain, public opinion has a different perception of this trend. The majority of Spaniards mistakenly believe that crime has increased. However, this distorted view of reality is not reflected in the fear of crime, given that Spaniards feel fairly safe walking alone in their neighbourhoods after dark and very safe staying home alone after dark. The explanation seems to be in the recurring coverage of crime-related news to which the public is exposed through mainstream media.

Considering the data presented here, we can conclude that in Spain everything has changed but nothing has happened. Namely, Spanish society has experienced major social and demographic changes in the past twenty years, without involving any increase in crime experienced by victims.

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