

# Crime Trends in Bulgaria 2000 – 2005

## Executive Summary of CSD Report

Toward the end of the 1990s and, particularly after the year 2000, as the prospect of EU membership became more likely, greater political stability and economic prosperity in Bulgaria led to a gradual decrease in crime. **This trend, which was most perceptible in the period 2000–2005,** was the result of several factors. Declining unemployment, rising incomes and economic growth provided alternatives to many individuals with criminal incomes. Demographic processes and emigration also contributed to the reduction in crime. Further strengthening of the judiciary and the law-enforcement systems, in an attempt to meet EU-set requirements, revived the criminal justice system, which in 2004 issued six times more sentences than it did in 1993.

### *Police Statistics and Victimization Surveys*

During the past decade, just like in other transitional democracies (and even in some EU member states), crime in Bulgaria has been on the top of most political parties' agendas. This situation has created an even greater need for an assessment of crime through internationally accepted standards and approaches. The Bulgarian public remains **suspicious or distrustful of official crime statistics**. The Ministry of Interior (Mol), which collects these statistics, is considered very important and is usually headed by key members of the political party in power. Therefore, the messages it sends are often politicized. The public deems the falling crime rate as one such message. They are also skeptical towards the various Mol services that have their own institutional interests to demonstrate a falling crime rate, in order to prove their own efficient work. Thus, the collection and interpretation of crime data is more than a criminological issue.

The report<sup>1</sup> of the Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD) for a second consecutive year presents information about Bulgaria's crime rate from an alternative source—**victimization surveys**—and attempts to make a systematic comparison of the crime level according to victim-reported crime and police crime data. The crime situation in Bulgaria is also compared to crime in a number of European countries. The findings of three national crime victims surveys, referred to throughout this report as **National Crime Surveys (NCS)**, offer an opportunity to assess street crime in Bulgaria in the period 2000–2005.

The first NCS 2002 and NCS 2004 examined only **11 categories of offenses against households and persons, while NCS 2005 also incorporates 11 categories of offenses against companies**. The 11 categories of offenses included in the NCS correspond to about 80% of all police-registered crimes in Bulgaria. The report does not cover corruption, drug-related or organized crime offenses, as they are the subject of other CSD analyses.

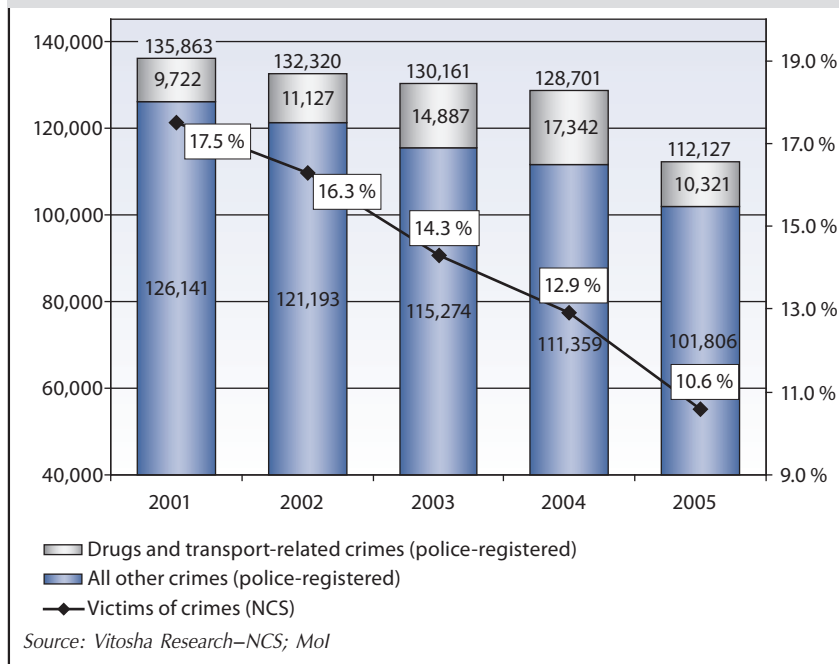
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<sup>1</sup> *Crime Trends in Bulgaria 2000 – 2005*. Center for the Study of Democracy, 2006.

### Main Findings

The findings of NCS 2005, which was conducted in December 2005, corroborate what police statistics have captured: compared to 2004, **the number of crimes and crime victims in 2005 went down**. The **decrease** that police statistics registered in 2005 (8.6%) is **twice** the annual decrease for the period 2001–2004, when it ranged between 3.4% and 4.9%. NCS 2005 also reveals a record **drop in the number of crime victims—compared with 2004, they fell by 18%** in 2005. The annual decrease that NCS had registered in the four years preceding the 2005 survey ranged between 4% and 12%, which means that the share of people above 15 years of age who became victims of crime fell by nearly 7 percentage points—from 17.5% in 2001 to 10.6% in 2005 (figure 1).

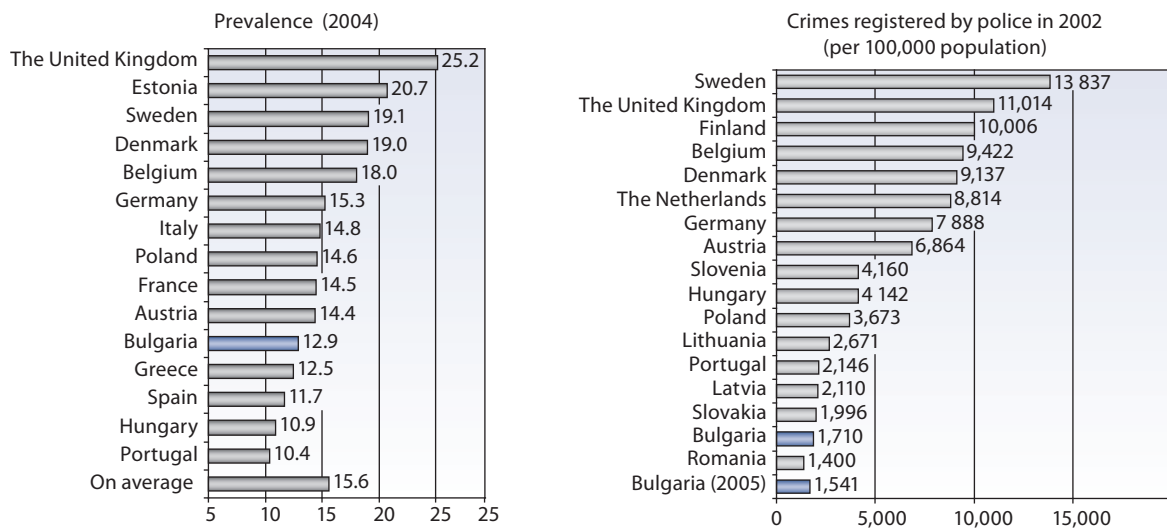
**FIGURE 1. POLICE AND NCS-REGISTERED CRIME (NUMBER OF CRIMES AND SHARE OF VICTIMS)**



A comparison of the NCS 2005 with the *European Union International Crime Survey* (EUICS) shows that **Bulgaria's level of street crime has remained lower than the average level of most EU countries**. Whereas in 2004 the average EU prevalence rate for the eleven crime categories among citizens above 15 was 15.6%, the prevalence rate in Bulgaria was 12.9% (figure 2). The dynamics of some types of crimes, however, calls for special attention:

- Although the frequent **contract killings** have received much media, as well as domestic and international political, attention (particularly in light of EU accession), the level of **homicides** in Bulgaria in 2005 was 2.4 per 100,000 of population, lower than that in 1990 (2.7 per 100,000) and twice as low as the peak year, 1994 (5.8 per 100,000).

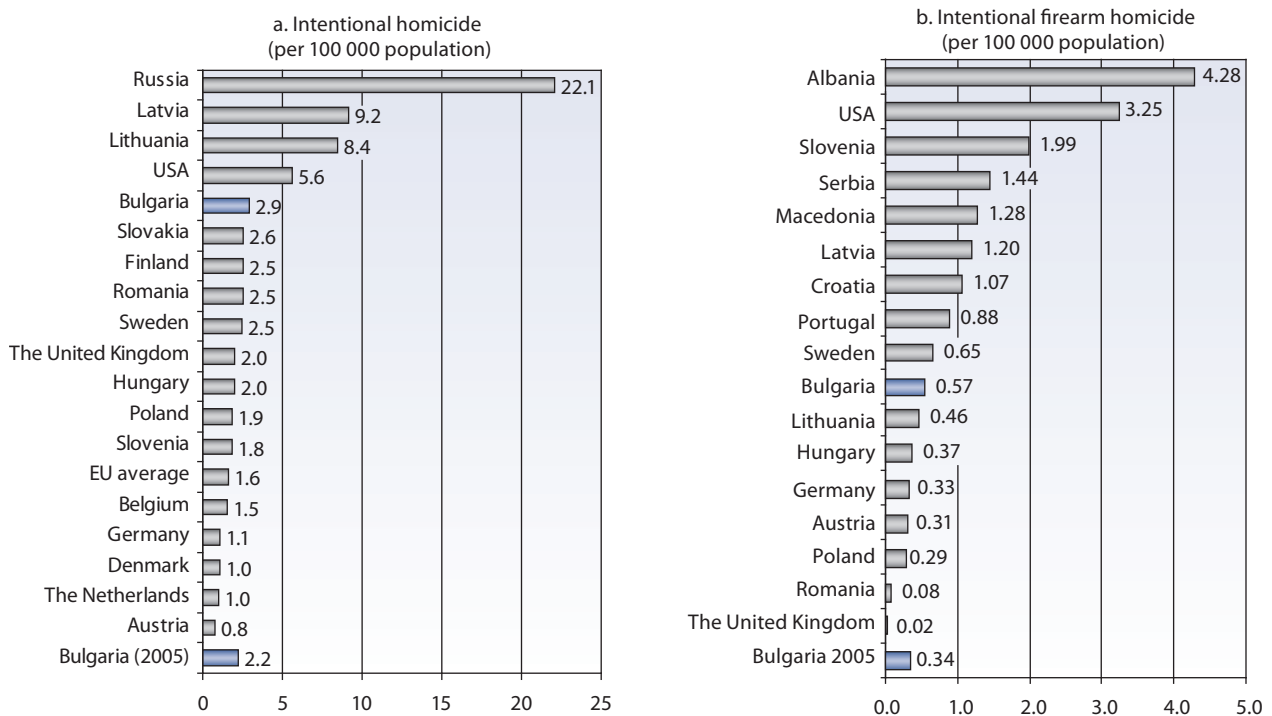
**FIGURE 2: PREVALENCE RATE (% OF POPULATION) IN SOME EUROPEAN COUNTRIES**



Source: EUICS; Vitosha Research–NCS 2005; UNODC 2002

The overall homicide rate remains higher than the average European rate, but the firearm homicide rate (0.34 per 100,000) is similar to the level in many EU member states (figure 3).

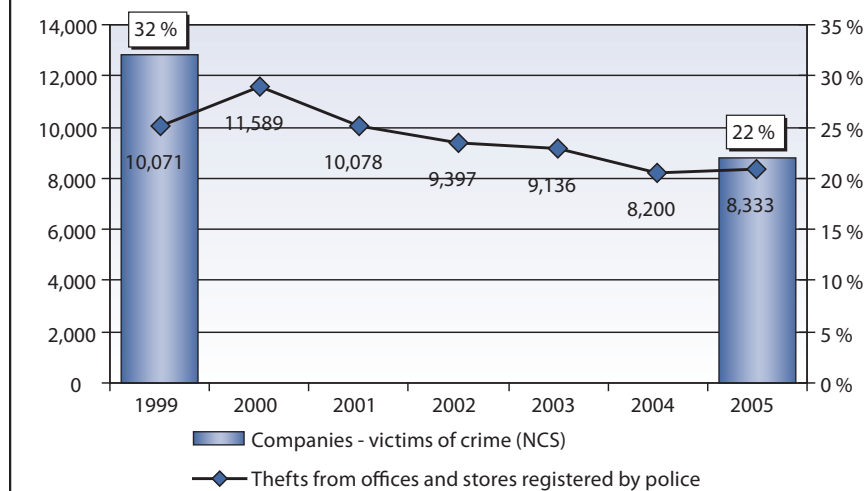
**FIGURE 3. HOMICIDES PER 100,000 OF POPULATION (2002)**



Source: UNODC; Mol

- In 2005 the number of **car thefts** continued to decrease, but a considerable portion of vehicle theft victims used extra-judicial or informal approaches to recover their car, usually by paying a ransom for it. Nearly one third of the victims were asked to pay ransom (of €1,100 on average) for getting their stolen car back. Over half of them (56%) paid it.
- One of the crimes that increased in 2005 was **burglary** (2.2% of all households were victimized, up from 2%). **This trend diverges from police data, which registered a decrease in burglaries.** The main reason for the discrepancy is that in 2005 more burglaries were not reported to the police than in 2004.
- NCS shows that between 1999 and 2005 **crimes against businesses** and crimes against individuals were decreasing at almost the same rate. Whereas in 1999 the share of companies based in Sofia that reported to have been victimized was 32%, in 2005 only 19% of them were victims of crimes, while their nationwide share was 22% (figure 4). However, in the same period there was a **growth in fraud by employees, as well as an increase of threats and extortions against companies.**

FIGURE 4. VICTIMIZED COMPANIES (1999–2005)



Source: Vitosha Research–NCS; Mol

#### *Financial damages from street crime*

Despite the falling rate of street crime from 2000 to 2005, it continued to inflict serious damages on both households and companies. Costs included losses from stolen and damaged property, emotional and psychological trauma, loss of potential income and medical, protection and insurance expenses.

NCS 2005 allows for estimating the **cost of lost property from thefts and robberies of persons, households and companies.** The

**total amount for the year 2004 was somewhere between €107 and €127 million, or around 0.6% of GDP.** These estimates, however, do not take into account the financially most damaging crimes, such as financial fraud against citizens and companies and thefts of municipal or state property.

#### *Unrecorded and Unreported Crime*

When juxtaposing the **NCS findings** and **police crime data**, it becomes evident that the police register only **a small portion of the crimes that are actually committed**. For instance, in NCS 2005 citizens declare to have been victims of 542,161 crimes, while the police registered only 101,806 crimes during the year. There are two basic reasons for this disparity:

- Victims of crime report criminal incidents to the police but the police do not register them, i.e. they apply various police **filters** and the **reported crime goes unrecorded**.
- For a variety of reasons (lack of trust in the police, insignificance of the incident, etc.), citizens fail to report crimes to the police, thus leaving part of the **crimes unreported**.

During the period 2000–2005, **the impact of unrecorded and unreported crime continually diminished, but the unreported crime rate became progressively important**, reaching a level where more than half of all crimes are never reported to the police. **In contrast to many EU countries**, where unreported crime is slowly falling, **since 1998** (when victimization surveys in the country were first conducted) **Bulgaria has experienced a steady growth of unreported crime**.

Unlike households or individuals, during the period 1999–2005, **the number of unreported crimes in the business sector went down considerably for all crime categories** covered by the NCS. The reporting increased particularly in cases of thefts by outsiders and customers (from 16.7% to 52%) and thefts from employees (from 7.1% to 50%).

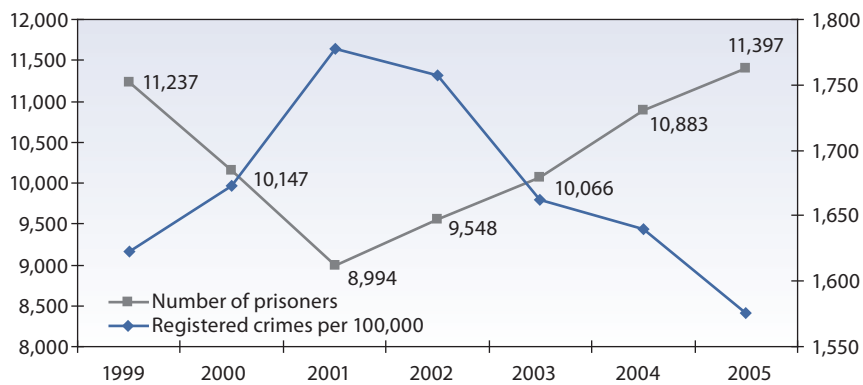
#### *Dynamics of Crime*

The present report aims to attract public attention to some **demographic, social and institutional factors** that could have impacted Bulgaria's crime rate. Without attempting to assign particular weights, the following factors are considered to have contributed to the change of the crime rate in Bulgaria between 2000 and 2005:

- **Decrease in the total population as well as the young male population** in risk age (15–29 years old). The risk-age group in the period fell by 5% due to high emigration and low birth rates after 1989.
- **Migration of criminally active individuals**: according to crime data from some EU countries and the observations of Bulgarian police officials, the removal of the Schengen visas in 2001 led to increased migration of criminally active individuals.

- **Fall in unemployment:** lower youth unemployment rates have led not only to a decrease in property crimes but possibly to a fall in homicides and rapes.
- **Increase in the prison population:** in the period 2001–2005 the prison population went up by 27%, taking many repeat offenders off the streets (figure 5).

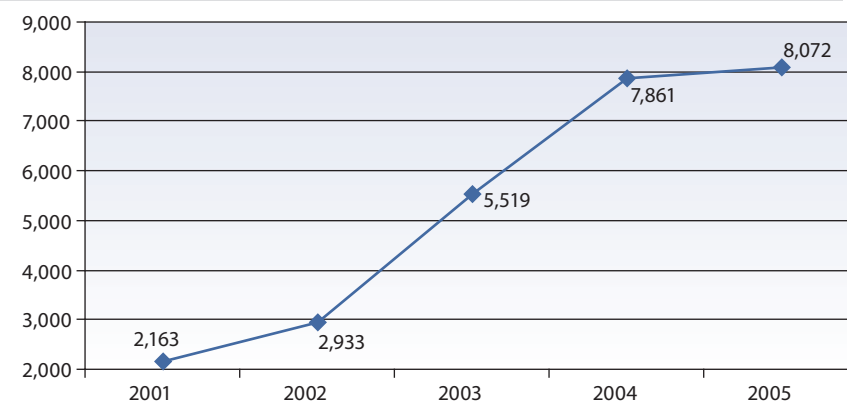
FIGURE 5. REGISTERED CRIMES AND PRISONERS



Source: Mol; Ministry of Justice

- **Growing number of effective penalties as a result of fast-track police investigations and trials:** the growing number of fast-track investigations and trials (a fourfold increase between 2001 and 2005 – see figure 6) has led to a growth in effective penalties which are generally considered to have a preventive effect. In 2002 only 15% of all sentences announced by the courts concerned crimes that were perpetrated in the same year. In 2004 the sentences imposed for same-year crimes reached 25% of the total.

FIGURE 6. FAST-TRACK TRIALS THAT ENDED WITH A SENTENCE



Source: Mol

Given the crime trends in the period 2000–2005 and the problems they pose, two types of measures are both feasible and necessary:

**1. Systematic and professional use of victimization surveys as an additional tool in the formulation and implementation of national crime prevention and law enforcement policy**

- **Annual victimization surveys.** Effective victimization surveys require much greater resources and in the future appropriate budget allocation should be made by the Ministry of Interior budget. Victimization surveys in Bulgaria have so far used a sample of only 1,000–2,000 households; in the UK, 46,000 households are surveyed several times per year. Extended National Crime Surveys would provide opportunities for an adequate monitoring of the overall crime situation. A public-private partnership mechanism that has brought forward the debate on these issues has already been created through the National Crime Prevention Commission.
- **Strengthening the analytical capacity of law-enforcement institutions in regards to victimization surveys.** Surveys can be used to enable the development of community and victim-oriented crime prevention and reduction programs. Victimization surveys have been conducted in Bulgaria for nearly nine years but they have not been used in the work of law-enforcement institutions.

**2. Development and implementation of measures for increasing crime reporting**

The adequacy of current criteria for police work effectiveness—“clear-up rate” and “number of registered crimes”—should be reevaluated. New mechanisms increasing the motivation of local police chiefs to record reported crimes should be implemented. Possible approaches include: public accountability regarding the ratio between reported and registered crimes; introduction of a single registration number for registering reported crimes; awareness-raising campaigns on the ways of reporting a crime and the benefits of reporting. Only in this way could initiatives such as the *Community Policing Program* promote closer contacts between the public and the police.

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