

# English Summary

Crime clearance and efficiency. An analysis of the factors affecting trends in the clear-up rate

*Author:* Jan Ahlberg

*Published by:*

National Council for Crime Prevention (BRÅ)  
P.O. Box 1386  
SE-111 93 Stockholm  
Sweden  
Internet: [www.bra.se](http://www.bra.se)

*Reference:*

Report 2002: 4  
ISSN 1100-6676, ISBN 91-38-31923-3

*Available in Swedish from:*

Fritzes kundservice  
SE-106 47 Stockholm, Sweden

Since the mid 1970s, the clear-up rate has fallen. This drop has been particularly marked and consistent since the beginning of the 1980s. At its peak in 1982, the clear-up rate lay at 41 per cent, since when it has fallen successively, reaching a low of 23 per cent in 1996. The clearance rate for the year 2000 was 26 per cent.

## **NOT ALL OFFENCE TYPES ARE AFFECTED BY DROP IN CLEAR-UP RATE TO SAME EXTENT**

The drop in the clear-up rate has not been the same across the various different types of offence. Dividing crimes into three categories shows that differences in clear-up rate trends are relatively substantial. Over the course of the 25 year period since the mid 1970s, there has been hardly any fall in the clear-up rate for offences whose discovery depends on the efforts of various enforcement agencies to uncover crime (primarily traffic offences, drug offences and shoplifting offences). The opposite is the case for property crimes (thefts and vandalism offences) where the clear-up rate has more or less halved. This means that the drop in clearances in relation to these offences has been substantially larger than for the clear-up rate as a whole. In relation to the third category of offences, violent crimes (primarily comprising crimes against the person), the drop has been approximately the same as for the clearance rate as a whole.

Registering a reported offence as cleared does not necessarily mean that a perpetrator has been tied to the offence (at the prosecutorial level). It is not uncommon to clear offences by registering them as 'no-crimes', which is what occurs when it proves impossible to confirm that a crime has actually been committed. The reason that such so-called 'technical' clearances are included in the concept of cleared offences is that the clear-up rate was originally intended to be used as a measure of police efficiency in dealing with incoming reports in relation to the total number of offences being reported. The decision to 'no crime' thus means that the case has been concluded from the police point of view.

Trends in the clear-up rate may be affected both by changes in the crime structure, which may involve a smaller proportion of relatively easily cleared offences such as those whose discovery depends on the work of enforcement agencies, for example, and by changes in the use of technical clearances. Analyses show that changes in the crime structure have not generally been of any significance for trends in the clear-up rate. Technical clearances on the other hand have come to be employed more often, and have therefore meant a certain, albeit relatively small, improvement in the clear-up rate over recent years, particularly in relation to so-called everyday offences (property crimes and violent offences).

The analyses, which have primarily focused on an examination of the two components of which the clear-up rate is comprised, namely the number of reported offences and the number of cleared offences, show that trends in the clear-up rate can be divided into four distinct periods since the end of the 1970s. Within these different periods, the trends have been generated in quite distinctive ways.

#### **RISE IN THE CLEAR-UP RATE, 1980-1982.**

During the period 1980 to 1982, the clear-up rate increased substantially. This increase was related to the introduction by the police of measures directed at street level drug offences. One effect of this was a change in the structure of reported offences in a direction that had a positive effect on the clear-up rate. The proportion of drug offences underwent a marked increase. In addition, the number of offences in connection with which suspected offenders were registered was counted more expansively.

#### **BASE PERIOD 1983-1993**

During the period between 1983 and 1993, the clear-up rate underwent successive and consistent reductions. The police were clearing more or less the same number of offences year after year at the same time as the number of reported offences was increasing. This pattern was a result of the fact that police resources for the investigation of crime were relatively constant over this period, during which time the police organisation remained more or less unchanged. The number of cleared offences was limited by the time availa-

ble to the police to investigate crime. At the same time, the number of crimes awaiting investigation grew in line with successive increases in the number of reported offences – which of course resulted in a fall in the clear-up rate.

#### **DROP IN CLEAR-UP RATE, 1994-1996**

During the period 1994 to 1996, the clear-up rate dropped more markedly. Over the course of these few years, it fell from 31 per cent in the year prior to the period's beginning (1993) to 23 per cent in 1996. This minor collapse was related to a substantial reduction in the number of cleared offences. A total of no less than 110,000 cleared offences "disappeared" over a period of three years (from an annual level of 370,000). At the same time, the number of reported offences stopped increasing. The drop in the clear-up rate was thus generated in quite the opposite way to that of the preceding period.

The reasons for the dramatic drop in the number of offences being cleared during this period lie in a number of major changes that took place within the police organisation. These included a major reform of the local police organisation whose successive implementation involved a reduction in the resources available for the investigation of offences. The local police reform involved many police officers being given additional work assignments. Resources that had previously been assigned to criminal investigations were transferred to these new areas of activity. In addition, the police organisation faced demands that it make cut-backs, which meant terminating the employment of certain civilian staff and the early retirement of numbers of police officers. The reduction in resources involved in these measures also affected the investigation of offences.

#### **IMPROVEMENT, 1997-2000**

Following the substantial decrease in the clear-up rate during the mid 1990s, the remainder of the decade witnessed a minor recovery. This was the result of steps taken by several agencies to make improvements to the number of crimes being cleared. These measures led to a minor upswing in the clear-up rate, although the improvement was for the most part the result of offences being cleared-up by means of technical clearances.

#### **TWO ALTERNATIVES: MAKING ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AVAILABLE**

The report concludes that a return to the more accepted levels of cleared offences witnessed prior to the police reorganisations of the mid 1990s is to a large extent a question of available resources. Certain improvements can no doubt be brought about by means of increased efficiency, but it is unreasonable to expect such increases to produce a major effect. A more realistic approach would involve increasing the resources available for the work of investigating crimes. Here there are two alternatives. The one is to provide the police with new resources specifically targeted at their criminal investigation operations. The other is to redistribute existing resources within the police organisation.