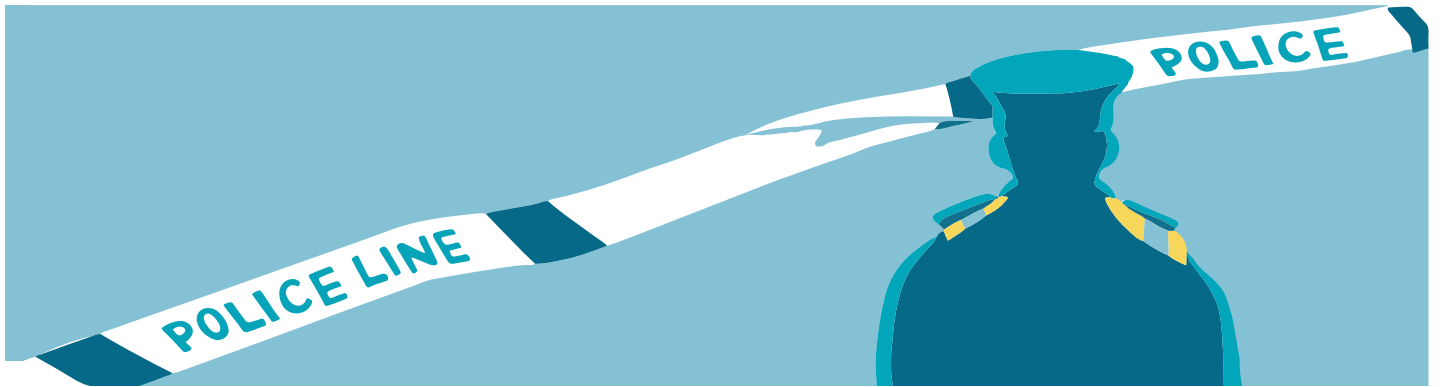


# HOW CRIME HAS CHANGED IN SCOTLAND

According to police records, crime in Scotland grew steadily in the decades following the end of the second world war.



However, this trend changed abruptly in the early 1990s. Between 1991 and 2016/17, there was a major reduction in crime in Scotland.



The biggest reductions were in crimes of 'dishonesty' such as car theft and stealing from people's homes, which fell by 74% over this period.

There was also a large reduction in the number of violent crimes recorded by the police in Scotland, although this happened more recently.



These types of property crime fell to such an extent that they went from representing 70% of all crime to about half of all crime.



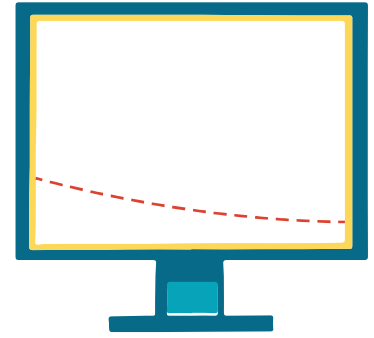
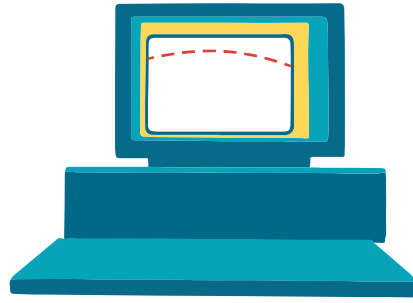
Between 2002/03 and 2014/15, violent crime fell by around 60%. Although declining, violence continued to represent around 3% of all crime recorded by the police.

This so called 'crime drop' was not unique to Scotland. It also happened in England and Wales, Northern Ireland, many European countries, and in North America, Australia and New Zealand.

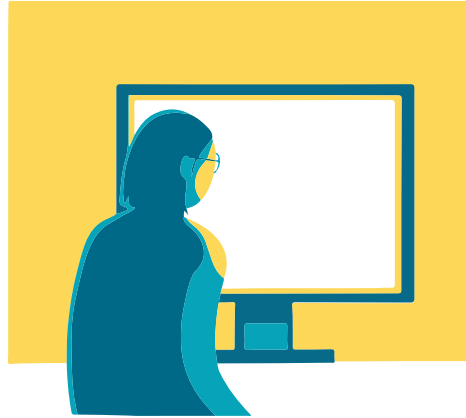
## Why has crime fallen?

One of the leading explanations for the fall in police recorded crime internationally is the growth in technology.

This has operated in a number of ways.



Firstly, technology means that valuables are getting harder to steal. For example, there are better alarm systems on cars and smart security systems with cameras in our homes.



Secondly, the increasing use of technology by children and young people means that they are more likely to stay at home and less likely to get involved in offending behaviour out on the streets.



Despite an overall fall in crime, there is evidence that technological crimes are on the rise, such as internet crime and credit card fraud.

## Has crime fallen for everyone?

The Scottish Crime and Justice Survey (SCJS), provides an alternative measure of crime to police records. It asks a representation sample of the population whether they have experienced a range of types of crime.

Analysis of SCJS data found four typical types of victim profiles, based on the types and number of crimes people experienced per year.



### Non-victims

Around **82%** of the population had little or no risk of becoming a victim of crime.



### One-off property crime victims

Around **12%** of the population experienced one incident of crime, mostly motor vehicle or household crime.



### Multiple mixed victims

Around **5%** of the population experienced two incidents of crime.



### Frequent personal victim

Less than **1%** of the population experienced about 10% of all crime. They experienced 3 or more incidents of mostly violent crime.

Over the period of the crime drop in Scotland, the likelihood of being a 'non victim' increased, while the likelihood of being a one off property crime or a multiple mixed victim decreased. However, the likelihood of being a frequent personal victim stayed the same.

This means that the risk of being a victim of crime has fallen for everyone except the 1% of the population who are frequent victims of crime.

# How have children and young people contributed to the crime drop?

The crime drop in Scotland is partly explained by a reduction in offending amongst young people.

Two Scottish studies conducted twenty years apart provide evidence of a reduction in youth offending.

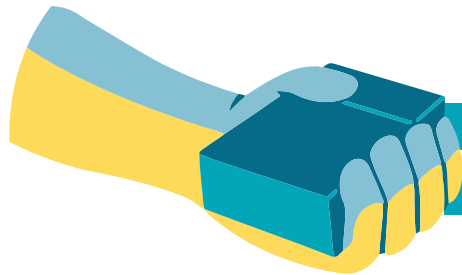
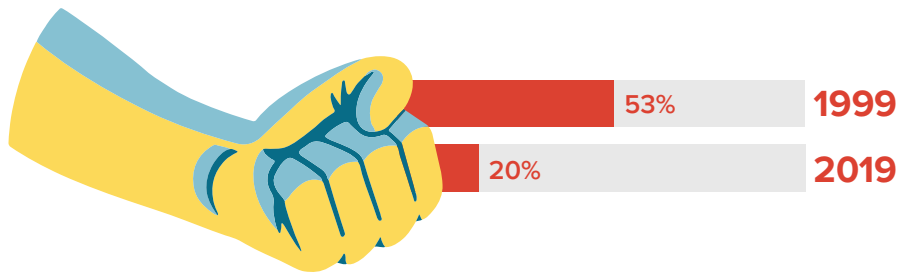


In 1999, the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime found that 71% of 12 year olds had ever committed at least one of nine different types of crime or anti-social behaviour.



However, in 2019, the Growing Up in Scotland study found that this was true for only 30% of 12 year olds.

The Edinburgh Study found that 53% of 12 year olds in 1999 had ever assaulted someone with the intention of hurting them compared to only 20% in the Growing Up in Scotland study in 2019.



Similarly, in 1999 the Edinburgh Study found that 27% of 12 year olds had stolen something from a shop but the Growing Up in Scotland study found this applied to only 6% of 12 year olds in 2019.

One reason that children are less likely to offend these days is that they spend less time hanging around in public places. Research shows they are more likely to be spending time at home, gaming or communicating with their friends online.

Back in 1999, the Edinburgh Study found that 47% of 12 year olds did not play computer or video games most days. In 2019, the Growing Up in Scotland study found that only 10% of 12 year olds did not spend time on social media on an average school day.

Most computer time is spent in normal friendly chatter, but there is increasing concern that children are at risk of both offending and victimisation online.

The National Crime Agency's National Cyber Crime Unit states that children as young as 12 are increasingly becoming involved in cybercrime.

A UK-wide study of 11-16 year olds found that 28% had been cyberbullied and 17% had cyberbullied someone else.

While another study found that 25% of people had experienced hate crime on the basis of their gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, disability or transgender identity.

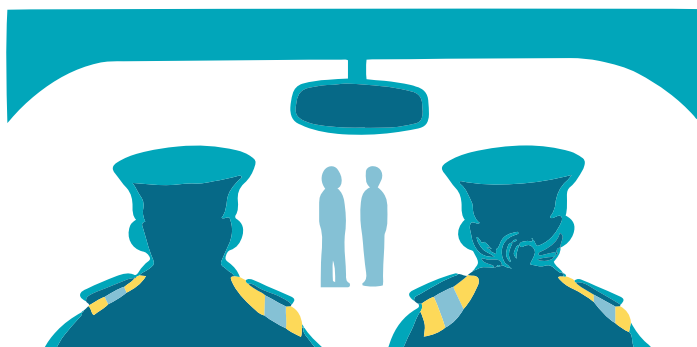
SOURCES: 9. McAra, L and McVie, S (2018), 11. McVie, S (2019), 12. Smith, DJ, McVie, S, Woodward, R, Shute, J, & McAra, L (2001), 13. The Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime website, 14. The Growing Up in Scotland study website, 15. Cross, E., R. Piggen, T. Douglas, and J. Vonkaenel-Flatt. (2012) 16. The National Crime Agency website

# How has falling youth crime impacted on policing of young people?

Offending and victimisation that occur in online environments cannot be measured, investigated or prevented by the police as easily as crime that happens in the 'real world'.



In the main, the police continue to focus on those young people they can see offending (on the street rather than online).



The Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime found that police contact at age 15 was four times more likely amongst people who had previously had police contact.

But young people are not policed equally the police tend to focus their attention on certain categories of children who they think are most likely to be involved in offending.

This suggests that the police tend to focus on 'the usual suspects', who are badly behaved but also highly 'visible' through their lifestyles, their background and who they associate with.

Other risk factors for police contact were involvement in offending or other risky behaviours, poor parental supervision, hanging out on the street, associating with others known to the police and living in a low income household.



Where young people live and hang out also impacts on police contact. A recent study found that young people aged 12 to 17 were more likely to be stopped and searched in the 20% most deprived Scottish communities than anywhere else in Scotland.



Children who grow up in poor neighbourhoods are also more likely to be living in a low income household, have lower educational achievement, have more health issues, experience addiction, and have poorer mental health.

Justice systems are not the best way to deal with children with complex needs, yet we have seen a significant increase in inequality in terms of young people who end up in the justice system and those that don't.

Falling crime means there are fewer young people in the Scottish youth justice system. But, those that are tend to live in the most deprived communities and display high levels of vulnerability.



# What happens to young offenders who are caught by the police?

In Scotland, children under 16 who offend can be referred by the police to the Children's Hearings System (CHS). The CHS then decides what to do in the best interests of each child.



There has been a large reduction in the number of young people referred to the CHS for offending in recent years. Between 2005/06 and 2013/14 the rate of offence referrals reduced by 83%.

There has also been a large reduction in the number of young adults, especially young men, being convicted in the Scottish courts. The rate of convictions reduced by 86% for men and 82% for women between 1990 and 2018.

The reductions in CHS referrals and convictions is partly explained by fewer young offenders. But it is also partly due to changes in how Scotland deals with its young offenders.

In the early 2000s, government policy led to a 63% increase in the number of children referred to the CHS on offence grounds.



However, findings from the Edinburgh Study showed that young offenders dealt with by the CHS were more likely to continue to offend than those who are diverted away to be dealt with informally.



As a result, between 2006 and 2011, the government introduced a set of new policies, including 'Getting it Right for Every Child' and the 'Whole System Approach', which aimed to reduce the number of young offenders dealt with by the CHS.



These new policies meant that many more children and young people under 16 who committed an offence were diverted away from formal measures and far fewer were convicted in Scottish courts.



Overall, evidence suggests that young people who are dealt with by the CHS are more likely to continue to offend and end up in the adult criminal justice system.



Whereas, diverting young people into informal measures (such as counselling, behavioural classes and specialist services) result in more positive long term outcomes.

# To what extent does poverty impact on crime and justice?

Findings from the Edinburgh Study have demonstrated a strong relationship between poverty and crime, and an even stronger relationship between poverty and justice.



Poverty has a direct effect on youth violence. Young people living in low income households and those growing up in deprived communities are most likely to engage in violence.

Other risk factors for offending include having more adverse childhood experiences, especially parental maltreatment.



Drawing on data from the Edinburgh Study, McAra and McVie (2016) propose that violence helps some young people from deprived communities to feel empowered, gain status amongst their peers and develop a sense of identity.

They also argue that it is harder for young people from deprived communities to 'negotiate' their way out of difficult situations when they encounter them.



Young people who are involved in violence are more likely to be charged by the police. However, those from low income households are disproportionately more likely to be charged by the police and referred to the CHS than those who are not.

In turn, police charges and youth justice supervision during the teenage years are strong predictors of later poverty, as measured by being 'not in education, training or employment' (NEET). This is true even when taking account of other factors that explain NEET status (including poverty in early childhood).



Moving into early adulthood, young men who are unemployed for more than a year are more likely to be charged by the police than others. Furthermore, those who are both unemployed for more than a year and known to the police in their teenage years have an even greater likelihood of being convicted.

The Edinburgh Study's findings show complex relationships between poverty, offending and justice system contact. They demonstrate significant inequality for children living in poverty as they are over represented amongst violent offenders, and even more over represented in the justice system.

1. [Scottish Government website - Crime and Justice | Recorded Crime](#)
2. **McVie, S (2017) 'Social Order: Crime and justice in Scotland', in D McCrone (Ed), The New Sociology of Scotland. Sage Publications.**
3. [Tseloni, A, Mailey, J, Farrall, G and Tilley, N \(2010\) 'Exploring the International Decline in Crime Rates', European Journal of Criminology, 7: 375–94.](#)
4. van Dijk, J, Tseloni, A, and Farrell, G (2012) The International Crime Drop: New Directions in Research. Palgrave Macmillan.
5. Zimring, F E (2007) The Great American Crime Decline. Oxford University Press.
6. [Farrell, G \(2013\) 'Five Tests for a Theory of the Crime Drop', Crime Science, 2: 5.](#)
7. [Farrell, G, Tilley, N and Tseloni, A \(2014\) 'Why the Crime Drop?', Crime and Justice, 43: 421–90.](#)
8. [Farrell, G, Tilley, N, Tseloni, A and Malley, J \(2011\) 'The Crime Drop and the Security Hypothesis', Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 48: 147–75.](#)
9. **McAra, L and McVie, S (2018) 'Transformations in Youth Crime and Justice across Europe: Evidencing the Case for Diversion', in B Goldson, ed., Juvenile Justice in a European Context. Routledge.**
10. **[McVie, S, Norris, P and Pillinger, R, \(2019\) 'Increasing inequality in victimization during the crime drop: Analysing patterns of victimization in Scotland from 1993 to 2014-15', British Journal of Criminology](#)**
11. **[McVie, S \(2019\) How changes to childhood have contributed to the crime drop in Scotland. Understanding Inequalities project blog](#)**
12. [Smith, DJ, McVie, S, Woodward, R, Shute, J, & McAra, L \(2001\) The Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime: Key findings at ages 12 and 13. Research Digest No. 1.](#)
13. [The Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime website](#)
14. [The Growing Up in Scotland study website](#)
15. [Cross, E., R. Piggen, T. Douglas, and J. Vonkaenel-Flatt. \(2012\) Virtual Violence II: Progress and Challenges in the Fight against Cyberbullying. London: Beatbullying.](#)
16. [The National Crime Agency website - Cyber Crime and Young People](#)
17. **[McAra, L, and McVie, S \(2005\) The usual suspects?: Street-life, young people and the police. Criminology and Criminal Justice, Volume 5, Issue 1.](#)**
18. [McAra, L., and McVie, S. \(2007\) Youth Justice? The impact of system contact on patterns of desistance from offending. Criminology and Criminal Justice, Volume 4, Issue 3.](#)
19. [Matthews, B. and Minton, J. \(2017\) Rethinking one of criminology's 'brute facts': The age–crime curve and the crime drop in Scotland. European Journal of Criminology, Volume 15, Issue 3.](#)
20. **[McAra, L., and McVie, S. \(2010\) Youth crime and justice: Key messages from the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime. Criminology and Criminal Justice, Volume 10, Issue 2.](#)**
21. McAra, L, & McVie, S (2010) Youth Crime and Justice in Scotland. In H. Croall, G. Mooney and M. Munro (Eds) Criminal Justice in Scotland. Willan Publishing.
22. [Scottish Children's Reporter Administration website - Official Statistic 2018/2019](#)
23. [Scottish Children's Reporter Administration website: Online Statistical Dashboard](#)
24. [Scottish Government website - Getting It Right For Every Child](#)
25. [Scottish Government website - The Whole System Approach](#)
26. **[McAra, L and McVie, S \(2015\). The Reproduction of Poverty. Scottish Justice Matters, Volume 3, Number 3.](#)**
27. **[McAra, L and McVie, S \(2016\). 'Understanding youth violence: The mediating effects of gender, poverty and vulnerability'. Journal of Criminal Justice, Volume 45.](#)**
28. [Scottish Justice Matters: Poverty, Inequality and Justice. Volume 3, Number 3. November 2015.](#)

Key sources are highlighted in bold. The hyperlinked sources were last checked on 27th October 2020. Please visit the Understanding Inequalities website for any link updates: <https://www.understanding-inequalities.ac.uk/crime-comic>