

# Research Agenda 2015 - 17



**CRIME  
STATISTICS  
AGENCY**



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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 The Crime Statistics Agency: who we are and what we do

The Crime Statistics Agency (CSA) commenced public operations in January 2015. The CSA has two primary, legislated functions: to release statistical information on crime and crime trends in Victoria and conduct research into crime and criminal justice trends and issues. The Crime Statistics Agency publishes accessible quarterly and annual statistics on the CSA website ([www.crimestatistics.vic.gov.au](http://www.crimestatistics.vic.gov.au)). In addition, the CSA has developed a research program.

## 1.2 About the CSA research agenda

This document outlines the development and content of the CSA's inaugural research agenda. It details foreseeable priority areas of crime research over 2015–17. The research agenda is designed to strategically direct the CSA's research work to ensure it meets the needs of policy makers and practitioners and to identify priority areas for potential collaborative research partnerships between the CSA and other organisations.

Many of the specific research projects the CSA will conduct over 2015–17 will stem from the priorities described in this research agenda. However, the CSA will take a flexible approach to its research program, ensuring the agency can refocus if necessary to meet any high priority information needs that emerge for key stakeholders.

## 2. CSA research program objectives

### 2.1 Build the evidence base

A key objective of the CSA's research is to support evidence based approaches to crime and criminal justice policy. A "basic premise of evidence based practice is that we are all entitled to our own opinions, but not our own facts" (Sherman, 1998: p.4). Evidence based approaches use high quality research to design or identify policies and programs that are proven to have the greatest likelihood of success. The CSA's approach to research will establish a consistent and coherent evidence base that is accessible and widely disseminated to form a foundation for evidence based policy. Tailoring policies proven to work in one location and under certain circumstances to another location and set of circumstances is an established challenge for evidence based policy. However, the CSA is uniquely positioned to conduct research that takes the local context into account within and across Victoria.

During the CSA's research agenda consultations, stakeholders told us they supported an evidence based approach. They emphasised the need for the CSA to focus on research that can be practically applied to inform the development of evidence based policies and programs.

The CSA research program therefore aims to focus on three areas of systemic research to practically inform policy-making and provide effective decision-support:

1. Who, what, where and why? (*Problem definition*): Describing and measuring the size and nature of crime problems and issues in Victoria, including an examination of the drivers of crime.
2. What can be done? (*Identifying 'what works'*): Providing accessible summaries of systematic research on 'what works' to effectively address identified issues and develop new policies.
3. What are the impacts? (*Monitoring and evaluating responses*): Piloting, evaluating or monitoring the impacts and outcomes associated with Victorian criminal justice policy initiatives, interventions or legislative changes.

These aims form the foundation for the research agenda.

### 2.2 Explore complexity

In conducting the research program, the CSA will consider a multitude of factors to develop an in-depth understanding of what is driving observed crime patterns and trends. At a macro-level, these include broad demographic and social factors. Changes in economic conditions, for example, can place significant pressures on individuals and may increase their propensity to commit crime. At a meso-level, institutional practices, policies and services may influence crime rates. A change to welfare policies or a reduction in funding for drug treatment services may be linked to changes in crime rates, for example. At a micro-level, consideration will be given to the individual factors that underlie offending or victimisation within the broader macro- and meso- environments. At this level, factors including, for example, individual social supports and/or personality may be relevant.

## 2.3 Deliver relevant research

During early operations, the CSA's research program will focus on projects that can add immediate value to the existing evidence base for understanding, preventing and addressing crime in Victoria. The CSA's initial projects will also be important in illustrating the utility of research based on recorded crime data to provide a strong empirical basis for actions to reduce and respond to crime.

The CSA will conduct research that is objective, timely, transparent, and accessible to stakeholders. The CSA will focus on effective communication of research findings to relevant audiences.

## 3. Developing the research agenda

In developing the inaugural research agenda, the CSA sought to discover what stakeholders need to know about crime in Victoria to inform their work, with a focus on how research conducted by the CSA can fill gaps in and add value to the existing knowledge base.

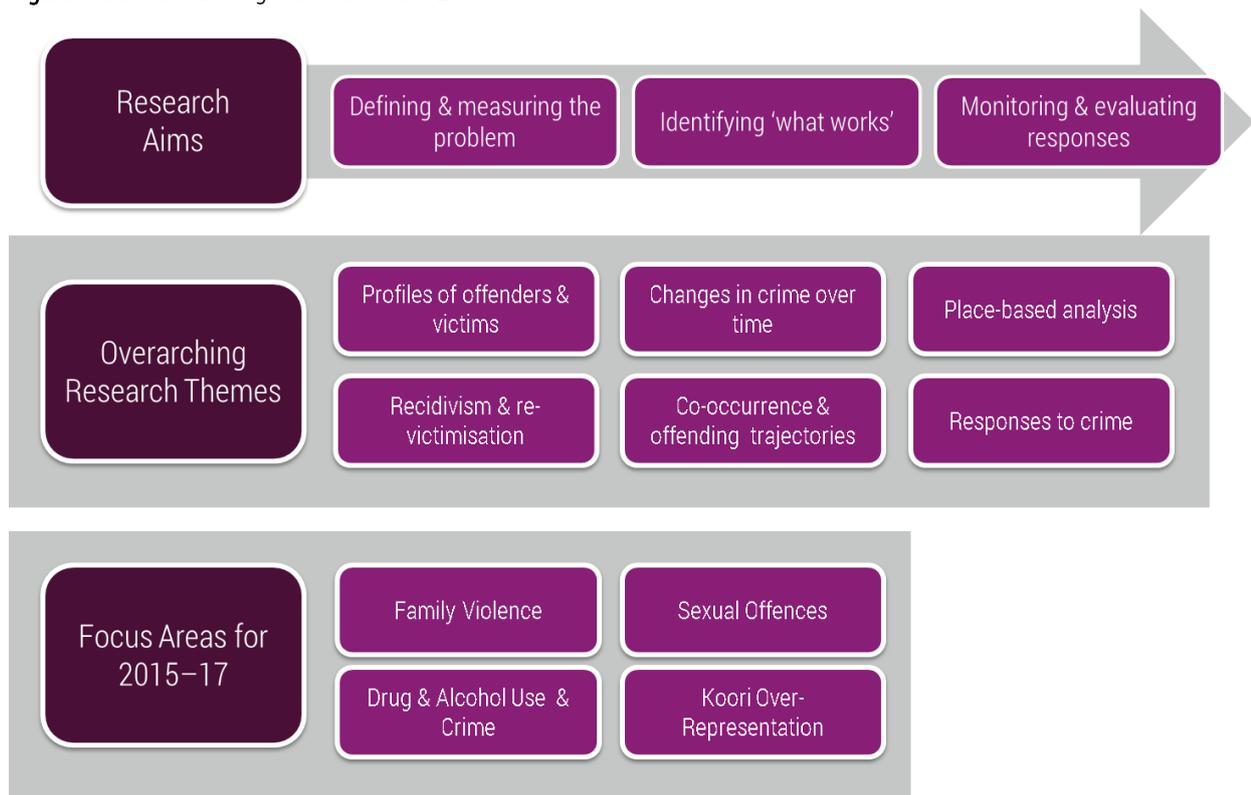
To inform the development of the research agenda, a broad consultation was carried out with organisations across government, non-government and academic sectors between July and November 2014. A literature scan of recent criminological research, particularly research focused on Victoria, was also conducted to supplement information provided by stakeholders during the consultation.

## 4. The CSA research agenda 2015–17

As noted, a primary objective of the CSA’s research is to provide a rigorous evidence base for crime and criminal justice related decision making, policy and practice in Victoria. Building on the research aims outlined above, the research agenda summarises the overarching research themes that emerged throughout the consultation and identifies a series of focus areas for the research during 2015–17. The overarching research themes represent the types of information that stakeholders told us were most important to fill gaps in the evidence base. The focus areas are the specific crime types or issues that are of current concern across Victoria. The framework for the research agenda is depicted in Figure 1.

Taken together, the research aims, themes and focus areas will be used to identify specific research projects that will be conducted by the CSA and potential areas for collaboration. The overarching research themes and focus areas for 2015–17 are each described in more detail below.

Figure 1: CSA research agenda framework 2015–17



## 4.1 Overarching research themes

As noted, the overarching research themes identified in the framework describe types of information required to fill reported gaps in the evidence base in Victoria. A desire to better understand the patterns, causes and correlates of crime across Victoria is at the core of all these themes.

### Theme 1: Profiles of offenders & victims

Stakeholders want to explore the fundamental question: Who commits crime and who is victimised? Interest was also expressed in developing knowledge about the extent to which there is overlap between victim and offender populations. A person may have multiple contacts with police – in some instances as an offender, and in others as a victim – and patterns of involvement in crime may change over time, for example.

A number of stakeholders commented that while it is of utmost importance to recognise and support victims, in-depth knowledge about those who perpetrate crimes in Victoria is almost absent. They noted that a strong evidence base about who is committing crime is vital for informing offender-based prevention and intervention strategies and supporting perpetrator accountability.

### Theme 2: Recidivism & re-victimisation

Recidivism can be broadly defined as repeat criminal behaviour (Payne, 2007). In practice, measurement of recidivism varies and is dependent on many factors including data availability and relevant policy questions to be addressed. For example, recidivism may be measured as an offender's re-contact with police following an earlier police incident, re-conviction in court, or return to prison following an earlier period of incarceration.

Stakeholders reported a lack of information about levels of recidivism and re-victimisation in Victoria. The CSA is in a unique position to contribute to filling this gap, particularly as it relates to data about crimes recorded by Victoria Police. The CSA will conduct research that explores the extent to which offenders re-offend, and to which victims are re-victimised, either by the same or multiple offenders. This theme includes exploration of the demographic, circumstantial and/or criminal history factors related to recidivism and re-victimisation.

### Theme 3: Co-occurrence & offending trajectories

Interest was expressed in developing an understanding of the different types of crime that are likely to be perpetrated by the same offender both at a point in time and across their offending career. This theme includes developing an understanding of the factors that influence an offender's behaviour over time. Of particular interest is the extent to which it is possible to describe and predict transitions in the type or seriousness of an individual's offending behaviour over time. While there are limitations associated with the use of recorded crime data to conduct full criminal careers research, the CSA will consider potential methodologies and other data sources that may be of use in the conduct of research to identify offending trajectories.

## Theme 4: Place-based analysis

Place-based descriptions of crime were a consistent theme arising throughout the CSA's consultation. Frequently, stakeholders were interested in the differences between levels of crime in metropolitan and rural Victoria and across postcodes. Place was not only defined geographically, but also included type of place (for example, residential, public, licensed venues). The importance of considering not only where crime occurs, but also where victims and offenders live, was highlighted as particularly important in planning the distribution of intervention programs and services.

Stakeholders raised questions about the extent to which place interacts with other contextual variables (for example, demographic variables or economic indicators) in predicting crime levels and trends and the extent to which crime can be considered as an inevitable consequence of place-based socio-economic disadvantage.

## Theme 5: Changes in crime over time

A broad theme emerged during the consultation about how overall crime trends change over time. While the CSA will report quarterly on recent and historical trends, there is also interest in research to explore the factors that drive changes in the overall pattern of crime in Victoria over time, and in the interaction between crime, time and other factors such as changes to employment levels, welfare policies, criminal policies and legislation, and the demographic structure of the population.

## Theme 6: Responses to crime

The consultation highlighted the need to better understand how the criminal justice system responds to crime in Victoria, and how these responses may subsequently impact on the frequency and/or prevalence of crime.

There was strong interest in considering the factors that influence whether and how offences progress from police callout through to charges and eventual outcomes. This includes considering the factors that influence the attrition or 'drop off' of crimes throughout the criminal justice process, for example, where police withdraw charges or otherwise do not take action against an offender.

Stakeholders noted that while the justice system tends to report well on justice system outputs, information is not always available about outcomes. For example, while the justice system reports on number of Intervention Orders issued (outputs), the impact of those Intervention Orders on victim safety or recidivism (outcomes) across Victoria is largely unknown. In part, this is due to inherent methodological difficulties associated with rigorously evaluating and measuring outcomes. However wherever possible, the CSA will focus on reporting justice system outcomes in addition to outputs.

## 4.2 Focus areas for 2015–17

The focus areas for 2015–17 represent crime types or issues that are current priorities for CSA stakeholders. Four focus areas have been identified for 2015–17, including: family violence; drug and alcohol use and crime; Koori over-representation in the criminal justice system; and, sexual offences.

### Focus Area 1: Family violence

The number of recorded family violence (FV) incidents in Victoria has been increasing for a number of years (Crime Statistics Agency, 2015). This may be attributable, at least in part, to increased awareness and reporting of FV to police. The need for coherent and comprehensive analysis of FV arose repeatedly during the consultation. This included the incidence and prevalence of FV amongst specific populations such as Indigenous people, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities and people who live in rural areas. Stakeholders emphasised a perpetrator focus for CSA research in this area, suggesting that a better understanding of those who perpetrate FV will facilitate the development of targeted, evidence based prevention and intervention strategies. Further, there is an identified need for research to examine:

- recidivism and re-victimisation rates in Victoria
- the outcomes of police callouts to FV incidents
- factors related to compliance with FV orders
- the extent to which FV co-occurs with alcohol and drug use
- the extent to which sexual violence and other criminal offending occurs in the context of FV.

Evaluation is warranted in relation to the impact of Victorian FV orders or other responses (for example, charges for breaching orders, referrals to support services or intervention programs) on the frequency and seriousness of FV. There is also a need to consider potential unintended consequences of criminal justice system interventions, such as increased risks to victims' safety.

### Focus Area 2: Drug & alcohol use & crime

Survey evidence indicates that while overall recent use of amphetamines in Australia remained stable from 2010 to 2013, the proportion of methamphetamine users that use the crystal form of methamphetamine (commonly referred to as ice) more than doubled (from 22% to 50%; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014). Stakeholders expressed some concern about reported potential increases in prevalence of ice use and the increased propensity of ice users towards aggressive behaviour and violence. Other recent research, however, suggests that the significantly increased purity of crystal methamphetamine available in Victoria may have led to the increased drug-related harms observed, rather than an overall increase in the number of users (Scott, Caulkins, Ritter, Quinn and Dietze, 2014). Evidence presented to a recent Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry indicates a general link between crime and methamphetamine use (Law Reform, Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee, 2014), but clarity about the prevalence of methamphetamine use and the nature of its relationship to other offending is missing.

While acknowledging that use of ice interacts with other factors to increase aggression in some drug users, submissions presented to the Parliamentary Inquiry suggested that frontline staff also remain extremely concerned about the relationship between alcohol and violent and aggressive behaviour. This was echoed throughout the CSA's consultation, which identified strong interest amongst stakeholders in developing better knowledge about the effects of alcohol on criminal and violent behaviour and the impact of interventions targeting this issue.

Developing a better understanding of the interaction between violence, drug and alcohol use in the night-time economy was highlighted as important. The triangulation and comparison of recorded crime data with data from hospitals and community services was perceived by stakeholders as a significant gap preventing improved policy-making in this area.

### Focus Area 3: Koori over-representation

Koori over-representation across the justice system was cited as an ongoing issue. Recent evidence shows that this may be a growing concern with regard to Koori women. Early in 2013, the Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreement Phase 3 cited evidence showing an increasing trend in the number of Koori women in prison between 2006 and 2011 (Koori Justice Unit, 2013). More recently, it has been reported that Australia-wide the proportion of Indigenous female prisoners increased from 21% of the female prison population in 1996 to 34% in 2012, even though Indigenous women account for only 2% of the overall female population (Baldry and Cunneen, 2014). According to this research, much of the growth in the overall proportion of Australian female prisoners can in fact be attributed to growth in the Indigenous female prisoner population. This shift warrants further investigation.

Research conducted in New South Wales suggests that levels of Indigenous imprisonment there are driven by higher rates of conviction for violent crimes and higher rates of re-offending for Indigenous compared with non-Indigenous offenders (Snowball and Weatherburn, 2006). Stakeholders are interested in research to describe over-representation in Victoria and develop a similar understanding of what drives Koori over-representation here. Additional areas for exploration include place-based analyses to determine whether there are differences in crime 'hotspots' for Koori and non-Koori Victorians, and whether and how Koori offending has changed across regions over time.

### Focus Area 4: Sexual offences

Relatively recent evidence is available regarding the number of rape and child sexual offences prosecuted in Victorian higher courts and associated sentences (Sentencing Advisory Council, 2013). Older data analysed on rapes reported to police between 2000 and 2003 in Victoria, however, indicated that only 15% of all reported rapes were eventually charged and that police did not proceed with more than 60% of their investigations (Statewide Steering Committee to Reduce Sexual Assault, 2006). Given this high rate of attrition of sexual offences through the criminal justice process, stakeholders advised that updated in-depth analyses of police recorded sexual offences and the attrition of sexual offence cases through the justice system are required and overdue.

Analysis to identify perpetrator characteristics, place-based analysis of offending and the nature of the association between drugs and alcohol and sexual offending were cited as specific areas for further exploration. In addition, there is a general lack of knowledge about sexual assaults involving multiple perpetrators and stakeholders are mindful of a need to learn about where this occurs (geographically as well as types of places), its relationship with drug and alcohol use and the demographic characteristics of perpetrators involved in these assaults.

## Additional research areas

A number of further research topics raised during the consultation process have not been included in the research agenda for 2015–17, because of a need to manage the scope of the agency's initial research agenda. This is to ensure that resources are deployed to focus on research that is most important to stakeholders and can add immediate value to the existing evidence base. Some of these topics do not fall within the remit of the CSA and may need to be addressed through other channels. Whilst the CSA believes these to be areas worthy of examination, they are outside the scope of the 2015–17 research agenda. Additional topics cited include: the relationship between mental health and crime; the impacts of recently introduced mandatory sentencing laws and parole changes and their relationship with demand for prison capacity; cybercrime and fraud; the impacts of Protective Safety Officers (PSOs); and, online child exploitation and child pornography.

## 5. Next steps

### 5.1 Applying the research agenda

Commencing in mid-2015, the CSA will produce and actively disseminate its research findings through a range of channels. The CSA will identify and form collaborative partnerships to draw on the specific expertise of external researchers and/or organisations whose interests align with this agenda.

Development of research methodologies will also form an important component of the CSA's work throughout 2015–17 and is required to ensure that complex questions about crime and criminal justice can be answered.

### 5.2 Ensuring continued relevance of the research agenda

The research agenda will be monitored and refined annually to ensure it aligns with new and emerging crime and criminal justice priorities, crime trends that emerge through the CSA's quarterly statistical updates, and stakeholder feedback on research outputs.

To provide feedback to the Crime Statistics Agency about your research and information needs and the coverage of this research agenda, please email [info@crimestatistics.vic.gov.au](mailto:info@crimestatistics.vic.gov.au) or write to –

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