The crime recording process

The Police Act 1996 Section 44 (2 and 3) states that the Home Secretary can require Chief Constables of forces in England and Wales to provide statistical data, and that he or she can specify the form in which these data are provided.

The Home Secretary uses these powers to require Chief Constables to provide regular data on the number of crimes they record. These data must be recorded in accordance with the Home Office Counting Rules (HOCR), which seek to bring more consistency to the process of creating and maintaining crime records at force level.

The crime recording process used by the police can be divided into six stages:

1. Incident reporting and recording

Incidents reported to the police relate to issues including public safety and welfare (44% of incidents recorded), crime (28%), anti-social behaviour (17%) and transport (11%).

There are a number of ways in which incidents can be reported to the police:

- victims, witnesses or other third parties can tell a police officer, PCSO or member of staff either on the street or at the front counter of a police station;
- victims, witnesses or other third parties can telephone incidents to police control rooms;
- increasingly, victims, witnesses or other third parties may report an incident online;
- the police might discover the crime themselves; or
- other agencies such as social services may refer them.

The HOCR require that “all reports of incidents, whether from victims, witnesses or third parties and whether crime related or not, will result in the registration of an incident report by the police”. It goes on to stipulate that these must be recorded on an auditable system, which in practice means:

- an incident log (sometimes referred to as a command and control log); and/or,
- a record on the force crime system.

When recording an incident, staff allocate an “opening code” to the incident log. Opening codes indicate the nature of the incident, for example whether it relates to a road traffic accident or a burglary. Opening codes are important because they allow supervisors to see immediately what type of incidents are currently open and prioritise resources accordingly.

2. Deciding if a crime should be recorded

The HOCR require:

“An incident will be recorded as a crime (notifiable offence) for offences against an identified victim if, on the balance of probability:

1. The circumstances as reported amount to a crime defined by law (the police will
determine this, based on their knowledge of the law and counting rules), and
b. There is no credible evidence to the contrary.

2. For offences against the state the points to prove to evidence the offence must clearly
be made out, before a crime is recorded:"

Because the rules place an obligation on the police to accept what the victim says unless there is
"credible evidence to the contrary", the following reasons are insufficient to justify not recording a crime:

- The victim declines to provide personal details.
- The victim does not want to take the matter further
- The allegation cannot be proven

In relation to the balance of probability test, the National Crime Recording Standard (which is
reproduced within the HOCR) notes that:

"In most cases, a belief by the victim (or person reasonably assumed to be acting on behalf
of the victim) that a crime has occurred is sufficient to justify its recording as a crime,
although this will not be the case in all circumstances. Effectively, a more victim orientated
approach is advocated."

"An allegation should be considered as made, at the first point of contact, i.e. the stage at
which the victim or a person reasonably assumed to be acting on behalf of the victim first
makes contact with the police, be that by phone, etc. or in person. If an alleged or possible
victim cannot be contacted or later refuses to provide further detail, the Crime Recording
Decision Making Process (CDDMP) should be based on all available first contact information."

Forces’ processes for deciding if a crime should be recorded

Forces operate different processes for deciding if a crime should be recorded and this has implications
for the scope of their incident logs. For example, in cases where a member of the public reports an
incident by telephone:

- Some forces initially record all calls as an incident and deploy an officer to the scene. The officer
then decides if there has been a crime and, if there has, records the crime on the force crime
system. In these forces all calls about crime will appear in the incident log. Nottinghamshire Police
(one of the twelve forces we looked at during this inspection) is an example of a force that follows
this process.
- If it is obvious that there has been a crime, the HOOCR allows forces to record the crime without
first recording an incident. Some forces follow this process and in those that do, not all calls about
crime will appear in the incident log. Devon and Cornwall (one of the twelve forces we looked at
during this inspection) is an example of a force that follows this process and they advised us that
about four out of every ten calls they receive are recorded as crimes without first being recorded
an incident.

3. Closing incident records

Once a decision has been taken to record a crime the incident record will often be closed. Any further
information should be recorded in the force crime system. This avoids unnecessary duplication and
ensures all the information is kept only in one place.

Incident records are closed by adding a closing code. Closing codes provide a brief description of the
incident to summarise what finally happened. A set list of incident closing descriptions (the National
Incident Category List – NICL) is in use by all forces. For example, an incident closed with an NICL code
of Crime-Robbery indicates that a decision was taken to record a crime of robbery. Other examples of
closing codes include ASB-Nuisance and Abandoned Call.

Sometimes the closing code will differ markedly from the opening code. For example, a report that
someone has collapsed in the street may be given an opening code of “Public Safety and Welfare (PSW)”: but, if subsequent enquiries determined that the person has fallen because he or she has been assaulted,
then the closing code would be “Crime–Violent”. In this example a crime record would be opened when
the incident record was closed.
Closing codes are important as they allow supervisors to check that all necessary actions have been carried out. They also mean forces can count and understand the types of incidents being reported to the police.

4. Recording a crime

Once the police have decided to record a crime, they then need to determine how many crimes to record and what offences have been committed. Consider, for example, a burglary where the car keys are taken from a house and the car has been stolen:

- This may involve two offences: a burglary; and theft of a motor vehicle.
- If there is only one victim and only one offender for all these offences then only one crime would be recorded, although the offender may be charged and convicted of all the offences.
- If there are two or more victims in the same incident, a crime should be recorded for each victim.

The HOCR require police to record crime at the earliest opportunity, and at the most within 72 hours of the time the reporting officer decides that a crime should be recorded.8

5. Closing crime records

Crime records remain open while police investigate the crime, collect evidence and identify a suspect. Crime records should be closed only when:

- The crime has been detected (solved). The HOCR set out the criteria for determining if a crime has been detected. These include, for example, when a person being cautioned, charged, or summoned to appear at court in relation to the crime.2
- Alternatively, it may become apparent that a crime never actually happened. For example, an item initially recorded as stolen was then found to have been mislaid. In these circumstances the police may show in the crime record that there was “no-crime”. There are six criteria for a ‘no crime’ set out in the HOCR, with the key one being if “additional verifiable information is available which determines that no notifiable crime has been committed”10. If, for example, following an investigation of a reported rape the police are ‘unclear’ as to whether an offence has taken place, then the crime record should remain open, because being “unclear” does not constitute additional verifiable information which determines that the offence did not take place.

6. Checking that crime records are correct

Each force has a crime registrar who is responsible for overseeing compliance with the crime recording process. He or she is the final arbiter for the force when deciding whether or not to record a crime or make a no-crime decision. The registrar’s responsibilities include training staff in the crime recording process and conducting audits to check compliance with the rules. All forces also designate a senior officer (of Chief Officer rank, usually the Deputy Chief Constable) as being responsible for overseeing the force’s approach to crime recording. The HOCR states that the force crime registrar must be outside operational line command and answerable to the Chief Officer with overall responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of crime recording processes.11

Footnotes

1 These rules also promote a more victim-oriented approach to crime recording (which means that a belief by the victim that a crime has occurred is, in most cases, sufficient to justify its recording as a crime). https://www.gov.uk/government/hmic/publications/counting-rules-for-recorded-crime

2 Transport includes road traffic collisions, highway disruption, road related offences and rail / air / marine incidents not recorded within the other categories listed.


4 It is also possible that other agencies will refer an incident that is clearly a crime.
We found one force that recorded sexual offences on a separate system. 

HOCR, General Rules, Annex A.

Forces use different criteria for deciding when to close an incident. For example, some forces close incidents once an officer has attended the scene while others only close incidents once all outstanding actions are complete.


Section H, HOCR.

HOCR, General Rules, Section C, No Crimes (1 of 2).

HOCS Annex A, National Crime Recording Standard (4 of 6), paragraph 4.2.