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The dark side of Maltese crime

Malta is a relatively safe country on paper, but with its total of 182,034 reported crimes from 1998 to 2008, it is not exactly a Garden of Eden. Criminologist SAVIOUR FORMOSA (www.crimemalta.com) analyses Malta's crime statistics and demographics

Consider a society composed of two hermits, each living distant from the other, with zero temptation levels and no rules. One morning, one of the hermits sneezes and breaks the silence. The hermits therefore create a rule against noise, and the same hermit keeps breaking it by sneezing; thus ending up subjected to sanctions.

Even "crimeless" societies, such as the imaginary society of two hermits, have their own levels of crimes – and new crimes are constantly being acknowledged under new rules.

For instance: until 1995, internet pornography as we know it couldn't have existed because the worldwide web was still undergoing birth pangs. Now, it is prosecuted. In similar lines, P2P piracy is currently being contested in courts – take PirateBay, the website which allows users to illegally download copyrighted material. The list goes on...

Crime is both realistic and relativistic, with rules created to comfort the powers that be as well as to ensure public safety. Malta is not virgin hermit territory and crimes have been around for ages; a forensic analysis of Ghar Dalam may yet bring up evidence of crimes dating back tens of thousands of years.

Malta in the World

The Maltese islands have a relatively moderate crime rate at 34 crimes per 1,000 persons, against a high of 100 for Finland at one extreme and 10 for Greece at another at an EU level. On a global level, there is



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Dominica at 112 and Yemen at 1 (although the latter may not report all crimes).

Malta's middle way looks good on paper, but indepth analysis makes for interesting reading nonetheless. With its total of 182,034 reported crimes from 1998 to 2008, Malta is clearly no Garden of Eden.

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Criminal trends

Malta has a declining number of crimes being reported, going down from 18,579 in 2005 to 13,804 in 2008, having previously gone up from 15,771 in 1998 to the 2005 figure.

The later years' trend exhibits diverse realities; increased and highly efficient police intervention, a realistic and muted public interest to report crime, a generic lack of expectation that crimes will be solved, indifference in reporting specific crimes and myriad reasons as numerous as there are victims.

'Dark figure of crime' surveys prove that the numbers are actually higher and point to unreporting ranging even up to 50% in western societies.

Malta has yet to upgrade its 1999 study.

Dangerousness

On a scale of dangerousness (a Formosa score model that places Malta at the different spatial level within a relative safety-dangerousness scale), Malta is deemed safe, though progressively decreasing in relative safety. Whilst one may be tempted to mix this issue with the public's perception that crime is on the increase, as based on media reporting of serious crimes, the scientific model points to the increase in dangerousness as a direct result of the decrease in reporting of crimes. The fact that fewer people are reporting both petty crimes, and crimes deemed too small to merit solving, is resulting in a relative upsurge in the number of more serious crimes, thus rendering the Maltese islands an increasingly dangerous place.

This is another reason why the dark figure of crime surveys will help us get an idea of what the reality is out there.

Types of crime

How do we rank amongst other countries in the EU? Malta ranks high for robberies, average for generic thefts, automobile thefts, burglaries and assaults, whilst we are lowest for rapes, homicides, drugs, fraud and

bribery. However when contrasted to similar-sized islands, Malta is way above the norm ranking high for generic theft, automobile theft, robberies and burglaries, indicating the fact that our structure is more continental than island-based.

A brief look at the most common crimes occurring in 2008 shows that in their majority, theft cases hit over 58.9% with over 8000 cases reported, followed by damages at 16.8% and thirdly by bodily harm at 7.3%. Interestingly, one category that was 'hidden' till a few years ago, today ranks fifth at 5.6%: domestic violence.

RISC Analysis

RISC (Relative Index of Spatial Crime) analysis shows that each local council has its own banshees to deal with. Considering that some localities register highest in the league of tables for most crime categories, it is a wonder why significant measures are not put in place in either a public or a public-private venture. At five times the national rate, Paceville keeps hitting top of the tops (http://crimemalta.com/risc_total.htm), what with over 60,000 persons aggregating there over a few hours per week. The figure below shows a phenomenal peak for non-serious crimes pointing to Paceville as against all the rest, with smaller peaks in Valletta, Sliema, and St Paul's Bay again due to their intrinsic retail and recreational nature.

Taking an aerial perspective one can immediately identify those areas which have significant hotspots in total number of crimes. What is interesting is that the areas surrounding these hotspots suffer from crimes that have nothing to do with the actual incentive that makes someone opt the commit an offence: take the residential areas of Swieqi, which suffers greatly from the recreational activities of a handful of streets in Paceville. This calls for a balancing of incentive and victim in terms of safety, requiring the shifting of the safety-onus on those entities that are attracting crime even if inadvertently: it is time for the social partners to balance their wares and ensure safety in their immediate footprint and that of the neighbouring areas. Forget neighbourhood watch, and install a functioning enforcement system funded by the entrepreneurs. It serves their end, too, as crimes will keep increasing in these areas and other alternative and more secure recreational localities may be in the pipeline, thus

eroding their income base.

The Offender/Offence debate

It is very difficult for people to distinguish between offence locations and offender locations. Three out of four state that Bormla has the worst crime rate, but this is really a myth: Bormla is the worst (perennially competing with Valletta, whilst Qormi and Gzira lap hot on its heels) in terms of offender residential location. However, these places do not host crime in such large numbers due to the relative low affluent attractor status. The real crime hotspots are in Paceville (St Julian's), St Paul's Bay and Sliema, which attract crime due to their intrinsic commercial and recreational value.

Thus, offenders live in an area and offences occur in another – where is the missing link? Criminologists have studied the structures separately but environmental criminologists investigate the dynamics that bring both together, and can predict when crimes are liable to occur over time, space and severity. This is essential to plan for strategic issues in such disciplines as town planning, recreational and tourism planning as well as “geodemographical” analysis.

Such analysis looks at the way populations change and ensures that predators are given a second-hand ranking in terms of who got to the potential victim first. Tackling crime reactively is self-defeating and can be said to suffer from the “ostrich syndrome”. Proactive planning uses a different strategy: preparing for population changes and commercial realities, predicting crime, in addition to tackling the social issues that permeate and enhance the melting-pot of human misery that keeps generating offenders.

As long as there are laws, there will always be offenders, but acknowledging that a festering-pot does exist, and doing nothing at strategic level to simmer it down, is in itself criminal. Such issues as parole will help in rehabilitation and reduction of recidivism, but the Minotaur resides in the labyrinth and it is there that society must concentrate: clean up the labyrinth and the social capital (educational, social and religious structures, etc) while enhancing social cohesion (guardians – families – peers). Releasing offenders without ensuring a base safety net for the offender, the victim and for society will not work, but ensuring that all measures are accounted for will.

In a silent world, the hermit will still sneeze
occasionally.

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