**SCMP Article**

**Changing face of crime means HK must stay alert**

Hong Kong police released the 2015 crime statistics a few weeks ago. They are largely good. For example, the number of homicides fell by 18.5 per cent. It is a reminder of just how safe Hong Kong is. Violent crimes are so rare that a small change in the absolute number can mean a big change in percentage terms.

The 18.5 per cent fall in homicides was actually a decline from 27 in 2014 to 22 in 2015 – that’s out of 7.2 million people. Detroit in the United States last year had 295 murders out of a population of 680,000. So our murder rate, per hundred thousand people, is just 0.3, while Detroit’s is 43. For every murder in Hong Kong, there are over 100 in Detroit. (Detroit may be extreme, but it ranked equal to Hong Kong, at 70th, in a recent survey of the world’s most liveable cities.)

The police statistics show a continuous decline in many other forms of serious crime. Robberies fell by 27.8 per cent – from 309 in 2014 to 223 in 2015. That is the lowest number since these crime figures were first collected, in 1969. Only one of last year’s robberies was committed with a real gun – and that was the first since 2006 (the culprit was arrested on the mainland). Assaults and arson have declined, while reported rapes went up from 56 to 70.

Because the absolute numbers are so low, we cannot necessarily read a trend into year-on-year figures. But for some crimes, there seems to be a clear upward pattern.

The number of blackmail cases went from 885 to 1,366. Police say this is due to people being photographed in the nude on sex chat internet sites, and then threatened. This is a new form of blackmail; it involves new technology and media, and the perpetrators are usually overseas – typically in Southeast Asia – making it far harder for our police to tackle the problem.

This is a good example of why we cannot be relaxed about Hong Kong’s low crime rates. It is very comforting to look at international comparisons for standard serious crimes. We can see, for example, that Hong Kong’s robbery rate of 4.3 per 100,000 compares well with Singapore’s (9.8) and is a fraction of New York City’s (195) or London’s (260).

But how will we do in the years ahead, as crimes can be committed far more easily across borders and through online and digital channels?

One really scary area concerns financial, transport and other data systems. The biggest crime challenge facing Hong Kong is probably cybersecurity – threats against banks, utility companies and other organisations in the form of data theft (like customers’ credit card details) and even terrorist activity.

Even members of the public in their own homes are exposed to cross-border and online criminal activity. Email scams are still out there, though the police recorded a 20 per cent fall in cases last year.

The “naked chat” blackmail has received wide publicity, but there was also a big rise in cases where gullible people lost money through online romance fraud.

Last year saw a 30 per cent rise in phone scams. One type of deception is cleverly aimed at particular types of people in Hong Kong. The victim – often a mainland student or immigrant – gets a call supposedly from mainland authorities saying they are involved in, for example, money laundering. The well-organised criminals lure worried victims into “solving” the issue by transferring money, offshore of course.

It is an ideal modern-day Hong Kong crime. It preys on people who may have moved money across the border outside formal channels. It exploits their fear of the authorities. It uses hard-to-trace communications and fund-transfer systems, though amazingly the police have worked with overseas counterparts and tracked culprits down.

The 2015 crime figures show us that Hong Kong remains one of the most secure cities in the world. We can be grateful for this, especially to the police who do so much to keep us safe. But they also reveal trends that could change that, through the rise of completely new types of crime. We cannot take low crime rates for granted.