



# Crime statistics: Are Malaysia's rising crime levels a consequence of the country's growing economy and democracy?

Many Malaysians are concern about the rising crime in the country. Difficulty in accessing the latest crime statistics has made it difficult to gauge exactly the crime levels in the country or to understand the reasons behind these criminal activities.



Our brave boys in blue. How much is crime rising and what are the causes for this rising trend in Malaysia?  
(photo from [my.news.yahoo.com](http://my.news.yahoo.com))

Newspapers and other mass media frequently report about violent and petty crime acts. This has led the previous Inspector-General of Police, Tan Sri Haji Ismail Omar, to retort that the rising crime levels in the country were only a

matter of perception. The former IGP was criticized by some quarters for his comment. Nevertheless, he does has a valid point.

Talk about an issue long and hard enough and the issue can appear more important than it really is. As any psychologist will tell us, we are prone to many types of cognitive biases. We have a tendency, for instance, only to remember outcomes that support our perception, while forgetting the many other outcomes that failed to agree with our perception. We are also prone to follow the crowd because we tend to believe that mass perception is correct.

Risk of overstating an issue and selective reporting by the mass media and ubiquitous sharing of news through the social media (such as Facebook) can encourage our cognitive biases; thereby inflating the true level of significance and prevalence of an issue.

Consequently, mass media coverage level and social media news cannot always be reliable sources to gauge the crime levels in this country or to understand the reasons for their rise. Fortunately, many scientific studies have been done on crime and its factors.



Recent spate of shootings in Malaysia. Pictured here is the Arab-Malaysian Development Bank founder, Hussain Ahmad Najadi, who was killed by a gunman in Kuala Lumpur on July 29, 2013 (photo from [themalaymailonline.com](http://themalaymailonline.com))

Studies have shown that the poor economic condition of a country (such as high levels of unemployment, low income, and political instability) would exacerbate

crime levels. A study by Fajnzylber and associates in 2002, for instance, showed that a country's rising GDP (Gross Domestic Product) per capita was associated with declining robbery rates in 15 industrialized, 11 Latin American and the Caribbean, 4 Eastern Europe, 3 Middle East, and 12 Asian countries.

That said, however, rising economic performance can also increase crime rates. Stronger economic growth leads to increase in wealth and higher level of transferable assets, which in turn leads to more lucrative targets or opportunities for potential criminals.

So, could it be that Malaysia' rising crime levels are due to the country's tenacious pursuit of a higher income and developed nation status?

Malaysia's Gross National Income (GNI) has increased rapidly to USD9,970 in 2012 from USD6,700 in 2009. Compare these figures to Malaysia's GNI of a mere USD670 in 1970. If Malaysia's GNI continue at its current growth rate, the country's per capita income would hit USD15,000 by 2020, successfully making Malaysia a high income and developed nation by then.

Crime statistics compiled by Habibullah and Baharom in 2008 showed that the crime rates in Malaysia in the last three decades (1973-2003) rose between 1 to 8% per year. More than 80% of the crime committed during this period were related to property crimes such as burglary, vehicle theft, and larceny.

Crime category	Average number of cases			Average growth rates in crime cases (in percentage)			Average share of criminal activities to total crime		
	1973-82	1983-92	1993-2003	1974-82	1983-92	1993-2003	1973-82	1983-92	1993-2003
Crimes	62638	77262	127590	6.4	1.2	8.2	808	100	100
Violence	6823	30902	17065	16.1	4.1	8.1	9.49	13.18	13.45
Murder	240	348	511	4.0	7.2	3.2	0.39	0.46	0.42
Attempted murder	64	45	59	-4.5	-4.2	12.2	0.10	0.06	0.05
Armed robbery	583	811	587	12.8	3.8	-1.9	0.81	1.05	0.61
Robbery	5228	4756	18179	14.8	-9.0	19.5	8.31	7.42	7.81
Rape	323	487	1218	8.2	5.9	6.8	0.52	0.68	1.05
Assault	1679	2526	4372	8.4	4.3	5.8	2.66	3.31	3.53
Property	56616	47968	110485	8.1	0.8	8.2	80.31	86.98	86.55
Capital burglary	5634	4445	7862	8.6	-3.2	4.8	9.06	5.79	5.76
North burglary	12385	18713	28331	10.8	9.7	3.7	19.57	21.58	18.83
Larceny-in-shop	167	576	2701	16.4	16.6	18.2	0.26	0.77	2.04
Car theft	1368	2935	5243	15.9	6.1	11.4	1.81	3.77	3.99
Motorcycle theft	5342	11635	32886	15.2	6.4	15.4	8.37	14.98	24.49
Loanship	35911	38876	42372	2.9	-0.7	6.8	54.78	48.99	53.49

Statistics on criminal activities in Malaysia, 1973-2003 (from Habibullah and Baharom, 2008)

But worryingly, violent or serious crimes (such as murder, robbery, rape, and assault) have increased by a larger margin of between 4 to 10% per year. In 1973-82, violent crime contributed 9.5% of the total crime in Malaysia, but its contribution has risen to 13.5% in 1993-2003.

Habibullah and Baharom further found that Malaysia's rising economic

performance, as measured by real GNP (Gross National Product) per capita, was associated to higher crime levels. More specifically, when real GNP per capita increased, crime levels due to murder, rape, assault, and burglary increased likewise. This positive association between real GNP per capita and crime rates could be due to increasing wealth and transferable assets in Malaysia, giving rise to more criminal activities, as mentioned previously.

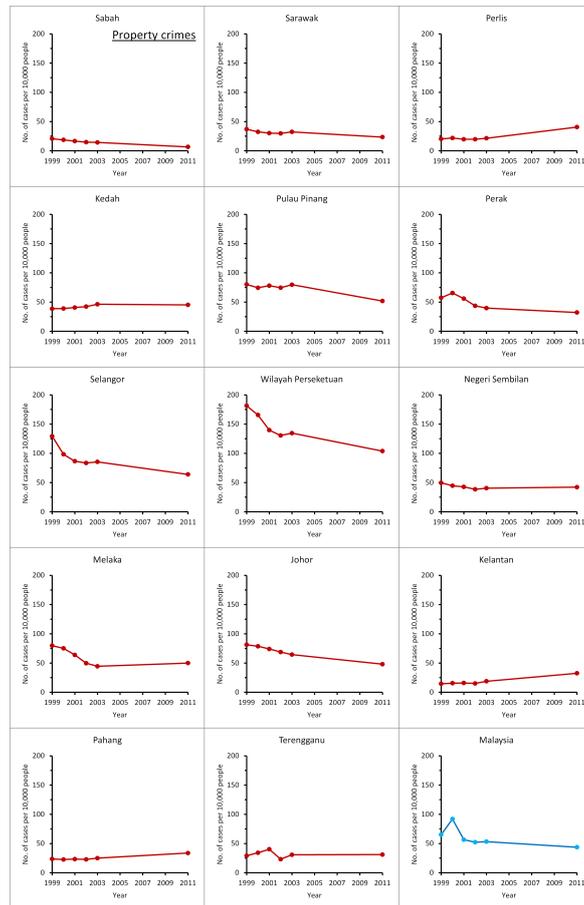
The crime statistics released by the Department of Statistics, Malaysia showed that most of the crime from 1999 to 2003 and 2011 occurred in densely populated and wealthier states: Kuala Lumpur, followed by Selangor, then Johor and Pulau Pinang experienced the highest crime rates for both property and violent crime categories in Malaysia.

Higher economic growth and higher income disparity may have contributed to Malaysia's rising crime levels. Malaysia's distribution of wealth, as measured by the Gini Coefficient Index, stands at 0.43 in 2012 (note: Gini of 1 measures perfect equality in distribution of wealth, whereas Gini of 0 denotes perfect inequality of wealth distribution).

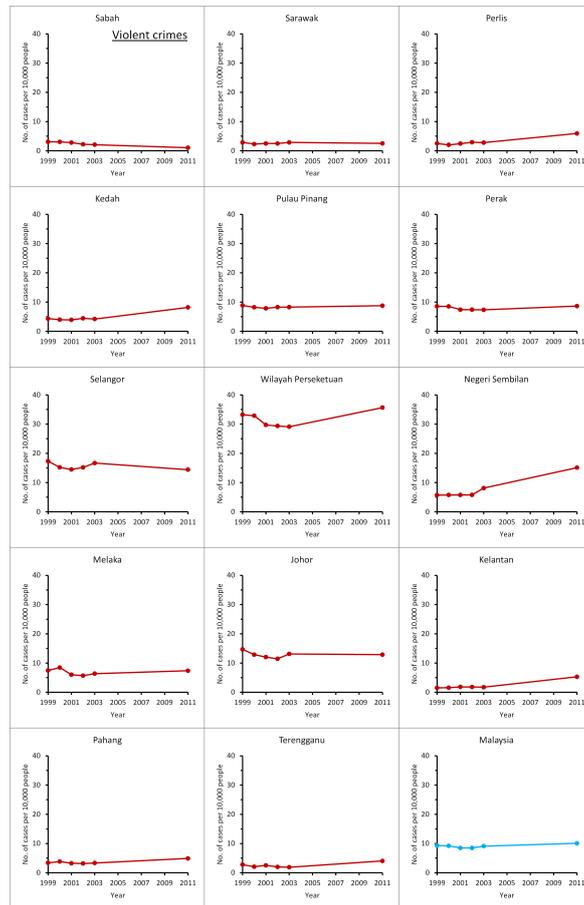


Smash-and-grab at a traffic light  
(photo from investvine.com)

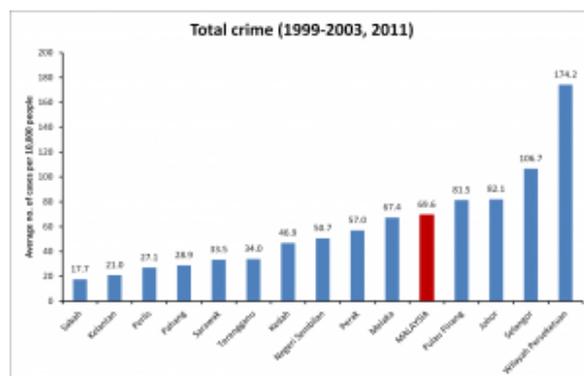
From a Gini score of about 0.5 in the 1970s, Malaysia's Gini's score has since stagnated at about 0.45 since the 1980s. Malaysia's income disparity is one of the highest in Asia and which is higher than India, Thailand, and Indonesia. And many studies have showed that when the gap between the rich and the poor widens, crime rates tend to rise.



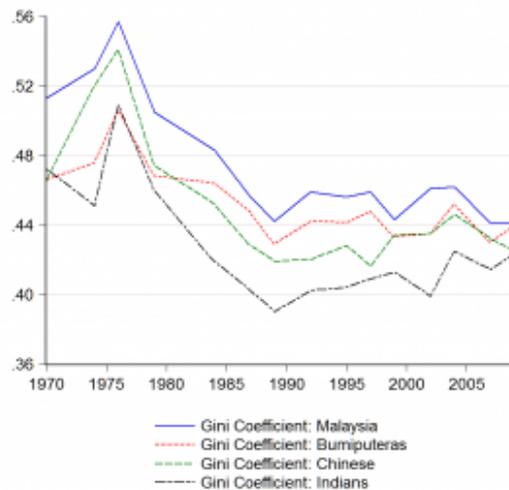
Property crime rates (per 10,000 people) in each state in Malaysia, 1999-2003 and 2011 (from [www.statistics.gov.my](http://www.statistics.gov.my))



Serious or violent crime rates (per 10,000 people) in each state in Malaysia, 1999-2003 and 2011 (from [www.statistics.gov.my](http://www.statistics.gov.my))



Average annual total crime rate (for every 10,000 people) in Malaysia, 1999-2003 and 2011 (from [www.statistics.gov.my](http://www.statistics.gov.my))



Income disparity (as measured by Gini index) in Malaysia. Malaysia's GNI has stagnated since 1980s at a score of about 0.45 (photo from econsmalaysia.blogspot.com)

Another possibility for the rising crime levels in Malaysia is — contentiously — the greater democratic freedom now experienced in the country. The national election results in 2008 and 2013 have compelled the Malaysian government to allow increasingly more democratic freedom in the country. Some opined that greater democracy would lead to lower crime levels because of the existence of greater social responsibility and discipline and the establishment of a judicial system with more appropriate punishment system.

However, the study by Lin in 2007 showed that the relationship between democracy and crime is not straightforward. Lin observed that non-democratic countries are more aggressive in enforcing laws against minor crimes than major crimes compared to democratic countries. Furthermore, the fear of crime is lesser among the people in non-democratic countries than in democratic countries. Some countries like Russia, Bulgaria, and Hungary have experienced greater difficulty in imposing harsh criminal punishment system that would otherwise be easier before they had adopted a higher level of democracy.

Using crime data collected from the Interpol for 18 countries and for the period 1971-1996, Lin found that greater democracy levels were associated to lower rates of homicide but higher rates of robbery, burglary, car theft, all theft, and total crime. The relationships between democracy and rape and between

democracy and serious assault were, however, weak.

Lin also found that democratic countries have shorter prison lengths than non-democratic countries. The prison length for homicide and minor crimes in democratic countries were shorter by 20% and 80%, respectively, than that in non-democratic countries. This disparity supports Lin’s findings that democracy is generally associated with higher minor crime rates (due to lower deterrence to commit minor crimes).

Comparison of crime rates for low and high democracy. Interpol data: 1971-1996

	Homicide	Rape	Robbery	Serious assault	Car theft	Burglary	All crime	Other theft
Low	9.5	6.3	30.7	93	16.3	142	1098	199
Democracy	(27.9)	(12.7)	(49.7)	(179)	(24)	(221)	(1701)	(246)
High	6.7	30.8	66.2	102.6	245.4	865	4387	1310
Democracy	(8.8)	(14.3)	(88.2)	(171)	(300)	(791)	(4346)	(1293)

Per 100,000 people per year. Standard errors are in parentheses.

Comparison of crime rates for 18 low and high democracy countries based on Interpol data, 1971-1996 (from Lin, 2007)

Malaysia is undergoing rapid transformation. In pursuit of a high income and developed nation status by 2020, as well as increased allowance of democratic freedom, means Malaysia is changing economically, politically, and socially. Malaysia’s aspirations are to be lauded, but these aspirations may carry detrimental side effects to the society such as rising crime levels. If left unchecked, crime can jeopardize Malaysia’s aspirations.

The challenge for Malaysia today is to achieve her goals and at the same time mitigate the detrimental side effects of greater wealth and democracy.



Malaysia’s aspirations for high income and developed nation status

by 2020 could be why crime levels are rising in the country (from [malaysiasdilemma.files.wordpress.com](http://malaysiasdilemma.files.wordpress.com))

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