The findings of the NCS 2004 were first published in early 2005. The public and the media accepted them cautiously, as for the first time there was an attempt to present an alternative to police statistics. Rather than being surprising, such reactions bring attention to another aspect of the crime situation—the formative factors of Bulgarian society’s perceptions of crime.

The issue of public perception of crime has been well studied and the EU and in 2005 even sparked a major political debate in Germany. A recent study by the Criminological Research Institute of Lower Saxony showed that despite a continuous fall in crime registered by police statistics and victimization surveys in the period 1993–2003, the majority of the public believed that the overall level of crime was on the rise. The problem lied in the fact that these misguided public perceptions had fuelled a political agenda for stricter penalties and repressive approaches, despite the falling crime rate.58

The problem that Bulgarian society faces is quite similar to the German one, as it has become a politically advantageous position to call for tough measures against crime. A good example of such measures is the legislative amendments leading to long-term prison sentences for drug users (see box 1 on p. 31).59

Detailed studies on public perceptions of crime have not been done in Bulgaria. But the more general questions about attitudes to street and organized crime included in the NCS could be used to analyze this issue. As NCS 2005 finds out, crime in Bulgaria in 2004 dropped by 40.5% compared to 2001. However, only 9.3% of the respondents thought that crime had gone down (figure 13). The pervasive opinion (of 40% of respondents) is that crime is growing, despite convincing evidence to the contrary.


59 The change was initiated in view of the upcoming elections by a small parliamentary party (Novoto Vreme), which saw it as a populist move to introduce legislative amendments.
A gap between the perceptions and reality of the crime situation could also be observed among business sector respondents. Although crime continued to fall in 2005, only 7.8% of business respondents declared they thought it was on the decrease (figure 18). This gap is best exemplified by the record-high levels for perceived street and organized crime registered in January and February 2001 (figure 19).

In January and February 2001, the issue of growing crime brought about a political crisis, involving a motion of no confidence and a blockade on the Parliament by taxi-drivers, who were angered by the murder of a taxi driver’s child. In February 2001, 71% of respondents were of the opinion that crime was on the rise, while only 5 to 6% of them declared to have been a victim of crime in the preceding three months. The rise of crime-related articles during this period indicates that the media is the main contributor to these public misconceptions. During the same period (late 2000 and early 2001), several high-profile organized crime-related crimes drew the attention of the media. Nevertheless, in the months that followed, public perceptions, which often conflate organized and street crime, retained high levels of the opinion that both categories of crime were on the increase (figure 20).
In the spring of 2001, organized-crime-related incidents did not abate. But in April the media’s focus shifted sharply to the upcoming parliamentary elections (in particular the entry into politics of the former king, Simeon Saxe-Coburg Gotha). As the media moved away from the topic of crime, public perceptions of growing crime also decreased.

The lack of monthly data hampers a detailed analysis of public perceptions of crime after October 2002. Annual data after the summer of 2002, though, indicates that the public slowly began to differentiate between organized and street crime. Since August 2002, perceptions of growing organized crime have remained consistently higher than perceptions of growing street crime (figure 21). The first factor contributing to these perceptions is the streak of contract killings and assassination attempts of organized crime figures after 2002. These acts usually happen during the day and in public places and attract significant media attention. For instance, the 2005 survey was carried out in late November and early December, soon after the assassination on 26 October 2005 of banker Emil Kyulev—one of the richest individuals in Bulgaria thought to have been involved in various illegal activities. This is the immediate reason why more respondents supported the opinion that organized crime was growing.

The second notable factor that explains the decreasing level of perceptions of high street crime is that in the fall of 2005 a new government (the Minister of Interior being a leading figure in it) was formed. In its first months it enjoyed strong public support, therefore resulting in public perceptions that crime was under control.