

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR LEGAL RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS



Open Access, Refereed Journal Multi Disciplinary
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AWARENESS OF ZERO FIR AMONG THE GENERAL PUBLIC OF TAMILNADU

AUTHORED BY - J.M. ANISHA

Abstract

The concept of Zero First Information Report (Zero FIR) was introduced to expedite the process of reporting cognizable offences regardless of the jurisdiction. It allows a person to approach any police station for reporting cognizable offences without creating any delay due to disagreement over the jurisdiction. It is crucial to note that despite the criminal justice system's approach, Zero FIR's success is dependent on public awareness and law enforcement agencies' efficacy.

Therefore, this paper aims to look upon public awareness about Zero FIR and their perception about Zero FIR as a cognizable offence reporting method. This paper will attempt to find out if people are aware of their fundamental rights to register FIR at any police station and if the unawareness can cause hindrance in FIR registration. The research aims to observe the lacunae in public knowledge about Zero FIR and in-depth analysis of the need for legal awareness and propagation of knowledge regarding Zero FIR. The paper will conclude by emphasizing the legal importance of bridging the gap between the law and lacunae in public knowledge.

Introduction

The First Information Report (FIR) is integral to the criminal justice system as it records the initial information relating to the cognizable offence. Registration of FIR allows police to start the investigation and take relevant action on the alleged commission of an offence. However, one of the difficulties in practice of FIR registration has traditionally been the issue of jurisdiction.

Victims or informants might be required to approach police station who have jurisdiction over the place where offence was committed. This could cause inconvenience or, in some cases, delay in reporting of the alleged offence. Concept Zero FIR aims at addressing precisely this problem by allowing the person to report about a cognizable offence at any police station and have the information recorded as Zero FIR and transferred to the police station having the appropriate jurisdiction for investigation. This concept is especially useful as it aims at

eliminating jurisdiction as a barrier to immediate reporting of the cognizable offence.

The legal recognition of this concept has become possible due to the introduction of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023 (BNSS)¹ which replaced the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973². Statutory framework of BNSS provides for recording of information related to cognizable offences irrespective of the area where the offence was committed. However, the existence of a legal provision does not guarantee that the general public is well-versed with the rights or procedures.

Public awareness is, therefore, one of the most important aspects while considering the efficacy of the Zero FIR mechanism. A person who is not acquainted with the concept might not realize their right to approach a police station of their choice or might not have an option to do so. Thus, lack of awareness might lead to confusion or delay at this initial stage of a FIR registration. The research attempts to identify the public's awareness level about Zero FIR mechanism and whether the public understands the protection the law provides for.³

Therefore, the research is focused on the relationship between legal availability of the Zero FIR and the public's awareness about Zero FIR's practical application. It analyzes the responses given in the survey to offer the empirical evidence for the significance of the question of the awareness in the context of the legal access to justice.

Literature Review

The concept of Zero FIR has been discussed in Indian legal and criminal justice literature in relation to accessing justice, police accountability and registering cognizable offences. Existing literature generally recognizes Zero FIR as a mechanism designed to address the challenges posed by the principle of territorial jurisdiction at the initial stage of reporting an offence.

Scholars have analyzed the value of Zero FIR in ensuring the timely registration of complaints and minimizing the procedural hurdles faced by victims and informants. Several legal commentaries and academic discussions on FIR registration have examined the obligations of the police in recording information in relation to cognizable offences. These discussions emphasize that procedural requirements should not constitute unnecessary barriers to accessing the criminal justice system. Literature concerning police administration has also recognized the issue of delays and reluctance in registering complaints as a pertinent concern, and thus has made Zero FIR relevant to the larger goal of ensuring accessible police.

¹ The Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, No. 46, Acts of Parliament, 2023.

² The Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973, No. 2, Acts of Parliament, 1974.

³ Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, § 173.

Research on offences against women has particularly emphasized the importance of mechanisms which enable victims to report offences without facing unnecessary procedural obstacles⁴. In this regard, Zero FIR has been discussed as a means of facilitating immediate reporting, particularly where the victim is away from the location where the offence was committed. Such literature emphasizes the importance of immediate police intervention and the need for victim-centric procedures. The available literature also demonstrates the importance of legal awareness in the implementation of legal rights. Studies on public legal awareness have found that knowledge of legal procedures influences an individual's ability to recognize and exercise their remedies.

However, knowledge of general legal rights does not necessarily entail awareness of specific procedural mechanisms such as Zero FIR. This distinction is particularly pertinent in the case of Zero FIR, which entails concepts such as cognizable offences and territorial jurisdiction, which are not familiar to members of the general public. The transition from the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 to the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023 has only underscored the relevance of legal research on the public's understanding of FIR registration procedures.

Although existing legal literature has discussed the statutory framework and procedural changes, comparative less attention has been given to examining the extent to which the members of the general public understand these changes and the practical rights at their disposal.

A review of the available literature demonstrates that a great deal of the discussion surrounding Zero FIR is doctrinal or descriptive, emphasizing statutory provisions, judicial decisions, police guidelines and the importance of the mechanism. A study conducted by Jeanne W. Simon, Claudio Fuentes-Saavedra, and Juan Carlos Rodríguez-Torrent in the journal *Law & Society Review* published by Cambridge University Press shows that there is a significant relationship between people and law showing that a citizen's **"self-perceived knowledge of where to turn" (legal awareness) directly dictates their "willingness to pursue a formal remedy"** when facing an issue.⁵

Another study by the World Justice Project⁶ shows that 59% of people who face a legal problem

⁴ § 173(1)(ii), Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, No. 46, Acts of Parliament, 2023 (India).

⁵ Jeanne W. Simon et al., *Citizen Awakening? Exploring Legal Consciousness in a Context of Mass Political Mobilization*, 58 *Law & Soc'y Rev.* 223, 225 (2024).

⁶ World Justice Project, *Global Insights on Access to Justice: Findings from the World Justice Project General Population Poll in 101 Countries* 15 (2019), <https://worldjusticeproject.org/our-work/publications/special-reports/global-insights-access-justice>.

never reach the government authorities or seek help. These data prove that knowing *how* and *where* to contact the state is the primary threshold required for a citizen to stop being passive and actively reach out to public institutions. Although these studies contribute to an important understanding of the legal framework, there is comparatively limited empirical research examining public awareness of Zero FIR, particularly amongst the general population in the context of Tamil Nadu.

Research objectives

1. To assess the level of awareness among the general public on the concept of Zero FIR.
2. To assess the respondents' knowledge on the concept of cognizable offences and jurisdiction and their relation with registration of Zero FIR.
3. To examine whether lack of public awareness on Zero FIR may be a factor of delay in reporting cognizable offences.

Research questions

1. What is the level of awareness among the general public regarding the concept of Zero FIR?
2. How far are members of the public aware that a cognizable offence can be reported at a police station irrespective of territorial jurisdiction?
3. If a police station refuses to register a Zero FIR because the offence occurred outside its jurisdiction, do the public know where or how you can complain about such refusal?

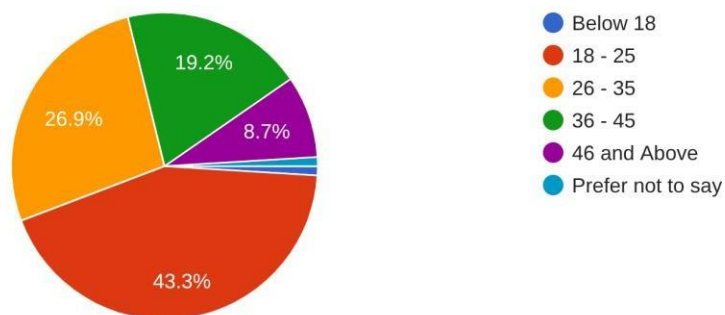
Methodology

A non-doctrinal and empirical research study was conducted to ascertain the level of awareness of the public about Zero FIR. The study collected primary data from respondents through a questionnaire. This information helps in concluding the study's findings about the level of awareness of the public about Zero FIR cognizable offences and jurisdiction. This paper uses secondary information from statutes, and literature to provide background to the research and legal justification.

Analysis and findings

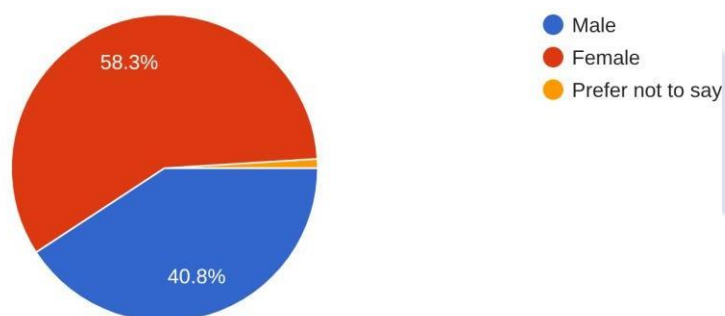
What is your age group?

104 responses



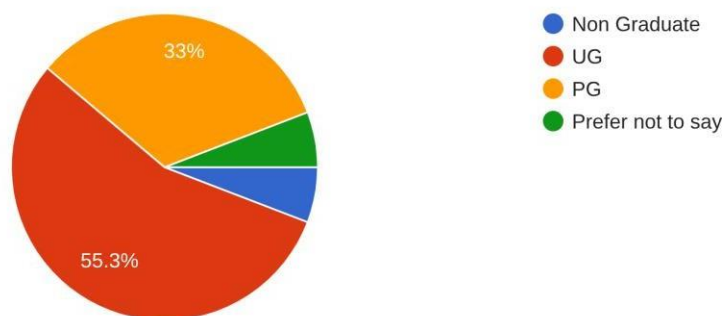
What is your gender?

103 responses



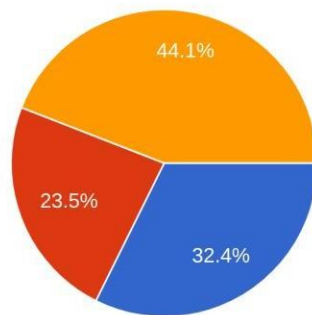
What is your highest level of education?

103 responses



Have you ever heard about Zero FIR?

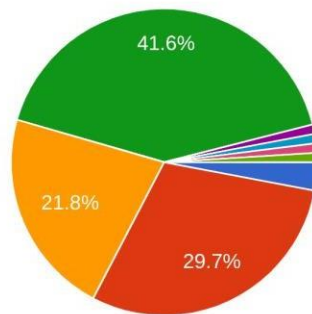
102 responses



- Yes, I know what it means
- I have heard the term but don't know its meaning
- No, I don't know

How did you first learn about Zero FIR, if you have heard of it?

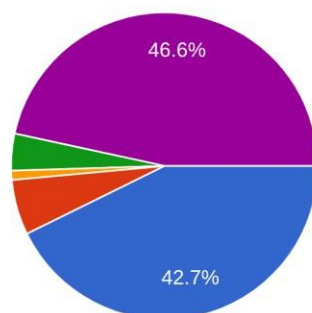
101 responses



- Class Room
- Social Media
- Friends/ Family
- I have never heard of it
- Internet
- Workshops
- Police station
- I am an Advocate and hence i know

What is a Zero FIR?

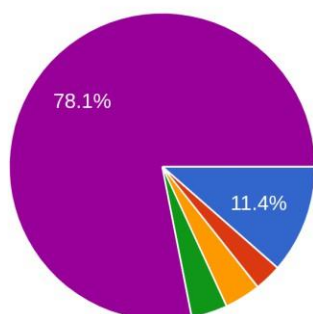
103 responses



- An FIR that can be registered at any police station, irrespective of where the offence occurred
- An FIR that can only be registered at the police station where the offence occurred
- An FIR registered only for serious offences
- An FIR that does not require any investigation
- I am not sure

When do you think the concept of Zero FIR was first formally introduced/recognised in India?

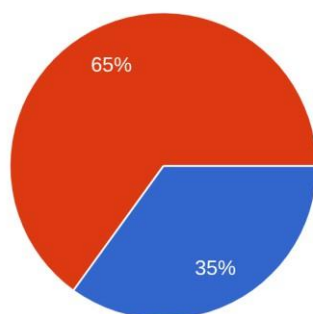
105 responses



- 10 May 2013 — through an advisory issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA)
- 25 December 2023 — through the enactment of the BNSS, 2023
- 1 July 2024 — when the BNSS came into force
- It was introduced only through the BNSS and had no prior recognition
- I am not sure

If a police station refuses to register a Zero FIR because the offence occurred outside its jurisdiction, do you know where or how you can complain about such refusal?

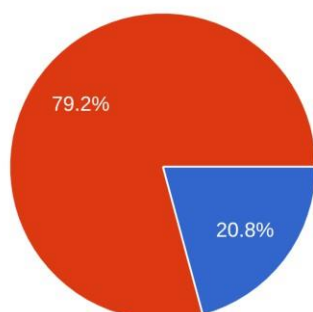
103 responses



- Yes
- No

Do you think the general public in Tamil Nadu is adequately aware of Zero FIR?

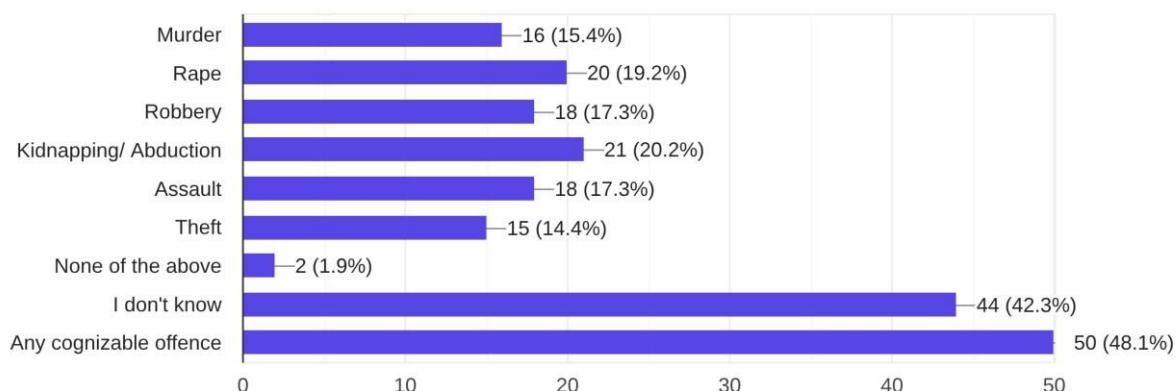
101 responses



- Yes
- No

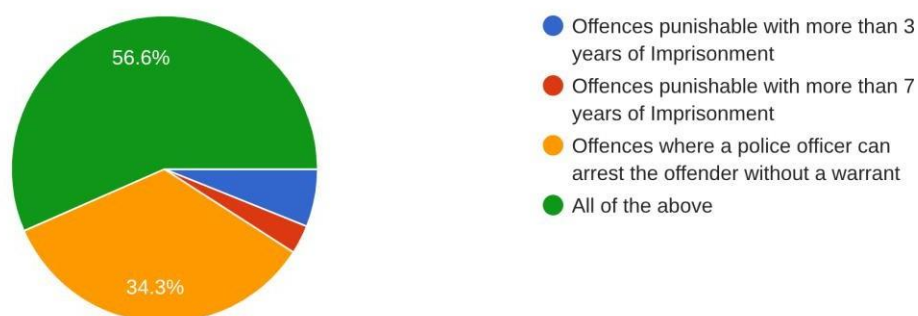
Which of the following offences do you think can be reported through a Zero FIR?

104 responses



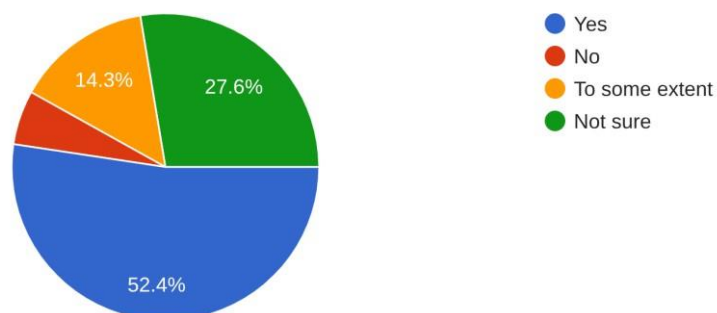
What is a cognizable offence

99 responses



Do you think lack of public awareness about Zero FIR allows police officers to more easily refuse or delay the registration of an FIR when the offence occurred outside their jurisdiction?

105 responses



Discussion

The findings of the present study indicate that the awareness of the public about the Zero FIR is alarmingly sparse. About 33 out of 105 respondents said that they knew what Zero FIR meant, while 24 had heard the term but did not know its meaning. And 45 had not heard of Zero FIR at all. This indicates that the awareness of the concept is limited among the surveyed population. Here I have to mention that I also surveyed the lawyer population and even after a significant number of them answered this was the result. So one might wonder what the result would be if the target was just undergrads or illiterates or even just the normal public excluding lawyers who filled at least 20% of the responses. The responses concerning the meaning of Zero FIR also show that the awareness is limited. While 44 respondents correctly identified it as an FIR that can be registered at any police station irrespective of where the offence occurred, 48 were unsure about the meaning. This shows that merely hearing the term does not necessarily translate into a practical understanding, and the findings suggest a difference between awareness of the term and substantive legal awareness. The responses about the formal recognition of Zero FIR, also indicate limited knowledge. A substantial majority of 82 respondents were unsure when the concept was introduced or recognised in India. Only 12 identified the Ministry of Home Affairs advisory dated 10 May 2013. This is relevant because it shows that knowledge of Zero FIR extends only to limited understanding of the concept, and does not generally include the legal or administrative development.

Another important finding concerns the respondents' knowledge about the remedies if a police station refuses to register a Zero FIR on the grounds of territorial jurisdiction. Only 36 respondents said they knew where or how they could complain about the refusal. 67 were not aware of this information. This shows further that knowledge of the existence of Zero FIR is of little value if people are unaware of the course of action when the mechanism is not properly implemented. The perception of the respondents about the public awareness in Tamil Nadu was also interesting. A large majority, 80 out of 105 respondents believed that the general public in Tamil Nadu is not adequately aware of Zero FIR. This perception is broadly consistent with the responses obtained in the preceding questions, especially the high number of respondents who were either unfamiliar with Zero FIR or unsure about its meaning and application.

The responses to the relationship between public awareness and police refusal and delay are also significant. Fifty-five respondents believed that the lack of public awareness allows police officers to refuse or delay registering when the offence occurred outside their jurisdiction, while 15 believed it occurs to some extent. Twenty-nine were unsure and only six respondents answered in the negative. These responses suggest that a substantial proportion of the surveyed

population perceives public awareness as an important factor for the practical implementation of Zero FIR. However, these responses are those of the respondents and should not by themselves be taken as proof that police officers generally refuse or delay FIR registration because of public ignorance. The findings also show the importance of public legal education. Among the suggestions for ways to increase awareness, social media and other digital platforms were often mentioned. Some respondents also suggested awareness campaigns, short educational videos, posters in police stations and other public places, and awareness programmes via educational institutions. These responses show that respondents perceive accessible and easily understandable forms of legal communication as potentially useful. Overall, the survey findings indicate that the main issue is not merely whether people have heard of Zero FIR, but whether they have sufficient knowledge to understand and exercise the mechanism in practice. The results show the gaps in awareness of its meaning, applicability, procedural consequences and remedies. The study therefore highlights the importance of strengthening public legal awareness so that the statutory and procedural safeguards associated with Zero FIR can be more effectively understood and accessed.

Conclusion

The present study was conducted to understand how much public awareness and knowledge there is on the Zero FIR and its importance in expediting the reporting mechanism in the criminal justice system. The responses obtained from the participants through the survey conducted indicate that although the Zero FIR institution has been introduced, a lot still needs to be done in terms of creating public awareness and educating the masses about the same. Some respondents indicated that they had heard of the Zero FIR, while others did not have any information about it. Additionally, a lot of confusion was witnessed among the respondents about the provisions and the remedies that come along with the Zero FIR. It was also noted that most respondents felt that the Zero FIR was not well advertised and most people in Tamil Nadu did not have a proper understanding of the Zero FIR. Many people had no idea what a cognizable offence is which is concerning because we say zero FIR can be used only in case of cognizable offences but many people don't even know what it means. This indicates that although the introduction of the Zero FIR was a step towards making the process of reporting cognizable offences easier and faster, it might not be of much significance if the public is not well informed about it. It was also observed that through such platforms as social media, advertisements, and lectures in schools and other places, a lot of information pertaining to the Zero FIR can be made public so that people know where to go in case the local police station

declines to register a complaint against any crime committed.

In summary, the results obtained from the study indicate the need to create public awareness about the Zero FIR and its provisions so that it can serve its intended purpose of helping fast-track the reporting process of cognizable offences. This way, the justice delivery system will be enhanced because of an efficient reporting mechanism. From the study, it is evident that a Zero FIR is significant in expediting the reporting process of cognizable offences, but it requires public awareness to be useful.

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