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THE ITALIAN CITIZEN’S SAFETY SURVEY

Submitted by ISTAT, Italy *

I. Introduction

1. In 1997-1998 ISTAT Social Structures and Dynamics service carried out the first survey on citizen’s safety concerning crimes against people and against property, the perception of safety in their environment and the safety measures adopted against the diffusion of criminality. It’s a periodic survey (every five years), that was repeated in 2002.
2. Furthermore Istat is planning a survey on violence against women that will be carried on 2005¹.
3. Traditionally, surveys on criminality were based on statistics derived from administrative sources that examine criminality from the crime perpetrator point of view, allowing to observe the level of criminality reported in terms of time and place. Instead the victimization surveys assume the victims point of view. They gather data on the underreported criminality (regarding almost a part of crime); they shed some light on how these crimes took place, they identify the population groups

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¹ It’s a dedicated survey that is substantial similar to the IVAWS. For more details consider the paper presented at the Work Session on Gender Statistics the 18-20 October 2004 ‘Italian survey on violence against women‘.

most at risk, reconstruct the victims' profile, provide information on how, when and where the crime was committed, and identify the relationship with the perpetrator of the crime and finally, surveys enable to identify which are the possible risk factors of being victimised with regard to the lifestyle, place of residence and age.

4. Moreover, since the level of criminality recorded with this method is not enough to provide a complete picture of the citizens' safety, besides examining reported and non-reported crimes, victimization surveys also examine the perception of safety in one's own living environment and the situation, relating, on the one hand, to the social environmental decay and the risk of criminality in the area where one lives, and, on the other hand, to the strategies citizens adopts to protect themselves, ranging from household security and protection systems adopted to relationship with the police.

II. Survey Aims

5. The survey on victimization aimed at acquiring an in-depth knowledge of crimes and victims. Then statistics should result from integrated data concerning the phenomenon, the related environment and the characteristics of people involved.

6. Aims included the following: an estimate of the crime level, that is the estimate of unreported crimes, of the "dark figure" of crime;

- A knowledge of crimes, specifying the type of committed crimes and their victims, individuals or property, where individuals are considered as single or as part of their reference group, their household;
- The possibility to know crimes little studied before, sexual harassment and violence which are seldom included in official statistics;
- Have information on the characteristics of crimes (when, where and how they occur...) on the offenders (number, sex, age, way of action) and their victims (who they are, what they do, where they live....);
- An outline of high-risk segments of population (by crime) and the possibility of drafting a risk map;
- An analysis of safety perception and of adopted defence strategies;
- An understanding of the citizen-police relationship based on propensity to reporting and non-reporting as well as the satisfaction degree regarding territory control; as well as their presence in the territory;
- The construction of an incivility index for the area where one lives. This index is the result of specific indicators concerning the number of drug-addicts, pushers, prostitutes and acts of vandalism against public properties.

III. Objective and subjective indicators: crimes and fear

7. Hypotheses were made to define the necessary objective and subjective indicators as well as the elements required to understand the phenomenon.

8. Objective indicators are a measure of crime incidence and prevalence and density. They are defined in time (1 year, three years, life course according the different crimes) and space (national, big areas, regional). Other indicators analyse the characteristics of victims and the conditions in which crimes were committed, or deal with the nearness (meant as geographical and living habits nearness) between victims and offenders, though none of them provides information on crime perception, on fear and on citizen defence strategies.

9. Citizen's role changes, sometimes they are the victims while in other occasions they become the offenders, other times they play an active role in social control, and they are only indirectly the source of social policies. They decide what is to be reported and what should not be reported, in this way they create a picture of crime which differs from the real one. However political users of information and police assume it as the real condition of crime.

10. The correct relation between the objective and subjective level is difficult to be determined, thus both of them should be examined.

11. The questionnaire, structured almost entirely with closed answers, was created to meet the necessity of having objective and subjective answers. On the one side crimes are surveyed, how and where they occurred, economic losses and injuries caused by crimes, the characteristics of offenders, the characteristics of victims and non-victims, their behaviours and their defence strategies, the reporting behaviour, the reason for reporting and not reporting; on the other side these elements are surveyed: the perception of fear in the streets, at home and crime risk of the area where one lives. The degree of decay of an area is very important, because the higher the level of lack of civilization in the area where one lives, the higher is the chance that this person feel unsafe and the index of incivility affects fear of crime more than actual victimisation.

12. Furthermore physical and social deterioration implies a demoralization of those living there, makes them feel more powerless. Deteriorated environments are less controlled by the police and at the end attract criminality.

13. Most recently, furthermore, a wide attention was put on the worry of crime (fear of having the car stolen, of breaking and entering, of being a victim of bag-snatching or pickpocketing, of becoming a victim of an assault or of robbery, of being sexually assaulted) and the influence of fear of crime on habits.

14. All these indicators, their combination, allow to design a better framework about citizen's safety in its complexity .

IV. Major experiences in other Western Countries

15. The starting point to design the victimization survey was the comparison with international literature and in particular with the NCVS carried out by USA, the international ICVS survey and the Canadian survey on violence against women.

16. The questionnaire has many parts similar to others. The topic considered shares some common areas and also the crimes definition are very similar. This is a good guarantee for international comparisons, even if, the absence of regulation or harmonization's attempts doesn't help the comparisons.

17. The first studies on victimization surveys were carried out in the United States in the 1960s. Since 1967, the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), which analyses the level of criminality and its victims, has been carried out annually. This survey has been improved over the years as the sources of possible errors were detected. Nowadays it is a longitudinal survey with a sample being re-interviewed on seven occasions every 6 months. The first interview is face-to-face while the others are carried out over the phone (if the family has a telephone or where they do not have any problems with being interviewed in this way).

18. Other countries have conducted similar studies, from Great-Britain to Canada, from Finland to Sweden, from Israel to France and Switzerland, although not all of them have dedicated the same

attention to methodological aspects as those applied in the United States, nor the same regularity when acquiring data, which is an important aspect for studying trends and changes in this phenomenon. In this regard, the situation of the British Crime Survey (BCS) carried out by the Home Office seems to be very interesting. This biennial survey was carried out for the first time in 1982, and has continuously been improved in terms of method and content. The increasing attention given to this matter led it to become a yearly survey, with core groups of questions that could be compared over the years.

19. Since 1989, UNICRI (the United Nation Interregional Crime Research Institute) has also been urging nations to take part in the International Crime Victimization Survey (ICVS) every 4 years, so as to have data that can be compared for the various countries. The UN finances this research in developing countries or those in transition; the industrialized countries taking part in the survey provide their own financing. Italy joined in 1992 being financed through the Internal Ministry. This survey is carried out on a small sample of 2,000 individuals, by telephone or face-to-face according to the presence of the telephone network in the country being examined. The value of this experience lies in the attempt to draw up the first harmonized questionnaire on an international level.

20. Recently the European Commission has asked to UNODC to carry out the ICVS (financing it) in the first european 15 countries.

V. Typologie of crimes studied

21. The victimization survey does not examine all crimes, but dwells upon those whose conscious victim is an individual or household, those for which it is easier to identify objective parameters of gathering and those suitable to be examined in the context of a survey aimed at gathering individuals as crime victims (for this reason extortion is not considered). Thus it eliminates crimes such as usury, that could be experienced by some persons with negative feelings of guilt. Generally it examines personal thefts, (such as pocket picking and purse snatching), household burglaries, motor vehicle theft, thefts of parts and properties in the motor vehicle, simple thefts without contact, robberies and assaults, unlawful entries, vandalisms and some sexual crimes, such as harassment, rape and sexual blackmail at work

22. We did not consider the consumer fraud, but considering their increasing rate, we think there is an urgent need to redesign the questionnaire to include it. An other important topic will be the internet thefts.

VI. The questionnaire

23. The survey instrument was carefully evaluated owing to the difficulties connected with a survey on victimization. Difficulties were increased by the adding of a section on sexual crimes and on safety systems and strategies to defend against criminals; that seems to be more sensitive and private than that on sexual crimes.


24. A number of problems should be taken into account and solved to define the survey instrument: the reference period of data to be gathered, the problem of remembering which has a double action - crimes seem to be close or remote in time depending on their importance and concern (telescoping effect). In some serious cases crimes had been forgotten or repressed, what is more some delicate issues could have affected the respondent, inducing him or her to interrupt the interview. Other difficulties include complex terms to define crimes, the questionnaire length to detail specific crimes, the problem of accessing households.

25. So we took many decisions to find solutions such as:
- the **screening technique**, useful to remember events, to count them;
 - the **sequence of sections**, in fact delicate, sensitive and confidential topics are to be faced at the end, this is a problems not only for sexual harassment and violence but also for the defence strategies systems;
 - the **reference period** that was articulated in two different ones, the last three years and the last year, to avoid the telescoping effect or the social desiderability and for remembering trivials crimes easy to forget; Furthermore in 2002 survey, because we noticed that there were some bias in remembering events, we experimented the use of the indication of the month and year to better define the period in which occurred the last episode.
 - the **wording problems**, that we have limited with the use of description and victimization stories.
26. The questionnaire consists of 17 sections (filtered in according to the victimization's experience), each regarding a crime or structural and perceptive aspects:

Section1. Family structure

Section2. Time away from home during the day and the evening


Section3. Perception of own safety (at home and in the street), influence of criminality, worry about crime, opinion about the penalty for a theft, opinion about the work done by the police, presence of the police in the area

Section4. Screening on individual crimes 

Section5. Bag snatching
Section6. Pick pocketing
Section7. Theft of personal objects

Section9. Threats

Section10. Assaults

Section11. Screening on household crimes 

Section12. Vehicles' theft
Section13. Thefts of vehicles' parts
Section14. Burglary

Section16. Sexual harassments and rapes

Section17. Home, soft crime (drugs consumption, prostitution and act of vandalism), crime perceived in the area where the interviewee lives and safety's systems

VII. The Methodology and the survey process

7a. The sample

27. The sample group of 60,000 individuals is a two-stage sample with stratification of the first-stage units. For each stratum (region and demographic size of the commune) we have a phone list of

households to be contacted. In the selected household, a respondent (aged 14 and above) is randomly chosen as secondary sample unit. Women aged 14 – 59 years are asked about sexual violence episodes.

28. Apart from the base sample, the number of sample selection names provides 3 replacement samples as numerous as the base sample (geographically closer to the telephone subscribers in the initial list).

The estimates are representative for the 21 local area in which is subdivided the Italian country.

7b. The CATI technique

29. For conducting this survey, because of the particularity and delicate nature of the studied themes, such as for example sexual harassments and rapes, assaults and threats, ISTAT decided it was necessary to abandon the traditional survey methodology (face-to-face interviews generally conducted by a municipal employee) and to opt for telephone interviews, which offer a greater guarantee of anonymity and at the same time, a guarantee of privacy and protection also with regard to the person's own environment.

30. The use of CATI made possible to get to the heart of the survey process, thanks to the greater transparency in the data collection phase: the data concerning the questionnaire and the quality indicators were processed and checked in real time. The centralisation of the data collection made possible to observe the work of the interviewers and acquire *on-line* the quality indicators on the questionnaire's performance, on the openness of the interviewees and the difficulties encountered by them, on the interviewers' work, and on the overall course of the survey.

31. CATI also made it possible to manage the questionnaire, which had an extremely complex system of filters, and to interrupt an interview at any moment and resume it later, picking up from the point where it had been cut off (that is a real good practice for guarantee more safety to women).

32. However the telephone technique did not suffice to gain easy access to households and to guarantee the quality of data. The refusal and non-response rates are very low for traditional multi-purpose surveys (resulting from face-to-face interviews made by commune interviewers), whereas rates were higher for the pilot survey in citizen's safety (July 1996).

Other instruments should be used as well to reduce refusal and non-response rates and to have more effective telephone interviews: the citizen's sensibilization, the construction of a daily monitoring system (so that adjustments could be made even during the survey), the continuous training during the survey, the psychological support.

7c. The citizens' sensibilization

33. To the selected households, an introducing letter signed by the President of the ISTAT has been sent before starting telephone calls. The letter is drawn up paying great attention to its content, inviting the receiver (telephone contract customer) to inform the whole household of the incoming ISTAT telephone call and illustrating the subject of the survey, the reasons underlying it, the interview method, the choice of keeping information providers anonymous and also inviting to gather further information by calling ISTAT free-call telephone number.

34. The free-toll number was very useful, in fact calls informed about the interviewee availability to co-operate, new addresses were notified or best time for the interview. Moreover other information were requested as well as assurances on the reliability of survey and on the Institution promoting the survey. The free-toll number was the instrument the citizens used to be reassured after the interview,

moreover the direct contact with citizens allowed to find out new problems and warning events to be immediately adjusted.

7d. The interviewers' training

35. Interviewers (only female interviewers were chosen due to sensitive questions) had to be supported and assisted during the training phase and also during the survey, owing to the peculiar nature of questions and subjects in the questionnaire.

They had a high quality task to perform, in fact interviewees should open themselves, and interviewers should bear with uneasy situations, emotional distress and psychological pressure.

36. Teaching “measured sympathy” when approaching interviewee was a difficult task, since interviewers should get their stories while interviewees should not feel deprived of their privacy but at the same time interviewers should not act as therapists.

37. The interviewer motivation was a key point, in fact interviewers are not to be considered unknown recipient of notions but an active part of the survey process. Moreover, the whole survey process, including the data gathering phase was supported.

38. This meant being responsible for both the interviewers and the interviewees. Then, for the different phases of the survey, supporting instruments had to be established: briefings (the theoretical one was of 2 days and the technical was of 1 day) and debriefings were organised, discussion groups for interviewers and researchers, as well as an internal help-desk and daily monitoring.

39. These instruments aim at:

- guaranteeing that the survey content is understood, with reference to survey goals, subject and instruments used for data collection;
- developing, in the interviewers, the necessary skills to get and correctly complete an interview;
- increasing the skills required to manage C.A.T.I.;
- specifying the multiple roles researchers play in acting as reference point even during the survey carrying out: they are research experts, they are friendly people who know how to listen and tackle embarrassing situations determined by nervous stress, weariness, emotional or psychological uneasiness, bring comfort and give suggestions, who are ready to intervene in case of dangerous telephone calls, who are the supervisors and who should solve any potential problem.

40. A further help was provided to interviewers: a **list of anti-violence centres** spread all over the Country where women could be addressed, in case they asked for help during the interview. Centres were selected according to the quality of legal, social, psychological and health services they provide to victims of sexual violence and harassment.

7e. The time table

41. Survey hours were established when households are more likely to be at home: 6.30pm to 9.30pm for weekdays and 2.00pm-7.00pm on Saturdays. During the survey, hours were slightly delayed taking into account refusals and the presence of the household at home, these data were examined daily. Households not found at home were called again, on other days at different times, while busy telephone numbers were called every 10' for an hour.

VIII. The interviewers' effect on sensitive topic

42. At the end of the survey we decided to focus on the sensitiveness of some questions and the effect of interviewers in influencing data. The results of our analyses show that there is a direct relationship between the variability due to interviewers and the sensitiveness of the questions. When asking the questions concerning sexual harassment where interviewers have emphasized every daily life contexts such as bus, street, cinema, instead of more intimate places such as work or house, which are perceived as more sensitive ones, the interviewer effect is 0.03. With regard to the question on attempted rape, the intraclass correlation coefficient is 0.12. This result shows that the interviewers feel a greater embarrassment when a sensitive topic is asked for the first time. In a similar way, it is possible to explain the lower interviewers' impact for attempted rape with respect to rape. The rape is a much more sensitive subject (with an intraclass correlation coefficient of 0.39) if compared with the attempted rape where the women had the chance to avoid such a negative and painful experience and can be considered as "winners" from this point of view. It is not the case of the questions concerning the rape where the interviewer is aware that she is asking questions to a raped woman. Therefore sensitiveness concerns not only the content of the questions, which are aimed to reconstruct the story of the crime, but also the painful climate which characterizes the interviewer-respondent interaction. The interviewer effect has also been evaluated with regard to the item non responses for sensitive questions. The interviewer intraclass correlation is 0.61 for item non responses to the different questions about violence. It is interesting to note that the interviewer effect on item non responses is very high and does not change regardless the increasing sensitiveness of the questions.

43. The analyses show that the interviewers affect the quality of the observed results. Their impact increases together with the sensitiveness of the questions they are asking (and it is similar to some questions concerning defense strategies). Moreover the results underscore that the attention to the relationship with the interviewees and the creation of a trust climate in the whole interview's setting forecast the possibility to obtain more sensitive information and to gather a higher quality interview. It can be said that the attitude and the behavior of the interviewer in any step of the interview has some consequence: the experience is capitalized in both a positive and a negative direction.

44. In this direction we chose to give more attention to interviewers selection and training.
