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**CRIME VICTIM SURVEYS:
POLITICAL RELEVANCE AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES**

Submitted by Ministry of Justice, Denmark*

1. Let me start by pointing out the enormous political relevance of victimisation surveys. The position I hold at the Danish Ministry of Justice offers me a great opportunity to observe how crime victim surveys are used among politicians and officials in the criminal justice area. Today both national and international crime victim surveys are being used to a huge extent in consequence of the general increasing tendency to use research achievements in politics.
2. It is a general knowledge that official crime data only tell a part of the story and the concept of 'dark figures' is widely accepted. So both general and political discussions on increases in the number of reported crimes will nearly always be followed by questions whether this reflects an actual increase or whether it is a result of, for instance, an increasing inclination to report offences to the police.
3. Crime victim surveys should thus be able to answer the following question:

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- What is the actual level of crime?
- To which extent are crimes reported to the police?
- Why are crimes not reported to the police?

These fundamental questions can only be answered by crime victim surveys.

4. As we all know, changes in crime trends often attract more attention than the level of crime, meaning that replication of crime victim surveys at short intervals is very important politically.

5. Furthermore, politicians also find crime victim surveys useful in getting knowledge on the behaviour of the police. If reported, did the police deal satisfactorily with the matter? Or in what ways is the victim unhappy with the way the police handled the case?

6. It should be noted, that questions like ‘Why do some people have a higher risk of victimisation than others’ seldom are asked in the political or general debate. It is the overall results and trends that are of primary common concern.

Types of crimes included

7. Which crimes should be included in a crime victim survey? Normally different types of property crimes, robbery, rape and violence are included in crime victim surveys. However, these crimes are reported to the police in a varying degree.

8. In Denmark and in many other countries the rate of reporting is close to 100% regarding car theft. Similarly, crimes like domestic burglary have a very high level of reporting. Taking into consideration that crime victim surveys tend to be too extensive as we want to include too many questions, it should be seriously reconsidered if crimes with high reporting rates should be included in crime victim surveys. In my opinion police statistics will often provide us with sufficient information concerning crime risk and actual crime level for these types of crime.

9. Yet this might not be the case in all countries, so a first crime victim survey must always be able to tell not only about the actual level of different types of crime but even about the rate of reporting.

10. Contact crimes like violence and rape have a much lower reporting rate as reporting is seldom reinforced solely by the prospects of economic compensation. This is one reason for crime victim surveys to concentrate more on contact crimes than on property crimes. Another is the increasing political importance of these types of crimes. My impression is that violence, sex crimes, crimes involving female or child victims are issues that have become much more in focus politically in many European countries during the last decade, and that development may quite well continue. If so, we may be confronted with new challenges of being able to include other forms of contact crimes in victim surveys or being able to measure victimisation of, for instance, violence of different degrees of severity.

No doubt, politically it would be interesting and convenient to be in a position to tell e.g. the actual number of serious assaults compared to minor assaults or the actual number of paedophilia incidences in society.

Distinguishing criminal acts from non-criminal

11. This brings me to another essential issue, namely how to delimit the acts accepted as crimes. How do we ask about crimes? How can we be sure that the incidence the respondent report really was a crime and not just an unpleasant experience?

12. For property offences this problem is probably minor. Theft and similar offences result in distinctive and visible signs: The car is gone, the door has been broken open, etc. So the victim does not have to interpret whether it was a crime or not. Also European penal laws are to my knowledge rather homogeneous on this point: Taking another persons property without the consent of the owner is in all countries defined as a crime. So comparative surveys should not cause problems regarding property offences.

13. Asking about violence and sexual offences in crime victim survey constitute, on the other hand, a great challenge. These offences represent behaviour which to a much higher degree than property offences becomes crimes only when defined as such by the victim and thereby varies according to the perception of the victim.

14. At present, there is no uniformity concerning methods of asking about violence. Methods vary from asking about 'criminal violence' to asking a number of questions concerning specific forms of aggressive behaviour and threats.

15. The International Crime Victimization Survey (ICVS) includes one question on 'violence and threats', and in the introduction to the question it is emphasised that the concern is about 'crimes of violence'.

16. Especially in victim surveys on violence against women it is common to include a number of questions on physical attacks. The International Violence Against Women Survey (IVAWS) includes no less than 12 questions about different forms of threats, physical and sexual attacks.

17. We know that these different methods will produce very different victimisation rates. This is, inter alia, shown in Danish crime victim surveys. The difference in prevalence is close to 1:10 when asking about just 'criminal violence' compared to asking about a number of specific acts including threats and minor aggressive behaviour.

18. Similarly, big differences are seen when comparing the prevalence from ICVS with the prevalence from in IVAWS (Danish figures).

19. Martin Killias has even demonstrated that it makes a difference whether you ask about exactly the same types of acts in two or more questions. By splitting up the specific forms of psychological attacks into a number of questions the prevalence rate will be higher than when asking the same in just two questions.

20. The problem by the technique used in surveys like the IVAWS is to my opinion that we diverge from what was the point of the study: To measure the prevalence of violence. IVAWS is mapping out a number of incidences, like grabbing and pushing, which probably never could or never would be defined as penal code offences. This is also reflected in differences in reporting frequencies: This was twice as high in the ICVS compared to the IVAWS (Danish figures).

21. It is probably not a coincidence that especially studies on violence against women often use techniques that we know will reveal a high prevalence rate. If anything it reflects the fact that violence against women is a hot political issue, and that surveys can be powerful tools in pursuing political aims. Yet to expand the scope of incidences included in a crime victim survey destroys the validity of a survey. The concept 'violence' becomes misleading, and politicians are misguided by surveys of this kind.

22. When looking at comparative surveys, linguistic problems regarding contact crimes becomes most difficult, as violence and sexual offences are defined differently by different countries. From the European Sourcebook on crime statistics we know, for instance, that in some countries violence include acts that are just causing pain, while in other countries it includes only cases of inflicting bodily injury.

23. How is it then possible to conduct international comparative surveys on the rate of criminal violence? Should questions differ from country to country in order to reflect national legislation? Studies like the ICVS have chosen to work with similar questions for all countries – an obvious solution, as everybody knows that the principal demand in comparative research is to ask exactly the same questions. But it is also obvious that the result of ICVS is not national violence rates in a legal sense.

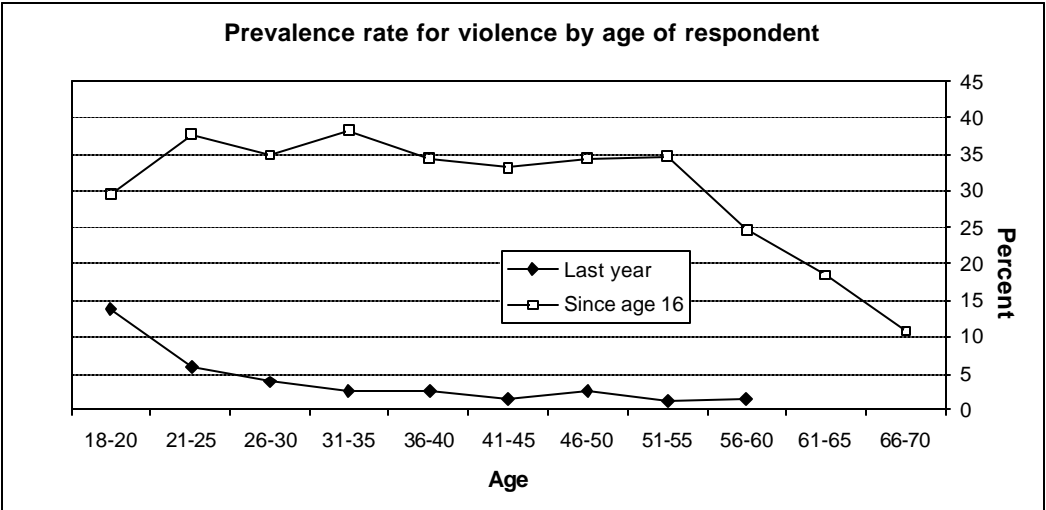
24. To some extent the problem is solved by follow-up questions on the seriousness of the incidence and on whether the incidence is seen as a crime or not. Incidentally, it is remarkable that even though ICVS ask for crimes of violence, only around 60% of the victims regard the incidence as a crime.

25. Generally, I think there is a need for more uniformity and more testing of different methods in constructing questions concerning sexual offences and violence. And I think it is necessary to discuss further how results should be presented. The prevalence rates now published are presented as prevalence rates for different types of 'crimes', but actually the prevalence rates often reflect more than just crimes. Should we to a greater extent try to limit results to mirror the penal law? Or should we accept crime prevalence rates to include acts that neither objectively nor by the respondent are seen as offences?

Prevalence period

26. I would like briefly to turn to another key issue, i.e. the prevalence period that are used in crime victim surveys.

27. Should we ask for victimisation during the last year, the last five or ten year or for all previous years? Fortunately, crime victimisation is rather seldom, at least when it comes to crimes like robbery, violence and rape. We might therefore be tempted to use a very long prevalence period in order to be sure to get a sufficient large number of victims. Allow me to warn you against using very long prevalence periods. We forget less serious incidences in our lives, and by using long prevalence periods we risk getting results like this:



28. This shows a one-year and (nearly) lifetime prevalence rate for physical violence in the Danish IVAWS study. The lifetime prevalence seems to indicate that older women throughout their lives have been much more protected than younger women. We know that this is not the case, but rather a reflection of short-term memories for minor serious incidences.

29. Normally a one-year period is used in crime victim surveys. However, if crime victim surveys in future is going to concentrate more on serious types of contact crimes I think it would be worth while considering using a 2, 3 or even a 5-year prevalence period. Firstly, because serious assaults, rape and similar serious crimes will not be forgotten within a short time, and secondly because such crime types a very rare.

Sample sizes

30. Size of the sample needed in a crime victim survey of course depends on the type of crime you want to study. If the study concerns the overall victimisation rate, or crimes for which the prevalence is known to be high, like for instance theft, the sample size do not need to be big. A sample of 2,000 will normally do. But as I emphasised earlier there is a growing focus on more seldom crime types. And in

these cases it is important to work with rather huge sample sizes. Increasing the prevalence period will not be sufficient. If we do not have big samples, it is impossible to demonstrate any differences between countries or between replicated national surveys. In the latest ICVS less than 400 persons reported incidences of physical violence during the last year – out of a total sample of 27,000 Europeans.

31. I may add that the latest national Danish violence victim survey had to be expanded in order to get a sufficient number of violence cases to make any statistical analyses possible. More than 25,000 respondents were included in the survey.

32. Taking into consideration the costs of conducting crime victim surveys it may seem rather unrealistic to ask for big samples. It is, however, feasible if questionnaires are reduced. We tend to be unable to limit ourselves when constructing questionnaires, which of course is quite understandable. But if we stick strictly to what is the primary purpose of crime victim surveys – to measure the actual level of crimes – I am quite certain that it is possible to reduce the number of questions.

33. Reducing the size of the questionnaire also result in an advantage, namely increasing the response rate. The significance of the size of the questionnaire has been clearly demonstrated in the Danish IVAWS pilot study with a net interview time of least half an hour. Many women refused to participate simply because of the length of the interview.

34. Among survey companies I think it is a common experience that interviews should not last much longer than ten minutes in order to secure a high response rate.

35. Let me emphasise that the rather limited samples sizes used in many both national and international surveys to me represent one of the biggest problems in this area.

Sampling procedure

36. Finally, let me briefly point to a sampling problem, which probably is of increasing concern.

37. To my knowledge most studies are based on Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) and samples are drawn by dialling randomly to listed phone numbers. Even though face-to-face interviewing based on random household samples gives a higher response rate, and even though there is a slight indication, that high response rates are associated with lower victimisation rates, the problem is not big, and CATI seems to be an acceptable solution when resources are few.

38. A bigger problem is the growing number of non-listed telephone numbers, as many mobile phones are not listed. As it furthermore seems reasonable to assume that especially persons who have been victims of violence often have non-listed telephone numbers, the problem can be quite devastating for surveys. The obvious solution to this problem is to generate telephone numbers, which on the other hand will increase costs, as the survey companies must spend extra time on the job due to the quantity of not existing numbers.