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Highlights of the International Crime Victim Surveys

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Published in:

Introduction to international crime and criminal justice

Publication date:

2011

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van Dijk, J. J. M. (2011). Highlights of the International Crime Victim Surveys. In M. Natarajan (Ed.), *Introduction to international crime and criminal justice* (pp. 462-470). McGraw-Hill.

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61 Highlights of the International Crime Victims Survey

Jan van Dijk

BACKGROUND TO THE INTERNATIONAL CRIME VICTIM SURVEYS

Over the past three decades an increasing number of countries have undertaken "victimization surveys" among the general population about experiences of crime. These surveys provide a source of data on crime independent of crime statistics recorded by police (Maxfield, Hough, & Mayhew, 2007). They also provide important additional information on crime including rates of reporting crimes to the police, victims' experiences with the police, fear of crime, and the use of crime prevention measures. If the research methodology used is standardized, the surveys also offer a new opportunity for the collection of crime statistics, which can be used for comparative purposes. This allows crime problems to be analyzed from a truly international perspective (Kury, 2001).

The first International Crime Victims Surveys (ICVS) took place in 1989 in a dozen countries. It has since been repeated four times in 1992, 1996, 2000, and 2005. Since its initiation, surveys have been carried out one or more times in seventy-eight countries including all twenty-seven Member states of the European Union, Australia, Canada, Japan, and The United States of America (van Dijk, van Kesteren, & Smit, 2007). More than 320,000 citizens have been interviewed to date in the course of the ICVS with the same questionnaire, translated into thirty or more languages. This process has resulted in a body of victim survey data across a variety of countries covering a period of twenty years. The full dataset is available for secondary analyses (ICVS, 2005).

METHODOLOGY

The ICVS targets samples of households in which only one respondent is selected aged sixteen or above. National samples include at least 2,000

respondents who are generally interviewed with the CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interview) technique. In the countries where this method is not applicable because of insufficient distribution of telephones, face-to-face interviews are conducted in the main cities, generally with samples of 1,000 to 1,500 respondents. Compared to the national surveys in the USA and England/Wales the ICVS uses relatively small sample sizes to keep costs at a minimum. Prevalence rates of victimization are published with their margins of error at the 90 percent confidence level.

The questionnaire includes sections on ten types of "conventional" crime, of which each question provides a standard definition. The ICVS provides an overall measure of victimization in the previous year by any of the eleven "conventional" crimes included in the questionnaire. Among the "conventional" crimes, some are "household crimes," in other words, those which can be seen as affecting the household at large, and respondents report on all incidents known to them. A first group of household crimes deals with the vehicles owned by the respondent or his or her household:

- § Theft of car
- § Theft from car
- § Theft of bicycle
- § Theft of motorcycle.

A second group refers to breaking and entering at the home address:

- § Burglary
- § Attempted burglary.

A third group of crimes refers to victimization experienced by the respondent personally:

- § Robbery
- § Theft of personal property
- § Assaults and threats
- § Sexual incidents (in the first rounds this question was only put to female respondents).

As said, the ICVS tries to measure crime, independently of police administrative records. Indeed, one of the most important findings of the ICVS deals with the reporting of victimizations by victims to the police and their reasons for nonreporting crimes, thus to provide comparative information on why police statistics often do not reflect the full crime picture. Those who have reported a victimization to the police are asked to assess the way the police has handled their report. Furthermore, all respondents are asked

to assess the performance of the police in preventing and controlling crime in their areas, perceptions of crime threats, reception of victim support, and use of common crime prevention measures.

SOME MAJOR FINDINGS ON LEVELS OF CRIME

The results of the ICVS 1996–2005 shows that, on average, approximately 25 percent of citizens, living in urban areas suffered at least one form of victimization over the twelve months preceding the interview. In Africa and Latin America significantly higher levels of victimization were observed (33 percent and 34 percent, respectively).

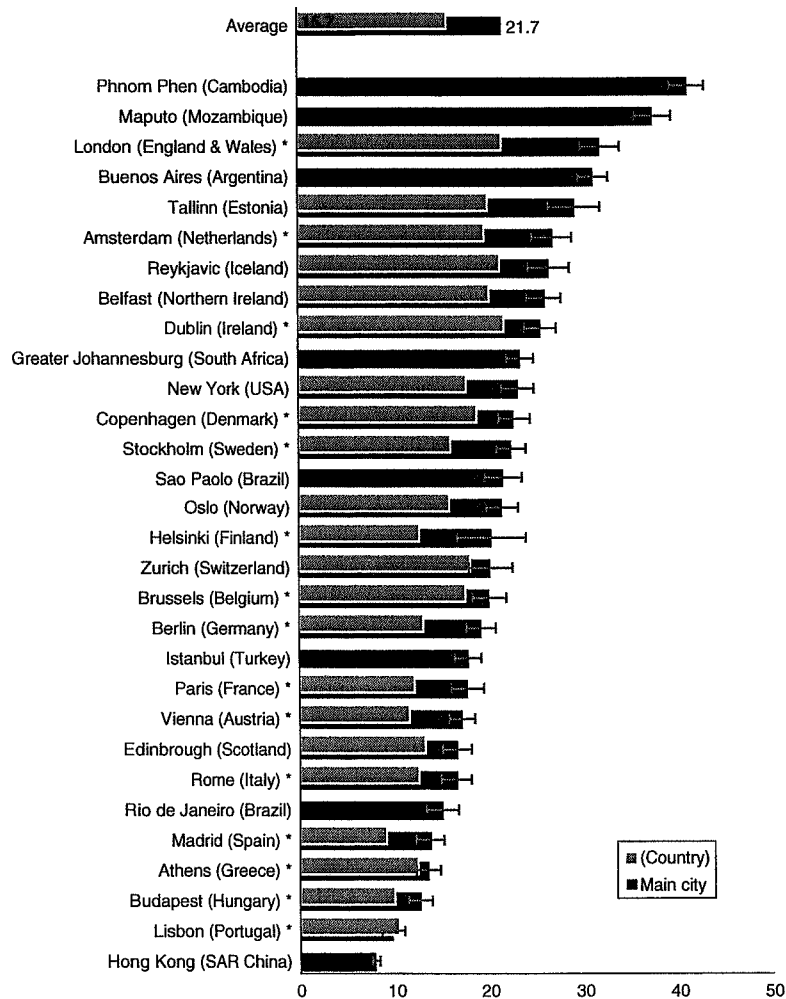
Globally, over a five-year period, two out of three inhabitants of big cities were victimized by crime at least once. Criminal victimization has evidently become a statistically normal feature of urban life across countries of both the developed and developing world. Almost no citizens anywhere in the world can feel immune from these threats to their personal security.

Figure 61.1 shows one-year victimization rates for any of the ten crimes included in the ICVS for the countries participating in the ICVS 2004/2005. Surveys in the fifteen original member states of the European Union were funded by the European Commission under the name EU/ICS. In most of the surveys carried out in 2004/2005 booster samples of 1,000 were drawn from the capital cities. This allows the calculation of special capital city rates.

Figure 61.1 confirms that levels of victimization by common crime are universally higher among capital city populations than among national populations, with Lisbon as the only exception to this rule. The mean victimization rate of the participating cities is 21.7 percent, whereas the mean national rate was 15.7 percent. In almost all countries, risks to be criminally victimized are a quarter to a third higher for capital city inhabitants than for others. Differences between the ten top countries and the ten at the bottom are statistically significant at the 90 percent confidence level.

The ranking of cities in terms of crime puts Phnom Phen (Cambodia) and Maputo (Mozambique) on top. Relatively high rates are also found in London, Buenos Aires, Tallin, Amsterdam, Reykjavik, Belfast, Dublin, and Johannesburg. Victimization rates near the global city average of 21.7 percent are found in New York, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Sao Paulo, and Oslo. The five safest capital cities of those participating are Hong Kong, Lisbon, Budapest, Athens, and Madrid.

High crime countries include, as said, both relatively affluent countries (Ireland, Denmark, and Iceland) and some of the least affluent (New



* Source: The European Survey of Crime and Safety (EUICS 2005). Gallup-Europe, Brussels

Figure 61.1. Overall victimization for ten crimes; one year prevalence rates (percentages) of capital cities and national populations in twenty-eight countries.
Source: ICVS, 2005.

Zealand, Estonia, and Mexico). The category of low crime countries is equally diverse. It includes both relatively affluent countries, such as Austria, and less prosperous ones, such as Hungary, Spain, and Portugal. Among the participating countries, levels of common crime seem to be neither associated with poverty nor with wealth. Macro factors known to be consistently

associated with levels of common crime are urbanization and the proportion of young adolescents in the population. Together, these factors can explain some of the variation in overall levels of crime across countries.

The crime category of assault and threat is defined in the ICVS as personal attacks or threats, either by a stranger or a relative or friend, without the purpose of stealing. Although physical consequences may be minor in most cases, it may well have important emotional repercussions for victims. Assaults on women are more likely to be domestic in nature than assaults on men. In one third of the cases of violence against women, the offender was known at least by name to the victim. In one of five of the cases the crime was committed in the victim's own home. The level of violence against women across countries is inversely related to the position of women in society, with most developing countries showing much higher rates (van Dijk, 2008).

VICTIM EMPOWERMENT: POLICE RESPONSES AND VICTIM SUPPORT

Reporting to the Police

The ICVS shows that victims in Western Europe, North America (United States and Canada), and Oceania (Australia and New Zealand) are more likely to report their victimization to the police than those in other regions (see Figure 61.2). The picture of regional reporting rates is the reverse of that of victimization rates. In the regions where more crimes occur, fewer of those crimes are reported to the police. This general pattern introduces a fatal flaw into international police figures of crime by systematically deflating crime in developing countries.

In general, burglary is the most frequently reported crime (apart from car theft, which is almost universally reported). Burglary was most frequently reported in Western Europe, North America, and Australia. Important factors determining reporting are insurance coverage (the requirement for making a claim for compensation being dependent on reporting the incident to the police) and the ease of reporting (determined by factors such as access to the local police, availability of telephones, etc.).

Robbery was also frequently reported in Western Europe, but much less in the remaining regions, with a minimum in Latin America, where only one victim of robbery out of five reported to the police. In places where robberies are rampant victims are less likely to report. In the case of robberies reporting seems to be dependent on confidence in the police. Those refraining from reporting often have no trust in their local police. This is

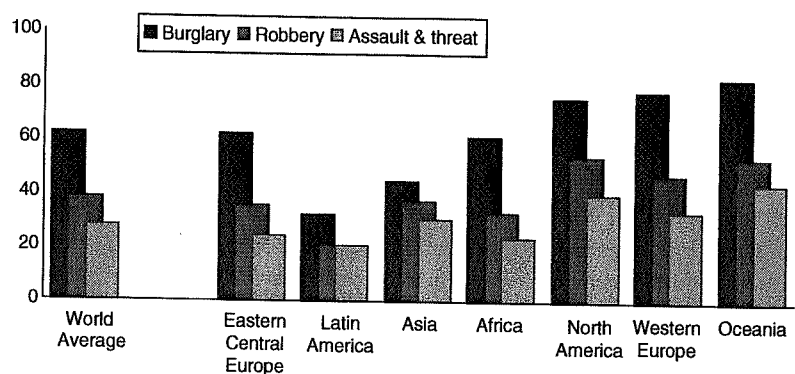


Figure 61.2. Percentage of assaults, robberies and burglaries, respectively, reported to the police, by region.

Source: ICVS, 2005.

born out by the finding that more than 50 percent of the Latin American victims of robbery who did not report to the police said they did so because “the police would not do anything” and approximately 25 percent said that they feared or disliked the police.

Finally, assaults and threats were the least frequently reported crime. Globally less than half of violence victims report to the police. Less than one in three of the female victims of threat and assault had filed a complaint with the police. Reporting rates are again lowest in Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Asia (one in five). As a general rule, the most vulnerable categories of victims – such as women in developing countries – are the least likely to seek assistance from the police, and thus those most in need of such empowering services are least likely to receive it.

Victim Satisfaction and Trust Levels

Among those who reported, less than half were satisfied with the way the police dealt with their case. Those least satisfied were the respondents from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Central-Eastern Europe. Only in Western Europe, North America, and Australia more than 60 percent of victims who reported to the police positively evaluated the treatment received. The most common reason for dissatisfaction was that the police “did not do enough” or “were not interested.” Around 10 percent said the police had been impolite or incorrect. This reason was given most often by victims of violence against women, especially by those from Latin America. Another common complaint is that the police failed to provide information about the case.

A special section of the ICVS deals with the assessment of police performance by respondents. The results suggest that in many developing countries the public remains skeptical about the capacity of the police to control local crime. At the country-level, lack of trust in the police appears to be strongly related to low rates of reporting of crimes to the police.

Ironically, then, low levels of police recorded crime in a country should not necessarily be seen as a good sign. Rather than as evidence for low levels of crime, low police figures may actually point to poor performance of the police and a resulting low trust level among the public, limiting the proportion of crimes reported to the police.

Victim Support Services

Victims of more serious crimes who had reported to the police were specifically asked whether they had received support from a specialized agency. In most countries, few victims had received such help. The figures are variable across offence type. Of those who reported burglaries to the police, 4 percent had received help. The level of support was the highest in the Western European countries, especially in United Kingdom, Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands where victim support for such victims is indeed institutionally most developed.

Approximately 16 percent of women victims of sexual offences who had reported to the police had received specialized support in North America, Western Europe, and Africa. Elsewhere the percentages were lower. In all regions only very few percentages of male victims of assaults had received specialized help (4 percent).

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE ICVS

The ICVS has over the years proven to be a reliable source of information on the level and trends of crimes, which directly affect ordinary citizens on a large scale (so-called volume crime) (Lynch, 2006). It has over the years also improved its measurement of street level corruption and of sexual violence, although for the latter type of crime the use of specialized survey instruments such as the International Violence Against Women Survey (IVAWS) seems preferable (Johnson, Ollus, & Nevala, 2007). No information is provided by the ICVS on the most serious violent crimes such as homicides and kidnappings, or on crimes victimizing businesses or society at large (racketeering, grand corruption, environmental pollution). In these areas, ICVS data must be supplemented by data on police-recorded

crimes or from other sources. Within Europe, the European Sourcebook has become an important source of international information on crime and justice (Aebi et al., 2006). Global information on homicides and on convictions for human trafficking can be consulted at the Web site of UNODC (www.unodc.org/statistics). A comprehensive overview of available international data on crime and justice is given in van Dijk (2008).

THE WAY AHEAD

By disclosing important aspects of crime and victimization at the international level, the ICVS has become an indispensable source of information for researchers, policy makers, and the international community. It is expected that in the future the ICVS will become even a more solid source of data, due to the fact that a greater number of countries will be included and that those who have already participated will continue to do so, thus reinforcing the longitudinal series. In this respect the decision of the European Commission to fund the execution of a revised version of the ICVS in all member states of the European Union is a major breakthrough. In 2010 the survey was executed in six European countries and Canada with the special aim of pilot testing promising new techniques of Internet-based interviewing. A fully-fledged repeat of the survey in all twenty-seven member states of the European Union with sample sizes of 8,000 per country is scheduled for 2013.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Professor Jan J. M. van Dijk, Pieter van Vollenhoven Chair in Victimology, Human Security and Safety, was born in Amsterdam, the Netherlands in 1947. He received a Ph.D. in criminology from Nijmegen University in 1977. He initiated the International Crime Victim Surveys in 1988 and acted as president of the World Society of Victimology between 1997 and 2000. He received the Stephen Schafer award from the National Organization of Victim Assistance (NOVA) for his life-long contributions to victimological research and received an honorary doctorate from Tirunelveli University in India specifically for his promotion of ICVS in developing countries. In 2008, he received the Sellin-Glueck Award of the American Society of Criminology.