

# *Use of Official Statistics and Crime Survey Data in determining Violence against Women*

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There is an oft held debate on which source of data is best for measuring victimisation: official statistics or crime survey data. The benefits of one are set against the limitations of the other, but rarely are the two sources of data used to complement or enhance each other. This paper has as its main purpose the examination of violence against women, but in doing so both police and survey data have been used. The benefits and limitations of each source of data are illustrated in the paper with reference to the obtained results.

The benefits of police data are sometimes forgotten by victimologists. This source of information represents the official response to crime. Police data include crimes against businesses as well as crimes against individuals. Children who have been victims as well as adults are included. In short, it is the total population of recorded offences. Offences are ordered in time so that the number of crimes reported in different months or days is easily established.

The biggest limitation of police data is the perennial question—what about those crimes which are not reported? In addition, because police data rely on administrative process and legislative factors, one is not able to make accurate comparisons between times or areas. A past limitation of police data has been that very little information about the victim of the offence was collected.

However, in South Australia details such as the victim's age, sex and relationship with the offender are now recorded on a computerised justice system, and are thus able to be retrieved easily.

The major benefit of survey data is that they include offences which are not reported to police. The survey can be also repeated at different times and places to enable comparisons to be made over time or between geographic areas. A further benefit of survey data, and one that is rarely mentioned, is the ability of survey data to provide more details about the victim and the circumstances of the crime. It allows one to move beyond counting things into examining the consequences of events.

The limitations of surveys arise from the fact that they are a sample and as such will be subject to sampling errors. Any results are subject to confidence limits. They generally exclude children and businesses, and usually limit the type of offences under review. Problems also exist with the recall and memory of interviewees.

It is best, therefore, to use each method for its strengths. Use police data for rare events, volume of data, and to reflect official response. Use survey data for its flexibility and descriptive qualities.

## **Previous Research**

Information on physical violence against women has been to date difficult to obtain despite extensive public interest in the topic. There has been, however, some limited research on the topic both in Australia and internationally. The Australian Bureau of Statistics conducted national victim surveys in 1983 and 1993. The findings of both surveys revealed that females were victims of assault and robbery less frequently than males (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1986 1994). The Australian National Homicide Monitoring program also found females were victims of homicide less often than males (Strang 1991). A National Injury Surveillance and Prevention project found that although males were the most frequent victims of physical violence identified in emergency hospital departments, females were more likely than males to have such injuries sustained in their own or another person's home (National Committee on Violence 1990).

A Canadian national survey on male violence against women found that half of all Canadian women had experienced at least one incident of violence since the age of 16 (Statistics Canada 1993). The United States Department of Justice released figures which showed that the rate of assaults on males has been declining over the past 15 years, but that the rate of violence towards women has either stayed the same or increased (US Department of Justice 1992).

The following results are taken from the Office of Crime Statistics study which examines violence against women (Gardner 1994). The study takes advantage of recent improvements in the collection of crime statistics in South Australia which allow details such as the victim's age, sex and relationship with offender to be easily retrieved. In recognising that even the inclusion of this detailed information would only present some of the picture, the study also utilised findings from a recently conducted crime survey. The results provide,

therefore, for the first time in Australia, comprehensive information about the extent and characteristics of violence against women.

## **Violence Reported to Police**

All violent incidents reported or becoming known to South Australian police between January and December 1992 were examined. During this time there were 16 262 violent incidents to males and females. Although the majority of victims were male, a sizeable proportion (46.1 per cent) were female. The age profile for male and female victims was very similar across all age categories, with both sexes most at risk of victimisation between the ages of 20 and 29 years. It is worthwhile noting that 9.2 per cent of females and 9.6 per cent of males were aged under 10 years. This highlights one benefit of police data as it is unlikely that this age group of victims of violence would have been captured in any survey.

A range of violent offences was reported to police ranging from homicides, rapes, assaults, robberies, blackmail, and threatening behaviours. This illustrates the benefit of police data, in that a variety of crimes, including relatively rare events, are captured. It is also possible with police data to determine a seriousness ranking for the violence by using the legal classification; for example, an assault can be recorded as a common assault, or assault occasioning actual bodily harm, or grievous bodily harm.

The most frequent type of violent offence occurring against women was common assault in nearly 6 out of 10 violent cases (57.7 per cent). Over one in five female victims reported some sexual violence (21.2 per cent), this was the next most frequent offence type for females. Males, too, were often victims of common assault (66.1 per cent), but very few males (2.9 per cent) were victims of sexual offences.

The location of the violent incident was examined for the police data. A private dwelling was the most frequent location of the incident for female victims (58.2 per cent), compared to less than a third of male victims (30.6 per cent). The most frequent location for males to be victimised was in an open, public area such as a street or a recreational area (40.9 per cent). The rate of males being a victim in a private dwelling was estimated to be 3.8 per 1000, which compared to 6.1 per 1000 for females. The risk for females being a victim of violence in a private dwelling therefore was 1.6 times greater than the risk for males.

Although the relationship between the victim and offender was an available data item, it was recorded by the police in only half of the incidents involving female victims (52.2 per cent), and fewer still for male victims (38.9 per cent). This highlights one of the limitations of police data: the reliance on administrative and bureaucratic process which may or may not distort the data. In this case it is difficult to establish if bias has occurred in recording or not recording information about the offender/victim relationship, although it would be reasonable to assume that the information is more likely to be missing if the victim did not know the offender. The large number of cases, however, which have missing data does mean that some caution should be used when interpreting

the results. The survey data presented later in this paper provide additional information on the relationship between victim and offender.

From the available information, female victims reported knowing the offender in three-quarters of incidents (76 per cent), but male victims were just as likely to not know the offender as to know them (52.1 per cent known, 47.9 per cent stranger or unknown). For females, the offender was often someone close to them. Partners, or ex partners, relatives or friends comprised 61.6 per cent of the violent offenders against females. These groups comprised one in five (20 per cent) of the offenders against males.

An illustration of how much more information is now able to be retrieved from the police data than previously is the ability to detect individual victims who report more than one incident during a year. During 1992 the vast majority of female and male victims had cause to only report the one violent episode (91 per cent female and 92 per cent male). Examination of the last reported incident, however, revealed some differences between female and male victims. For those females who were multiple victims during the year, the offender in the last incident was known to them in nine out of ten cases, and this offender was also likely to be a partner or ex-partner (39.7 per cent compared to 30.2 per cent of all female victims). There was little difference between males who had been victims more than once during the year and male victims as a whole. There were, however, more offenders in the 'other' category for male multiple victims (15.6 per cent compared to 9.4 per cent). This 'other' category includes assaults on police and prison officers. These findings suggest that work-related victimisation might be a factor in repeated violence to males, while domestic assaults are a feature of repeated violence to women.

Another advantage of police data is the ability to examine the official response to recorded crime. The number of offenders apprehended for offences reported in 1992 was able to be determined. Over four out of ten violent offences against women resulted in the apprehension of the offender (43.8 per cent). The apprehension rate for male victims of violence was very similar to the rate for female victims (46.3 per cent).

## Survey Results

Not all violent incidents will be reported or come to police attention, and it is for this reason that crime surveys are useful in providing information on the extent of victimisation. The survey data used for the South Australian violence against women project involved over 3000 people aged over 15 years, interviewed in person during two months of 1992. The respondents were asked about two violent offences: robbery and assault. The definitions of these offences are broader and more subject to individual interpretation than the legal definitions used in police data.

The results of this survey showed that the vast majority of adult South Australians had not been robbed (98.9 per cent) nor assaulted (95 per cent) in the past year. Nearly twice as many males however, were assaulted as females (6 per cent compared to 3 per cent), and a similar situation existed for robberies (1.3 per cent compared to 0.8 per cent).

Although the two sources of data: survey and police, are quite different in the scope of victims covered, it is interesting that the two sources find similar results with regard to the location of incident and relationship of victim to offender.

As with police data, the survey data found that a residence was the location of an assault for the majority of female victims (59.5 per cent), whereas male victims were more likely to be assaulted in public areas (37.4 per cent). In addition, the survey data found that men were unlikely to be assaulted by someone who they knew (37.9 per cent), while women knew their attacker in seven out of ten cases (71 per cent).

## **Qualitative Information**

The same survey as the one described above was undertaken during two months of 1993, but in the 1993 survey respondents who reported being victims were given a supplementary interview by telephone at a later date. This supplementary survey highlights the strengths of survey data in that it can be used to provide valuable descriptive information about the victimisation event. The circumstances surrounding the event, the degree of seriousness of the victimisation, and the consequences to the victim can all be elicited. The following example illustrates how this information can help us understand victimisation.

Both the police data and the survey data revealed that women were victims of assault in private dwellings more than males, while males were often assaulted in public areas. The qualitative data available from the supplementary survey provides us with more of a 'feel' for what this finding actually means for those involved. The following information is drawn from among the victims who responded to the supplementary interview. These victims were the 13 females and 6 males who were assaulted inside their own home, and the 12 males and 6 females who were assaulted in the street.

The qualitative data revealed that the violence is often greater at home than in a public area, and within the home the degree of violence was greater for women than for men. This was reflected in the degree of physical injury which involved hitting, punching, bruising and breaking bones. None of the male victims of violence in the home suffered physical harm, while 5 of the 13 women had some injury. Street assaults physically harmed a third of women and men (4 of 12 men, and 2 of 6 women). Most of the assaults in the street, however, could be best described as 'incivilities', threats and swearing which involved no physical contact—half of all street assaults fitted into this category. Perhaps as a consequence of the higher degree of harm, most home assaults were reported to police (11 of the 19); but very few of the street assaults were so reported (4 of the 18). It was also interesting to note, however, that nearly all the men assaulted in their home (5 of the 6) called the police but only about half the women assaulted at home took this action (6 of the 13).

From reading the descriptions provided about the event it is doubtful whether some of the 'assaults' recorded in the survey would meet any legal definitions of assault. This raises a question about the promoted benefit of crime

surveys, that of estimating the amount of unreported crime. A proportion of behaviours presented in crime surveys as ‘unreported’ crimes could actually be misleading. It is not so much that the crimes have not been reported but that surveys can tap into a totally different and much wider range of behaviours than would ever, or should ever, occupy police attention. Behaviours that were captured included drivers swearing when cut off in the traffic, cyclists having bicycle handle bars bumped, and commuters having toes trodden on in a bus queue. There were, however, some very serious events captured in the survey such as a rape, an attempted rape, victims being hospitalised, and being threatened with guns and knives.

Apart from physical harm, the supplementary survey looked at the emotional harm felt by victims. In this area, too, the consequences of assaults in the home were also greater than those in the street, for both male and female victims. The vast majority of victims of home assaults (15 out of 19) reported some emotional harm resulting from the assault (4 out of 6 men, 11 out of 13 women). Common emotional responses included fear, sleeping problems, anger, and shock. These problems were also reported as a continuing problem for six of the victims. Victims of street assaults also reported some emotional harm (6 out of 18), but females were more likely in these instances to report this harm than males (4 out of 6 females compared to 2 out of 12 males).

When examining victimisation it is often convenient to consider them as isolated incidents. The qualitative information shows that this is a fallacy, especially with regards to incidents in the home. Every one of the street assaults was by a stranger, and all were a ‘one off’ event. The home assaults, however, were all by people known to the victim, and in 13 of the 19 cases the assault was part of a series of similar events which had occurred in the past.

## **Domestic Violence**

Given that most of the interest in violence against women is concerned with domestic violence, the study undertaken by the Office of Crime Statistics examined this issue in more depth.

The definition of ‘domestic violence’ includes incidents between a woman and her spouse, ex spouse, defacto partner or ex defacto. Although some definitions of domestic violence include relationships such as other family members or friends, the findings below are limited to abuse that occurs between partners or ex partners. It is also recognised that domestic abuse can involve a myriad of non physical abuses such as psychological, social and economic abuse. The focus of this paper, however, is on threats and incidents of physical violence.

Using the above definition, over one in six violent crimes reported to police by females in 1992 could be classified as domestic violence. This represented 1241 individual women. The annual rate of domestic violence for the South Australian female population was calculated to be 3.4 per 1000 (0.3 per cent) of the married, separated and divorced women.

The survey data enable another estimate to be made of the level of domestic violence, one that includes incidents not reported to police. The value of survey data is also that more information is available about the victim, for example,

their marital status. Very few (1.7 per cent) of married women or women in de facto relationships had been threatened with force or attacked by anybody in the past year—and only 10.3 per cent of these assaults were committed by a partner or ex partner. The situation for women who had separated or divorced was, however, significantly different. These women were much more likely to have been assaulted (8.3 per cent), and the people who assaulted them were much more likely to have been a partner or ex partner (51.5 per cent). From these figures it was estimated that 2 per 1000 women in a married or defacto relationship had been a victim of domestic violence in 1992, compared to 42 per 1000 women who were separated or divorced.

## **Conclusion**

Physical violence as reported to police or told to interviewers involved in the crime survey occurred to relatively few South Australians in 1992, female or male.

Police data informed us about victims which the survey data could not report on, for example younger victims, and victims of a wider range of crimes. The police data also provided information about the apprehension of offenders. Both survey and police data showed that it is the location of the offence and the nature of the relationship between victim and offender that characterises violence towards women. Women, compared to men, are more often victims in their homes, and more frequently the offender is someone with whom they have a close relationship.

A benefit of survey data was that more qualitative details could be obtained on the consequences of victimisation. The seriousness of violence, circumstances surrounding the attack, and the variety of behaviours that are captured in a survey were better understood through the qualitative information than by the statistical results alone.

Data obtained from police records and survey data have been used successfully to provide a picture of violence against women. It leaves a picture that is more complete than would have been achieved by using only the one source of data.

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