

Crime and Victim Surveys

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Many mass media commentators and politicians assert that the public demands a tougher policy on crime in response to rising rates of violent crime. In this discourse, crime victims feature as the prime supporters of a tough policy on crime. Victimisations are supposed to generate feelings of fear and a call for harsh, deterrent punishment of offenders. Conservative politicians present themselves as the ones who understand this call better than others and will act accordingly when (re)elected. For instance, in the 1988 presidential election campaign in the USA ex-President Bush consistently portrayed his contender as 'soft on crime'.

For the criminal justice establishment, this line of reasoning provides welcome support. If tougher law enforcement is seen as a top priority by an increasingly victimised and fearful public, political claims for expanded police and prison budgets seem justified. The professional interest of law enforcement and prison agencies is well served by the image of the crime victims as a natural pressure group for law and order. The demands of those who have personally suffered from deficient criminal policies cannot be easily disparaged.

Whether crime victims or the public at large benefit from more expensive, punitive criminal policies remains to be seen. It is far from certain that such policies actually discourage offenders and reduce crime. In the meantime the interests of crime victims might be harmed by their portrayal as emotional proponents of tough crime policies. For academic lawyers, prosecutors and judges this image confirms their traditional reservations about crime victims. Criminal lawyers in both the common law and the European codification tradition have always felt that crime victims are too emotional and vindictive to be given a place in criminal proceedings. They are seen as a threat to the

principles of equality and consistency (van Dijk 1986; Sumner 1987). A greater involvement of crime victims in criminal proceedings will be more strongly opposed to the extent that victims are believed to seek gratification of personal emotional needs. In the early days of the victim movement, some lawyers favoured state compensation and counselling as an alibi for denying crime victims access to criminal procedure.

Criminologists have for years tried to redress the image of the victim as a person who seeks reassurance for his fears by demanding severe sentences. In the 1970s survey researchers concluded that fear of crime sometimes moved in the opposite direction to changes in recorded crime. Personal or household victimisations were found to be weakly related to fear of crime (Van Dijk 1978, 1979; Rifai 1982). Sparks, Genn and Dodd (1977) even speculated that victimisations reduce fear. Those most at risk such as adolescents did not exhibit most fears and those least at risk from ordinary street crime—elderly ladies—were most fearful (Hough & Mayhew 1983). Those who were fearful did not themselves try to reduce their perceived risks. On the basis of these findings and discrepancies, fear of crime was frequently described as ‘irrational’. Fear of crime was said to be fuelled by exaggerated media reporting on violent crime and exploited by political parties and the security industry. It was sometimes also found to be associated with racist attitudes.

In the reports on the first generation of crime surveys excessive fear itself was often identified as a negative force which undermines the social fabric of the community. Those who take special measures to protect their households against crime were said to exhibit a ‘fortress mentality’. Rather than acting as a rational response to crime, fear was construed as a social problem in its own right and in fact a cause of crime (Conklin 1975; Skogan & Maxfield 1981; Wilson & Kelling 1982).

Little empirical support was also found for the ‘fear of crime causes punitivity’ hypothesis. Personal victimisations were found to be unrelated to a preference for severe sentencing (Taylor et al. 1979; Fattah 1979; Tyler & Weber 1982; Brillion 1983). Increased crime rates did not go together with a demand for more severe punishment in The Netherlands (Van Dijk & Steinmetz 1988). Opinions on sentencing were related to level of education and age but not to victimisation (Wanner & Caputo 1987). Punitivity was partly seen as a consequence of media-induced, exaggerated fear. In addition it was supposed to be determined by political-social ideology (Killias 1989).

In the criminologists’ book, neither fear nor punitivity were seen as natural responses to rising rates of violent crime. The politicians’ equation of victimisation by crime with feelings of fear and punitive attitudes was rejected. Interestingly, criminologists did not only take issue with the image of the victim as a spontaneous campaigner for law and order but even sought to turn the argument around. They not only denied that victims are fearful and punitive but also construed these very attitudes as socially harmful. The politicians’ exploitation of fear as an argument for heavy sentencing was seen as part of the problem rather than of the solution (Fattah 1982). In the USA fear reduction was put forward as an important policy goal, independent of crime reduction (Skogan 1981). In Europe the Council of Europe set up a committee of experts in the mid

seventies to study methods to overcome the public's resistance towards non-custodial sanctions.

Victim advocates or practical victimologists, too, have wittingly or unwittingly taken sides in this ongoing debate. At the Budapest conference of the International Society of Criminology in 1993, Fattah accused the victim's movement of being a law and order lobby in disguise. According to him the movement has taken sides with conservative mass media and politicians. Although North American and German victim advocates may occasionally have campaigned for stiffer sentences, the overall position of the victim's movement is, much more ambiguous. In most European countries they have in fact clearly distanced themselves from the 'war on crime'. In circles of victim support agencies strong feelings of fear and revenge are not valued positively. In clinical studies fear of crime is interpreted as one of the negative repercussions of a victimisation. Incapacitating fears can be overcome if proper help is given. Certain manifestations of fear of crime are defining elements of a Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (Cook et al. 1987). In evaluation studies of victim support, the help given was found to be unsuccessful partly because clients did not experience less fear than control groups (Steinmetz 1990; Skogan & Wycoff 1987). If punitivity is indeed driven by fear and anxiety, victim assistance agencies try to reduce rather than to encourage it.

In The Netherlands very few victim support officials and volunteers welcome or support punitive attitudes among their clients. Most of them feel ill at ease with clients who demand harsh punishment of the offender. One occasionally even gets the impression that some victims are socialised by their visitors/counsellors into not being vindictive. In media presentations in The Netherlands crime victims frequently express socially desirable opinions about the senselessness of long prison sentences and the importance of forgiving.

Crime victims are differently construed by conservative media and politicians on the one hand and criminologists and victimologists on the other. The former present crime victims as people who, for good reasons, demand more protection against violent crime from the government through harsher sentencing. The latter portray the victim as a person who, given proper care and treatment, will come out of his/her experience as a better person. That is, a person who, ideally, reaches out to the world and is ready to participate in victim-offender reconciliation.

The debate about the true nature of the crime victim is part of a wider political debate on the direction of criminal policies. Both parties project their own biases and policy agendas upon the abstract victim and accuse the other party of exploiting him/her. The alternative options are an unmediated expansion of police forces and prison departments or a more experimental policy, promoting non-custodial sanctions, mediation and crime prevention. The victim is presented as a key witness by both parties.

As mentioned, there are also stakes in this debate for crime victims as a special interest group. Contrary to popular beliefs, repeat victimisation might be prevented more effectively with a preventive than with a punitive approach. In some cases victims might have a legitimate interest in presenting their damages before the court in person. Their reputation for vindictiveness may close

procedural doors for them. As said, criminal justice agencies may deny victims a proper place in criminal procedure precisely because they are presented as vindictive and over-emotional.

It would be an illusion to think that this ongoing debate will be settled by scientific research and analysis alone. Victimologists must at any rate try to influence the debate by confronting both sides with available empirical findings and theoretical insights. In this paper we will make such an attempt by presenting and interpreting data on the experiences and attitudes of crime victims across the world, collected in the framework of the International Crime Surveys.

The dataset of the Surveys, stored and processed by the Criminological Institute of the University of Leyden, offers unique possibilities to analyse characteristics and opinions of victims in an international context. Such analysis will reveal which features of victims are cross-cultural and which reflect national or regional idiosyncrasies. In the last paragraphs we will discuss the implications of our findings and conclusions for victim policies and for the socially construed image of crime victims.

The International Crime Surveys

In crime or victimisation surveys representative samples of the population are asked about selected offences they have experienced over a given time and whether or not they reported them to the police. As such they provide an estimate of the level of crime, independent of reporting behaviour of victims and recording practices of the police. Typically, such surveys have also asked opinions about fear of crime, policing and sentencing.

In 1987, the proposal for an international crime survey was formally made at a Council of Europe conference (Van Dijk et al. 1987). A working group was set up to take forward a standardised, international survey. Up until now the survey was carried out in 1988 and/or 1992 in 41 countries involving, in total, more than 80 000 respondents. Samples sizes varied between 1000 in developing countries and 2000 in most other countries. The study was characterised by an authoritative reviewer as 'a quantum leap in international statistics on crime and justice issues' (Lynch 1993).

Internationally comparable surveys will a fortiori be flawed in some respects. The International Crime Surveys (ICS) are no exception to this rule. They do provide, however, comparable information on crime and related issues which cannot be collected otherwise and which has never been available before. The so-called ICS league tables of national victimisation rates have so far attracted most attention in the media. The attitudinal data presented here are potentially just as interesting and arguably less affected by the error structures of the survey.

To be made presentable, the data were aggregated into rates for six global regions: the New World (USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand), Western Europe (13 countries), ex-communist Europe (8 countries), Asia (Japan, India, Indonesia, Philippines), South America (Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica) and Africa (Tanzania, Uganda, Egypt, South Africa and Tunisia). Each country was given an equal statistical weight. Data from countries where the survey was

carried out twice were averaged. To ensure greater comparability, all rates were calculated for respondents living in cities with more than 100 000 inhabitants.

Urban Victimisation Rates across the World

By way of introduction to the subject, we will first present urban victimisation rates for four different types of crime and the overall rates of the six global regions.

The overall five-year victimisation rate is highest in Africa where three of every four citizens were victimised. In Uganda, for instance, 96 per cent of the citizens were victimised at least once. In Asia, less than half the population was victimised. Rates for contact crimes (such as violent crimes and robbery) are highest in Africa and South America. In Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, Kampala, Tunis, Dar es Salaam and Cairo one in every three citizens had fallen victim to such crimes. The distribution of car related crimes (car theft, theft from cars and car vandalism) is strikingly different: the highest rates are in the New World countries and Western Europe.

To gain insight into the social background of crime, all respondents were asked whether they were satisfied with their financial situation. Respondents in the industrialised countries and Asia were substantially more satisfied than those in Africa, South America and Eastern Europe. On the face of it, high rates of victimisation by contact crimes and personal thefts go together with high proportions of people who feel economically deprived. This relationship was confirmed by multivariate analyses of national victimisation rates. By contrast, car-related crimes tend to be higher in nations with developed economies where more people own cars. These findings lend support to the theoretical notion that crime rates are partly determined by the economic problems of (potential) offenders and partly by the provision of criminal opportunities by (potential) victims.

From these findings the conclusion can also be drawn that victimisations by crime can no longer be seen as rare events in most urban parts of the world. This is even true for victimisation by crimes of violence. A majority of all families in urban areas are struck at least once by crime in the course of five years. The experience to be criminally victimised has become a statistically normal feature of the life of families in an urban setting. In all countries victimisation rates are highest among young adolescents. Most adolescents living in the largest cities of the world must be regarded as streetwise survivors of crime and its repercussions.

If the large majority of the population has been a victim in recent years, the impact of victimisations cannot be adequately assessed by comparing victims with non-victims. Nearly all citizens, whether formally defined as victims or non-victims, are affected in one way or the other by criminal victimisations. In addition to cross-sectional analyses, the impact of crime upon the victim's attitudes must therefore be measured by comparing the attitudes of the public in low crime regions with those of the public in high crime regions. The ICS dataset offers unique opportunities to carry out precisely such comparisons. Using the ICS dataset, relationships between victimisations and attitudes can be analysed at

both the level of individual persons—comparing victims with non-victims—and the aggregate level of nations or regions (comparing the attitudes of the public in high crime and low crime areas).

Fear of Crime and Crime Prevention

In the ICS, respondents were asked both how they rated their chance of being burgled over the next year, and—to tap fear of street crime—how safe or unsafe they felt when walking alone in their local area after dark. Roughly 40 per cent of all city dwellers in the world feel vulnerable to burglary and street crime.

Fear of burglary is highest in Africa and Eastern Europe and lowest in Asia. Clearly these rates are higher in regions where vulnerability to burglary is also objectively higher. The correlation between regional burglary rates and regional concern about burglary is strong ($r=0.31$; $n=156$). In a regression analysis, level of urbanisation and burglary rates were both independently of each other, strongly related to fear of burglary. Risk perceptions of burglary closely reflect actual risks and experiences at the aggregate level.

Fear of street crime is by far the lowest in Asia. Less than 20 per cent of the citizens in Asian cities feel unsafe after dark in their domestic areas. Feelings of unsafety are the highest in Eastern Europe. The surprisingly high levels of fear in some of the ex-communist countries indicates that collective feelings of personal vulnerability are partly determined by other factors than exposure to crime as measured in the survey. In Eastern Europe political instability—for example, the civil war in Georgia and various political coups in Russia—may, for instance, have increased feelings of personal vulnerability.

At the level of national regions, fear of street crime is nevertheless strongly related to regional victimisation rates for street crimes, such as robbery ($r=0.40$; $n=101$). Fear of crime, too, closely reflects actual exposure to violent crime.

As previous analyses of the ICS data have indicated, personal victimisations are also significantly related to concern about burglary and street crime at the individual level. By and large the ICS findings indicate that criminal victimisations substantially increase the awareness of crime risks among both victims and the public at large. The notion of ‘irrational’ fears which have no basis in actual experiences of crime, is clearly not supported by our international findings.

Both populations and individuals who indicate concern about their risks to be victimised are more likely to take precautions. This finding again refutes the notion of free floating, inconsequential fears. Those who feel to be at risk make a serious effort to protect themselves. The conclusion seems warranted that high levels of crime increase the crime awareness of the public at large as well as the readiness to make investments in various forms of self-protection. Fear of crime, in this sense, can be interpreted as a fairly rational or utilitarian response to the actual burden of crime. Although some groups of the population are more sensitive to threatening (media) information than others, the average rates of fear of national or regional populations closely reflect actual crime rates.

Attitudes towards Sentencing

Respondents were asked which types of sentences they considered the most appropriate for a recidivist burglar—a man aged 21 who is found guilty for the second time, having stolen a colour television. In total 43 per cent of all respondents favoured imprisonment. More than half of the public in Africa, Eastern Europe, South America and Asia favoured imprisonment. In Asia, Japan was an exception (only 23 per cent favouring imprisonment and 58 per cent another sentence other than those listed). In the West European countries less than a quarter favoured imprisonment and in the New World countries roughly a third. In contrast to the stereotypical image in Western countries of the public demanding imprisonment of repeat offenders, community service orders are the most chosen sanction in this part of the world. In many countries, (including for example Germany, France, The Netherlands, Sweden, New Zealand and Australia) at least half of the public favoured community service orders.

Previous analyses of data at the individual level have shown that those most fearful of crime and victims in general are not more in favour of a prison sentence than non-victims (Rich & Sampson 1990; Kuhn 1993). There is no indication from the ICS data that recently victimised citizens typically reject non-custodial sentences. On the contrary, in Western countries community service is the favourite sentencing option, even of burglary victims, with 4 out of 10 favouring it. The idea that crime victims typically demand the imprisonment of offenders is apparently a myth.

Victims' Satisfaction with the Police

Victims of crime were asked whether they or anybody else had reported the incident to the police. In general reporting percentages are highest for serious property offences such as car or motor cycle theft and burglary. The ICS showed that reporting is much higher in New World nations and Western Europe than elsewhere. The main reasons for non reporting given were that the incident was not serious enough or that the police could do nothing. In the developing countries and Eastern Europe a relatively high percentage said they had solved the incident themselves. Although few victims explicitly said so, lack of insurance seems an important factor. At the individual level, those without insurance are less likely to report burglaries to the police. In most African and South American countries only between 10 and 20 per cent of the respondents are insured against household burglary. In most industrialised countries the insurance rate is at least 70 per cent. Among the industrialised countries, those with low insurance rates, as Spain and Italy, show the lowest reporting rates. At the aggregate level there is obviously a strong association between the extent of insurance cover and reporting of burglaries to the police. Financial considerations seem to play an important role in the decision making of victims vis-a-vis the police.

All respondents who had reported a crime to the police over the last five years were asked whether they were satisfied with the way the police had dealt with their last report. Having reported an offence, satisfaction with the police

was lowest in Eastern Europe, South America and Africa. In the New World countries in particular satisfaction was remarkably high. There is a weak association between reporting rates and levels of satisfaction. In countries where victim satisfaction is high, more victims report burglaries and other crimes to the police.

Victims who were not satisfied were asked to give their main reasons (more reasons per respondent could be given). The reasons given for dissatisfaction show interesting differences. In South America and Africa, where satisfaction was low, the single most important reason is that the police did not recover the property. In Eastern Europe, many reporting victims also complained that the police did not find the offender or were slow to arrive. The reasons for dissatisfaction of African, South American and East European victims indicate that for them reporting is often motivated by the wish to reclaim stolen property. In more affluent nations, this instrumental consideration seems less pertinent. The findings on insurance coverage, presented above, corroborate this interpretation. In the developing countries great economic interests are at stake for the victims of property crimes in the criminal investigations of the police. This is illustrated by the comment of the survey coordinator in Uganda that in many cases the interviewed victims had not yet replaced the stolen property (Samula 1993).

The dissatisfaction with the police of crime victims in developing countries must be understood in relation to their immediate economic interest in the outcome of the investigation. Since most burglary cases are not solved, the victims' dissatisfaction—and subsequent lower willingness to report such crimes—in developing nations stands to reason. Victims whose financial interests rest with insurance rather than with the police are logically less concerned about the outcome of the investigation. Victims in these circumstances want to be treated efficiently and with respect and be given a document supporting their insurance claim. Against this background the relatively high levels of satisfaction in the West become somewhat less impressive. The fact that a quarter and perhaps up to a third of victims in most Western countries are dissatisfied should be a reason for concern rather than complacency.

Need of Victim Support

In the surveys, victims were specifically asked whether they had received support from a specialised agency. In most countries few victims had received such help. Of those who reported their last victimisation to the police 2.1 per cent had received help. Of all victims of contact crimes and burglary 3.8 per cent had been given such help (3.3 in Western Europe, 5.1 in New World and 5.7 in Eastern Europe). The highest pick up rates were in the USA (10), England/Scotland (10), New Zealand (10), Costa Rica (4), Canada (4) and in The Netherlands (3). In all other countries lower percentages of such victims had been clients of victim support schemes.

The pick up rate of victim support schemes is rather low. Since victim support is still altogether lacking in most countries and a newly emerging service in most others, these findings were perhaps to be expected. An analysis of the

ICS 1991 dataset of industrialised nations showed that victim support was more often received by the elderly and by persons who were divorced or widowed.

Victims who had not received help from a specialised agency were asked whether they would have appreciated help in getting information, or practical or emotional support. The survey shows that on average 40 per cent of the victims would have welcomed more help than they actually got. In general there were less victims with unmet needs in countries with extended welfare provisions and/or more specialised victim support such as The Netherlands (12 per cent), Sweden (15 per cent), Canada (23 per cent), New Zealand (23 per cent), Australia (24 per cent) and England/Wales (24 per cent). Levels of demand were clearly highest in Africa and South America. Here more than half of the victims would have welcomed help. In Eastern Europe demand was also relatively high, although many victims declined to answer the question.

Implications for Theory and Research

On the basis of these findings victimisation by crime can no longer be regarded as a rare event in the rapidly growing urban areas of the world. In today's global village, the victim status is almost universal and has therefore lost its salience as a predictor of attitudes towards crime and crime control. The distinction between victims and non-victims must not be seen as a dichotomy but rather as a continuum. The impact of crime must be assessed at both individual and collective levels.

The responses of the public to crime are partly shaped by pre-conceived beliefs about crime and punishment, which are sustained and played upon by sensational media reporting. These responses must yet primarily be interpreted as the outcomes of rational assessments of the risk to be victimised and of the costs and benefits of possible countermeasures. In this perspective of the rational-interactionist model, fear of crime must not be regarded as a symptom of mental trauma but as the outcome of rational decision making. In general the perception of victimisation risks must not be a priori equated with emotions at all. In some cases a heightened risk awareness generates feelings of fear or anxiety but this need not be so. Neither is fear a necessary condition for self-protection as was previously assumed by the proponents of the fear-drive model.

In the perspective of the rational interactionist model, the public's collective decisions on preventive measures constitute an adaptive social mechanism which in the long term contributes to a better control of crime. Crime awareness among the public should be studied as a socially constructive, negative feedback mechanism. In future studies, more attention should be given to the economic interests and considerations of the public with regard to self-protection. In the evaluation of victim assistance increased risk awareness and a lasting commitment to reduce crime risks individually or with others must, in principle, be seen as positive outcomes of the coping process. More research must be done on the extent to which individual and collective self-protection measures actually reduce victimisation risks of individuals and (local) populations.

Attitudes of victims towards the police and sentencing also seem largely governed by rational considerations. The need to back up an insurance claim

with official papers is an important factor in decision-making on reporting to the police. In Western countries victims do not normally blame the police for being unable to arrest the offender and neither do they demand imprisonment. Satisfaction with the police does not predominantly depend upon the effectiveness of the investigation. Many crime victims, however, would like to receive more information and practical or emotional support than they actually get. Severe sentences are supported only if perceived to be instrumental in reducing crime and losses from crime. Several studies suggest that victims' satisfaction with the police and the courts is determined more by the procedural quality of the treatment than by its outcome.

Policy Implications

At an abstract theoretical level our findings refute the notion of crime victims as a special category of citizens who typically possess extreme feelings of fear and other mental health problems and demand the imposition of harsh, retributive punishment upon offenders. The image of the over-emotional and revengeful victim with a lust for punishment proves to be a fallacy. Victim advocates must therefore raise their voices against the persistent misrepresentation of crime victims for political ends. In the past victims have wrongly been paraded as proponents of tougher crime policies. Crime victims were supposed to resist experimentation with non-custodial or preventive policies. In reality the public at large in all Western nations, whether personally victimised by crime or not, leaves sufficient scope for such experimentation and would, in fact, welcome it. With regard to sentencing reform the public in several countries seems more pragmatic and open-minded than many criminal justice professionals and politicians.

If a majority of inhabitants of cities is victimised by crime at least once every five years or so, it is unlikely that victims typically suffer from mental health-related problems. If all or most crime victims would exhibit emotional disorders, the urban populations of the world would be in a permanent mental health crisis. Our findings suggest that most victims cope rather well with their victimisation experience and respond rationally to it, for instance by regaining their self-confidence through improved self-protection. The crime victim's public image must not only be defended against political exploitation. The emerging tendency to routinely attach clinical labels to crime victims on behalf of vested professional interests must also be exposed.

In our opinion, the needs of crime victims must not primarily be interpreted in medical or legal terms at all. They must first of all be understood in a perspective of informed self-interest. Victims of crime are sharply aware of their interest in better self-protection. They are therefore the government's natural allies in campaigns for improved situational or community-based crime prevention. The public's spontaneous tendency to be very concerned about its safety must not be seen as problematic. It should rather be seen as 'healthy anxiety' and a contribution to a better control of crime. It seems questionable whether governments are justified to try to reduce fear of crime independently of crime. As Bennett (1990) concludes, such policies might upset natural

equilibriums and reduce the motivation of residents to participate in community crime prevention programs and/or to take adequate precautions to secure their property. As experiments in The Netherlands showed, attempts by governments to reduce fear through information campaigns stand little chance of success anyway (Kuttschreuter 1994). Rather than to reduce fear against heavy odds, governments should aim to steer and encourage the public's spontaneous defensive responses in the framework of a coherent crime policy. The use of situational and community-based crime prevention should, for instance, be promoted through subsidies, taxation and the adoption of minimum standards.

Reservations of lawyers about the participation of victims in criminal procedure were probably also based on misguided notions. Criminal lawyers have been unduly concerned about the emotional state of crime victims. In The Netherlands victims of serious crimes are entitled to speak in person with the prosecutor in charge of 'their case'. Victims were found to be much less demanding than was previously feared. In North America victims exercising their right to speak up in court about their feelings and opinions do not typically demand harsh punishment. Most victims do not apparently use their new rights as a retributive tool. They want to be recognised as concerned parties and to be notified of judicial decisions. They also have an obvious interest in securing compensation from the offender for losses or for pain and suffering (Groenhuijsen 1993; Van Hecke & Wemmers 1992). Meeting these modest demands does not require any fundamental changes in procedural or substantive law. What is needed is nothing more or less than a serious commitment from all parties involved to treat victims the way government agencies are supposed to treat citizens across the board in democracies: fairly and efficiently.

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