

## **SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE INTERNATIONAL CRIME SURVEY**

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It is by now well known that international victimisation surveys have as their goal to provide an indication of the level of crime in different countries that is independent of conventional police statistics which, by their very nature, are limited to crimes that are reported to law enforcement agencies. While this has been, until now, the main purpose of the International Crime Survey, there are many other purposes for which the survey could be used. Here, two potential contributions of the ICS will simply be mentioned and a couple of suggestions made as to how to maximise the value of the information being collected.

### **Improving survey methodology**

International crime surveys can contribute significantly to the refinement of the methodology of victimisation surveys in general. It would be naive to assume that the same technique works equally well in different cultures and it is only by testing various techniques in different cultural settings that one can learn about their strengths and weaknesses. Ultimately, it might prove possible to figure out which technique or techniques work better or best in any given culture. This, of course, raises the problem of comparability of data obtained through the use of different techniques and may even be counter to the original idea of using a standardised technique in all the countries where the survey is conducted. Be this as it may, there is no doubt that insights gained through the international survey are bound to lead to considerable improvements in the techniques currently used nationally and internationally. One need only remember how superior the present techniques are to the rather primitive ones employed in the early surveys to realise how the methodology used can and will benefit from the international experience being acquired from conducting the survey in a large number of countries with very different social, cultural, political, and economic characteristics.

### **Testing criminological theories**

Cross-cultural surveys can be used effectively to test and validate criminological and victimological theories. For example, the findings of the International Survey provide support for the opportunity theory, and lend credence to several elements for the life style or routine activity models. But there are many other theories and theoretical models that could be tested using reliable cross-cultural victimisation data. Environmental theories of crime, as well as theories of target selection, are among the obvious candidates for such validation, but they are not the only ones.

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The rapidly changing conditions in the countries of Eastern Europe provide a unique context for testing several explanations of crime and criminal victimisation.

Testing the theories will require, however, certain modifications to the instrument and the addition of certain questions designed specifically to gauge the validity of certain theoretical postulates and hypotheses.

### **The need for qualitative data**

Victimisation surveys, whether national or international, are essentially measures of the incidence and prevalence of certain types of crime. They also provide information on responses to crime, fear of crime, attitudes towards the police as well as information on victim services and so forth. At present, they do not shed much light on the nature of the victimisation experiences. Understanding of those experiences would be greatly enhanced were the surveys to be complemented by comparative, cross-cultural, qualitative studies of the existentialist aspects of victimisation, what may be called in French, "la victimisation vecue". The qualitative study of the victimisation experiences of street kids in Ethiopia and the Sudan, outlined in the chapter by Prof. Max Taylor *et al.*, is a good example of the valuable insights that could be gained through such qualitative studies. They are the ones that inject some life in the rather lifeless numbers and percentages revealed by victimisation surveys. What makes this study of street kids particularly informative is the fact that children are currently excluded from victimisation surveys. Another example of the qualitative studies is the study conducted by Prof. Tony Peters in Belgium. In it he explores in detail and in depth the victimisation experiences of a small group of victims.

Through these qualitative studies it is possible to learn a great deal about the contexts in which certain victimisations take place, about the dynamics of victimisation, and particularly about the differential impact of victimisation. Studying the impact of certain victimisations on those subjected to them in different cultures can be very enlightening and can help us identify the social and cultural factors that enhance or alleviate the traumatic effects of victimisation. It can shed light on the different cultural attitudes and the varying levels of tolerance to the same types of victimisation.

Cross-cultural surveys can also indicate whether the needs of crime victims are universal or culture-specific. It is likely that the needs do vary, sometimes quite dramatically, from one culture to the other and it is only through these cross-cultural investigations that those needs and how to best satisfy them can be better understood. Last but not least, qualitative studies are indispensable for explaining whatever differences in the rates of victimisation are revealed by the international surveys. Establishing the differences, while in itself a very worthy piece of information, must be taken a step further to the next stage, the stage of explanation.

### **Exploring the relationship between victimisation and offending**

One of the most important findings of national victimisation surveys, such as the British and Dutch Crime Surveys, is the close link that exists between victimisation and offending. The surveys revealed that those who engage in deviant, delinquent, or criminal activities have a much higher chance of being victimised than those who

do not. They showed as well that those who are victimised (and particularly those who are frequently victimised) have substantial delinquent involvement. The considerable overlap between the victim and offender populations is, in the author's humble opinion, one of the most interesting and most significant findings of national victimisation surveys. There is a lot to be learned and gained by including questions about offending and deviance in international surveys. It is necessary to know whether this link and this overlap also exist in cultures other than the western cultures. It is essential to know how violent victimisation or even property victimisation is retaliatory in nature. For example, it has been stated that many Dutch victims of bicycle thefts do themselves justice by simply stealing other people's bicycles. But this is only one example of many. There are strong reasons to believe that victimisation is, in many instances, an antecedent to offending and is a significant contributor to delinquency. There is some conclusive evidence of this emanating from birth cohort research, from retrospective and prospective studies. The implications of this relationship between victimisation and offending for responses to crime and crime prevention policies are enormous.

It is true that the cross-sectional nature of the data currently collected in victimisation surveys makes it difficult to establish the time sequence of victimisation and offending and to determine which occurred first. However, what is important is to view offending and victimisation not as two separate, distinct, or opposing phenomena but as the two sides of the same coin, as two interconnected experiences in the life of many individuals that need to be examined within the same survey if the links between the two experiences are to be understood.

These are just a few, brief, personal thoughts about the potential contributions and the possible directions that the international survey (as well as national surveys) can take. The really important question is whether counting victimisation should continue to be the main or the sole purpose of the surveys or whether the objectives should be broadened. Since there are still some formidable methodological problems in the way of getting an accurate count or a reliable measurement of the victimisations that are taking place, a rethinking of the goals and a redefinition of the objectives might be in order.

