

## INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON OF CRIME AND VICTIMIZATION: THE ICVS

### *Introduction*

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This volume deals with a selection of issues of victim research by examining one of the largest series of victim surveys conducted so far: the International Crime (Victim) Survey (ICVS), which has been conducted four times (1989, 1992, 1996, and 2000) in numerous countries. Comparable victimization data was collected in highly differential countries by means of largely the same instrument, which was translated into several languages, and utilized the same methodology. Thus, victimization and crime load figures from a great variety of countries are now available, enabling an international comparison of crime on a different level. Logically, such large international comparative surveys, however, also entail considerable methodological problems, especially when countries vary in terms of languages, cultures, and social conditions. In addition to a presentation of further results, a number of these problems shall be discussed here.

There has been considerable progress in the field of victim research since the first large-scale victim surveys were conducted in the United States in the late 1960s (cf. Ennis 1967). In most Western countries it has developed into a widely applied instrument used to record the "actual" crime situation. Until then, the crime phenomenon was described almost exclusively on the basis of police statistics. Great developments in the field of empirical social research resulted in the use of public polling to record criminal behavior. In other fields, this methodology was already applied with great success. Survey findings even attracted worldwide attention, for example, Kinsey's survey of sexual behavior of Americans (cf. Kinsey et al. 1948, 1953). These studies, however, also pointed out the difficulty of collecting data, particularly on sensitive issues such as sexual behavior. It became increasingly clear that survey data only approximated the "reality."

As methodology quickly improved, the use of surveys increased, especially in Western industrial countries at the regional and the national level. A number of countries such as the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and the Netherlands conduct large representative crime surveys or victim surveys at regular intervals. In Germany, even though different research groups have already conducted a number of large nationwide victim surveys (e.g., Kury, Doermann, Richter, and Wuerger 1992), data has not been collected regularly. Last year, the German Federal Government established a work group to establish an annual survey. It has prepared and submitted a detailed proposal. Considering the currently tight national financial situation, it is still unclear whether policy-makers will

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decide in favor of a periodically conducted survey.

Initially, survey methodology was not only used to record (criminal) victimizations, it was also used to record reporting behavior, the relationship between the offender and victim, and effects of victimization experiences on attitudes and behavior (e.g., as regards fear of crime or sanctioning attitudes). This, in particular, caused these surveys and the derived findings to develop into an information pool in regard to crime and effects of crime. Thus, victim studies have also been instrumental in connection with the “rediscovery” of the crime victim and the development of the “feminist” movement, as it was possible to obtain better data on the effects of crimes on victims, particularly victims of sexual crimes. An increasing number of studies were carried out on female and child victims. The derived findings greatly supported the victim movement internationally. Individual countries increasingly enacted statutory regulations to improve victim protection, for example, in criminal proceedings and victim aid.

Additionally, the findings of victim research have changed the picture of “crime reality” considerably. For example, it became clear that police-registered crime often merely furnishes a distorted picture of the actual occurrence of crime. In the early days of empirical victim research, the “dark figure” of crime was estimated at 50 percent or more, as it was found that about one-half of respondents did not report all crimes to the police (Ennis 1967). Today the dark figure is estimated to be 90 percent (Kury 2001). In this context, victim research and relevant empirical surveys have contributed essentially to a more objective assessment of the crime situation.

Victim studies, and the critical discussion on the derived findings, have also promoted the discussion and refinement of survey methodology. In the course of the studies, it became increasingly clear that the valid recording of criminal victimizations, particularly in the field of domestic violence or sex crimes, is extremely difficult. In time, special collecting instruments were developed for this purpose. A main concern, for example, was whether the definitions and specifications of a criminal act, as predefined by the researchers, correspond with those of the victim.

To date, victim studies are conducted almost exclusively on a national level, often merely on the basis of partial samples within a given country. International crime surveys involve considerable methodological and organizational problems. The questionnaire, for example, needs to be translated into several languages. In this context, we know that the findings depend considerably on the question and the reliability of the translation. Different cultural backgrounds, for instance, significantly influences the respondents’ response behavior. Differential findings across countries are therefore not necessarily indicative of different “crime realities.” It is plausible that they reflect varying “sensitivities” to such incidents. In Germany, for example, police-registered sex crimes have increased in the past 10 years, after a downward tendency in the years before. Simultaneously, the subject of sex crimes was discussed intensively and publicly

in the media, often in connection with individual serious crimes such as sexual abuse of children. This most likely contributed to heightening the public's sensitivity to such criminal acts, and was likely responsible for the higher reporting rate. It is assumed that such circumstances are also able to influence the facts reported in victim studies.

The International Crime (Victim) Survey (ICVS), conducted in 1989 for the first time, was the first victim study carried out in numerous countries on the basis of the same collecting instrument and largely the same methodology. On the whole, this first study was conducted in 15 countries, mostly in Western Europe, but also in Japan, the United States, Canada, and Australia (van Dijk, Mayhew, and Killias 1990). The survey was repeated in 1992, 1996, and 2000 with largely the same instrument. Each "wave" included more countries, particularly developing nations from all continents. Already the second study in 1992 included Poland and Czechoslovakia, which were formerly countries of the former socialist-communist Eastern Bloc (van Dijk and Mayhew 1992). During that time, UNICRI (United Nations Interregional Criminal Justice Research Institute, Rome) began to develop comparable surveys in non-industrialized countries, largely at the city level, as nationwide surveys were frequently unfeasible due to technical problems (Alvazzi del Frate, Zvecik, and van Dijk 1993). The third study in 1996 comprised 13 countries once again, of which 11 had participated in at least one of the earlier waves (Mayhew and van Dijk 1997). Parallel to this, the city surveys were developed further in other countries, particularly in the developing countries (Alvazzi del Frate 1998; Hatalak, Alvazzi del Frate, and Zvecik 1998). Seventeen countries participated in the last ICVS in 2000, of which at least 14 had participated in at least one of the earlier data collections. The city surveys in the developing countries were developed further as well (van Kesteren, Mayhew, and Nieuwbeerta 2000). So far, according to the compilation by Nieuwbeerta (2002b:4-5), the ICVS has been conducted in 25 industrial nations, and more than once in many of them. Moreover, it was carried out in 46 cities all over the world. A total of 140 individual surveys were conducted, with 110,000 of the more than 200,000 respondents living in industrial countries. Table 1 shows which industrial countries participated in the individual waves with national surveys (van Kesteren et al. 2000:13). Note that no less than five industrial countries participated in all four waves, a further nine countries in three waves, and again nine countries in merely one wave. Thus, a longitudinal comparison in regard to the development of crime is possible for at least 13 countries.

It is clear that this survey represents a unique scientific project in the field of criminology/victimology. Nieuwbeerta (2002b) rightly emphasizes, "clearly, the International Crime Victims Survey (ICVS) is now the most far-reaching fully standardized survey examining householders' crime experiences in various countries" (p. 3). To date, as mentioned, more than 200,000 persons have been asked in more than 60 countries in the course of the four waves whether they have been victimized in one of the given crime categories. The study was carried out in

**Table 1: Countries That Have Participated in the Four Waves of the ICVS Conducted So Far**

	1989	1992	1996	2000
Australia	x	x		x
Austria			x	
Belgium	x	x		x
Canada	x	x	x	x
Catalonia (Spain)				x
Denmark				x
England and Wales	x	x	x	x
Finland	x	x	x	x
France	x		x	x
Germany (West)	x			
Italy		x		
Japan	x	x		x
Netherlands	x	x	x	x
New Zealand		x		
Northern Ireland	x		x	x
Norway	x			
Poland		x	x	x
Portugal				x
Scotland	x		x	x
Spain	x			
Sweden		x	x	x
Switzerland	x		x	x
USA	x	x	x	x

Western, Central, and Eastern Europe as well as in North and South America, Asia, Southern Africa, Australia, and New Zealand.

In regard to its content, the collecting ICVS data logically followed existing examples, particularly the questionnaires of national crime victimization surveys. The persons questioned were aged 16 and older. In most industrial nations the data were collected on the basis of CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing), and only in a few cases by way of face-to-face interviews. In individual countries the response rates differed greatly, ranging, for example, from 45 percent (France) to 81 percent (Northern Ireland) in the 2000 survey (van Kesteren et al. 2000:17). In the individual countries the sample size, as a rule, totaled 2,000 to 3,000 interviewees. They were screened for victimization experiences in the categories of car theft, theft from car, motorcycle and bicycle theft, burglary, theft of personal property, robbery, sexual and non-sexual assault, threats, other contact crimes, consumer fraud, and corruption. Thus, the list of crimes examined comprises 13 offense categories, with the latter two having been added at a later date. The respondents were screened for victimization experiences within the past 5 years in a number of categories, though they were asked whether they had experienced any victimization within the past year. In addition to victimization experiences and reporting behavior, information in regard to fear of crime and attitudes towards the police and sanctioning were collected (e.g., the questionnaire of the last survey) (van Kesteren et al. 2000:134-175).

So far, the enormous datasets collected have been only partially evaluated. After each individual wave, reports were published on the most essential sur-

vey results. Publications in journals and contributed works have dealt with individual issues (e.g., Kury et al. 1994; 1996). Additionally, further findings were presented and discussed at international conferences (e.g., Alvazzi del Frate et al. 1993; Zvekic et al. 1995). The volume of conference papers by Nieuwbeerta (2002a) contains a wealth of individual information on various issues on the basis of the data from all four ICVS waves. So far, numerous interesting questions, which may be answered on the basis of the information contained in the datasets, have not been dealt with yet. This volume intends to take up a number of these issues.

This volume contains 10 contributions on central questions, which the ICVS has set out to resolve or at least develop further. For example:

- possibilities of, and improvements in, the cross-sectional and longitudinal international comparison of crime;
- the inclusion of countries on whose crime problems few reliable data are available, such as Central and Eastern European countries of the former Soviet Union;
- international comparative information with regard to accompanying phenomena of crime, such as fear of crime or sanctioning attitudes.

In their introductory contribution, van Dijk (one of the co-initiators of the ICVS) and Shaw look briefly at the history of victim surveys and the contribution of the ICVS. They outline some of the key issues, challenges, and obstacles of the ICVS and discuss the possible impact of this data. They also highlight the importance of providing comparative crime statistics in an international setting. In their opinion, the importance of the ICVS increases with the number of participating countries and with the number of repeat surveys. International organizations are increasingly dependent on comparative crime data. The authors argue that the ICVS, in conjunction with other data sets, will play a critical role in managing issues of safety and development.

In their article on the international comparability of crime rates, Aebi, Killias, and Tavares broach a central aspect that is increasingly gaining significance, particularly in connection with increasing globalization. They discuss the possibilities of the ICVS as compared with “The European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics,” which was first published in 1999 and contains data on 36 countries. They compare the results of the European Sourcebook against the ICVS and establish a distinct deviation between the two data sources depending on crime category. Police statistics ought to be considered carefully before making expressive international comparisons and, as they explain, “crime surveys offer more valid comparisons if definitions of measures, survey methodology, and reference periods are tightly standardized.”

As an example of methodological problems of such surveys, Kury,

Obergfell-Fuchs, and Wuerger examine “interviewer gender” and its effect on the ICVS findings with regard to the crimes of “personal theft,” “assault,” and “theft from car,” and the extent of fear of crime. Interviewer gender bias differs from country to country as well as within individual countries in across the ICVS waves, which affects the comparability of the data. The findings document a considerable effect of interviewer gender on the results derived on the basis of the ICVS, which means that in future applications of the survey, interviewer gender ought to be kept constant in order to avoid a further reduction in the comparability of findings.

In their contribution, Alvazzi del Frate and van Kesteren sum up the findings of the ICVS in the developing world. More and more developing countries have participated in the survey since 1990, totaling at least 29 so far. Other countries are interested in participating as well. The results presented concern 23 large cities in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The victimization rates established for the developing countries are comparatively high, especially with regard to property offenses. Satisfaction with the police, reporting rates, and sanctioning attitudes exhibit a broad range of variation.

Gruszczynska discusses crime and victimization in connection with social factors in post-socialist countries. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was a distinct rise in the “official” crime load in these countries (though from a considerably lower starting point in comparison with Western countries). Against the background of the social, political, and economical transformations, Gruszczynska, examines changing crime patterns using data from the ICVS and the European Sourcebook.

Schaefer and Lynch examine cross-national differences in the perceived seriousness of crime. Their model, basis of the ICVS data, indicates that the variable “nation” has a significant effect on perceptions of seriousness. Respondents from Belgium, Finland, and Denmark perceive crime as less serious than respondents in Australia. On the other hand, crimes are perceived as more serious in Northern Ireland, Japan, and Catalonia than in the other countries/regions compared. Demographic variables such as gender partially influence the assessment of seriousness. As a result, Schaefer and Lynch argue that differences in perceived seriousness could account for some of the differences observed in sentencing policy.

Based on ICVS data, Verweij and Nieuwbeerta discuss gender differences in regard to violent victimizations against the background of women’s emancipation in 18 industrial nations. They find that men, particularly young ones, have a greater risk of becoming victims of a violent crime, yet the differences in relation to women vary between individual countries. The authors examine to what extent these differences depend on the style of living in the individual countries. The findings confirm the significance of women’s emancipation as a predictor of the degree of gender-specific victim rates.

In their contribution, Aromaa and Heiskanen discuss the subject of fear of crime on the basis of a comparison of different European countries. Differences established in the level of fear of crime between individual countries are enormous. Gender-specific differences were established, which point to special influential factors behind male and female fear of crime. The authors clearly point out the methodological problems in the ICVS with regard to accurate measurement.

Kury, Obergfell-Fuchs, Smartt, and Wuerger discuss findings on the development of sanctioning attitudes within the past decade. While sanctioning attitudes have stiffened in many Western nations, they have relaxed in Central and Eastern European countries, where the original level had been comparatively high. Policy-makers, in turn, very often take the public's "wishes in regard to punishment" as a basis for implementing stricter sanctions. Such results are thus of considerable importance, which underlines the demand for adequate recording of the data. The findings on sanctioning attitudes from the four ICVS waves were examined in terms of methodological effects, particularly interviewer gender bias. Interviewer gender was found to have an effect on the findings relating to sanctioning attitudes. Anglo-American nations exhibit an increasing demand for severe sanctions compared to a decreasing demand in the former Eastern Bloc states.

The last article by Alvazzi del Frate discusses reflections on the future development of the ICVS. There are great expectations regarding the next (fifth) application of the survey. The author reports on the present state of the discussion, the problems, and expectations of the survey. An increasing number of countries are interested in participating in ICVS, which also entails enormous financial and organizational problems. As the ICVS expands it runs the risk of becoming a victim of its own popularity, since the management of data requires greater funding.

The International Crime and (Victim) Survey is undoubtedly one of the largest and most influential criminological/victimological studies. Despite all of the methodological problems involved, the data have furnished a wealth of significant findings that have served to promote the international comparison of crime and victim research considerably. The authors of the volume, the majority of whom have been closely associated with the ICVS from the beginning, have made valuable contributions to improving scientific knowledge in the field of international victim research. I wish to express my sincerest thanks to all of them for their cooperation. And finally, I wish to thank the editors of the IJCC, especially Shivu Ishwaran, for their excellent cooperation.

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