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Criminal Victimization in Eleven Industrialised Countries; Key findings from the 1996 International Crime Victims Survey

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Summary

The International Crime Victimization Survey (ICVS) is the most far-reaching programme of fully standardised sample surveys looking at householders' experience of crime in different countries. The first ICVS took place in 1989, the second in 1992, and the third in 1996. Surveys have been carried out in over 50 countries since 1989, including a large number of city surveys in developing countries and countries in transition. This report deals with eleven industrialised countries which took part in the third sweep.

The reason for setting up the ICVS was the inadequacy of other measures of crime across country. Figures of offences recorded by the police are problematic due to differences in the way the police define, record and count crime. And since most crimes the police know about are reported by victims, police figures can differ simply because of differences in reporting behaviour. It is also difficult to make comparisons of independently organised crime surveys, as these differ in design and coverage.

For the countries covered in this report, interviews were mainly conducted by telephone (with samples selected through variants of random digit dialling). There is no reason to think results are biased because of the telephone mode. Response rates varied but we show that there is no overriding evidence that this affects the count of victimisation. Samples were usually of 1,000 or 2,000 people which means there is a fairly wide sampling error on the ICVS estimates. The surveys cannot, then, give precise estimates of crime in different countries. But they are a unique source of information and give good comparative information.

The results in this report relate mainly to respondents' experience of crime in 1995, the year prior to the 1996 survey. Those interviewed were asked about crimes they had experienced, whether or not reported to the police. The main results follow.

Overall victimisation

The ICVS allows a measure of the percentage of people victimised in the past year by any of the eleven crimes covered by the survey. This

is a simple but robust indicator of overall proneness to crime. The countries fall into three bands

- Above 30% (victim of any crime in 1995): The Netherlands, England and Wales.
- 24%-27%: Switzerland, Scotland, France, Canada, the USA.
- Under 20%: Sweden, Finland, Austria, and Northern Ireland.

For countries in previous sweeps of the ICVS, the present results generally mirror previous ones as regards relative rankings. In terms of the number of crimes experienced per capita, Switzerland, Scotland and France fared better than Canada and the USA, compared to the pattern from the above prevalence risks. On this incidence measure, there was again most crime in the Netherlands, and England and Wales.

Thefts of cars

The risk of having a car stolen was highest in England and Wales (3% of owners had a theft), Scotland (2.2%), and the USA (2.1%). Those in Austria, Switzerland, and the Netherlands were least likely to get their cars back - indicating proportionately more professional theft. Recovery rates were highest in Sweden, Finland, and the USA - indicating more thefts for 'joyriding'. In the eight countries in Europe with surveys prior to 1996, the proportion of stolen cars recovered has fallen in six.

In countries where bicycle ownership is high, bicycle thefts are high too, while cars stolen for joyriding in particular tend to be low.

Thefts from cars

Thefts from cars (luggage, radios, car mirrors etc) were highest in England and Wales (10% of owners had one or more theft), Scotland (9%), France (8%) and the USA (8%). Risks were lowest in Northern Ireland, Switzerland, Finland and Austria.

Burglary

The proportion of households who had a completed or attempted burglary was highest in England and Wales (6%), Canada, the Netherlands, and the USA (all 5%).

The pattern of relative risk is very similar whether the focus is on burglary with entry or attempts. Where burglars are successfully gain entry, they are also more active in trying to do so.

Nonetheless, the proportion of burglaries which involved attempts varies somewhat by country. More burglaries were attempts in Scotland, England and Wales, the Netherlands, the USA, and Finland. The ICVS evidence suggests that homes in these countries are better protected by security devices. This may explain why burglars more often fail to gain entry.

Contact crime

Contact crime comprises here robbery, assaults, and sexual assaults (against women only). The highest risks were in England and Wales and the USA: over 3% were victimised - double the level in Northern Ireland, Austria and the Netherlands. Sweden and Finland also had relatively high levels of contact crime, echoing previous ICVS results. There was a higher than average use of knives in robberies in Scotland, Switzerland, Austria, France, and the Netherlands, and a higher than average use of guns in the USA and Northern Ireland.

Other crime

There was a residual category of other crimes: vandalism to cars, thefts of motorcycles and bicycles, theft of personal property, offensive sexual behaviour, and threats. They are pooled together since most are seen as not very serious.

Taken as a whole, those in the Netherlands were hardest hit (26% experienced one or more incident in 1995), followed by those in England and Wales (23%) and Switzerland (21%). In the Netherlands, risks of all the sub-categories were comparatively high. In Switzerland, risks were increased most by bicycle thefts and thefts of personal property. In England and Wales, vandalism to cars increased risks most.

Country profiles of crime

The make-up of crime differs across country. In Scotland, France, Northern Ireland and England and Wales, half of the crimes reported in the ICVS were targeted at cars. But a third or less crimes in Finland, Switzerland, Sweden, and the Netherlands involved cars. Rather, thefts of two-wheelers formed a much bigger part of the national crime picture in these countries than elsewhere - in the region of a quarter of all crimes.

In the USA and Canada, burglaries comprised a bigger proportion of all crimes than elsewhere. Figures were lowest in Finland, Sweden and Austria.

Contact crime, together with threats and offensive sexual behaviour, made up nearly a quarter of crime incidents on average. But proportionately more crime incidents in Finland, the USA, and Austria were of this type.

Crime seriousness

Victims are asked to assess the seriousness of what happened to them. The mean scores for different offence types did not differ much by country - perhaps indicating similar thresholds of seriousness and patterns of crime. The ranking of offences in seriousness terms also showed marked similarity, indicating a high degree of consensus about the import of conventional crimes.

We applied an international consensus measure of offence seriousness to people's victimisation experiences in 1995 to see how countries fared on a crime count taking seriousness into account. It did not greatly alter the 'burden of crime' picture from other measures. The

Netherlands and England and Wales still remain most pressured by crime. However, Switzerland and Scotland fall back in the relative order when seriousness is taken into account, while the USA goes higher up the list.

Trends in crime

England and Wales, the Netherlands, Finland, the USA and Canada have entered all three sweeps of the ICVS. The trend in overall victimisation since 1988 was compared with offences recorded by the police. There is some symmetry in the two measures. On both, crime levels rose between 1988 and 1991, the USA being an exception on both police and surveys figures, and the Netherlands on police figures. Between 1991 and 1995, police figures have fallen in all countries except the Netherlands, with the fall in Finland fairly marginal. On ICVS figures, risks in the USA, Canada and Finland have fallen, and stabilised somewhat in England and Wales and the Netherlands. Where police and survey trends differ most, changes in reporting levels may help explain why. What explains this interesting picture of recent crime trends is hard to say. It may be to do with increased police or sentencing effectiveness, better economic conditions, improved security against property crime, or possibly complicated demographic and cultural changes. The ICVS itself cannot provide evidence for or against these explanations, although the results, as regards burglary at least, lend some credence to the possibility that improved security has had a beneficial effect.

Explaining crime levels

Results from the 1996 ICVS covered here were combined with those from eight other industrialised countries in previous sweeps, and seven countries in the Eastern bloc, economically in transition, which took part in 1996. The two main determinants of property crime were urbanisation (which increased risks) and affluence (which decreased them). But risks were higher than would be predicted in England and Wales, the USA, New Zealand and Estonia. In contrast, risks were lower than predicted in Austria, Finland, and Norway.

Reporting to the police

Nearly all cars and motorcycles stolen were reported, as were burglaries with entry. About two-thirds of thefts from cars and bicycle thefts were reported, but on average only about half of attempted burglaries and robberies were. Figures for other crime types were lower.

More victims in Sweden reported to the police than elsewhere. But those in Scotland, England and Wales, the USA, the Netherlands and Switzerland all shared high reporting rates. Crimes were least often reported in Northern Ireland and France.

That the incident was 'not serious enough' or there was 'no loss' was by far the most common reason for not reporting in all countries. The idea that the police could do nothing about what happened featured in just over one in ten incidents overall, and it was a more common

response in Northern Ireland. That the police would not help was mentioned most often in France, England and Wales, the Netherlands and Switzerland. When victims did report, insurance requirements weighed more with those in Switzerland, France and Sweden. The obligation to report weighed most with those in England and Wales, Scotland, and the USA. Retributive motives were most evident in Northern Ireland and the USA. More in the USA than elsewhere wanted compensation from the offender.

Some victims were asked whether they got help from a specialised victim support agency. When a burglary had occurred, the greatest proportion (one in five) received help in England and Wales, with higher figures than elsewhere in Scotland and Northern Ireland too. For interpersonal crimes, more support was given in general - the highest level in Sweden, the USA and England and Wales. Support from specialised agencies had generally increased since previous rounds of the ICVS.

In most countries, around three to four in ten victims would have welcomed more help after having experienced a crime.

The majority of victims were satisfied with how the police responded to their crime report. Those in Finland held the most favourable views, though not far behind were victims in Scotland, Sweden, Canada, England and Wales and the Netherlands. The police response was considered least good in France and Austria. People were asked to say whether or not the police did a good job in controlling crime in their area. Police performance was most favourably judged in Canada (80%), the USA (77%), Scotland (69%), and England and Wales (68%). By far the least satisfied were those in the Netherlands (45%). In most countries, attitudes have become less favourable since 1988.

Anxiety about burglary

One in ten of those in England and Wales felt they were very likely to be burgled in the coming year. Those in France were the next most pessimistic (6%). There was least concern in Sweden, Austria and Finland.

Whereas more people felt a burglary was likely in 1992 than in 1989, fewer did so in 1996 - generally speaking. Public perceptions of risk are tracking crime trends to an extent then.

Safety on the streets

When asked how safe they feel walking alone in their area after dark, those in England and Wales were most anxious (32% felt a bit or very unsafe). Concern was also high in Scotland, Canada, and the USA - about 25%. Feelings of vulnerability were lowest in Sweden, Finland and Switzerland.

Whereas anxiety about burglary matches national risks, feelings about street safety are not consistently related to levels of 'street trouble'. The lack of much relationship between anxiety and risks of street crime has been evident in previous ICVS results. It may mean that fear of street crime is determined by specific 'cultural' pressures.

Home security

Taking a summary measure of home security, the most security conscious were those in England and Wales, the Netherlands and Scotland.

New questions in the ICVS have been able to confirm the effectiveness of burglar alarms. Those who had an alarm installed less often had a burglar get in.

Attitudes to punishment

People were asked about the most appropriate sentence for a recidivist burglar aged 21. A community service order was most favoured in seven out of twelve countries in the 1992 and 1996 surveys. It had the strongest support in France, Australia, and Switzerland.

Support for imprisonment in 1996 was greatest in the USA, England and Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland (all with about half choosing it). For the ten countries for which change in sentencing preferences can be examined, support for imprisonment has increased in eight. The most marked switch in opinion has been in England and Wales and Scotland. The trend was not evident in France and Sweden, where community service orders now find more favour. Whether sentencing policies follow public attitudes, or public attitudes follow sentencing practice is difficult to say.

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