Victimisation surveys – what are they good for?

Kauko Aromaa*

The author analyzes the usefulness of victimization surveys. The paper is focused of surveys in which nationally representative population samples are surveyed for their personal victimisation experiences, and their attitudes and opinions of issues related to crime and crime control. The author points out the benefits of using victimization surveys, but also explains why most countries have failed to make systematic use of this instrument.

Keywords: victimization surveys, interests of knowledge, criminal policy.

Introduction

Over the last 45 years or so, after the first US work of the mid-1960s (Biderman et al. 1967; Ennis 1967), victimisation surveys have gradually become accepted as a major innovation in the assessment of certain crime-related issues. Much has been written on the shortcomings of the victimisation survey approach, and in criticism of a mechanical application of the victimisation surveys as a substitute for other measures of „crime“. Nevertheless, a tendency is observable that victimisation surveys begin to form part of the basic crime information systems widely applied in some countries, with other countries likely to follow suit in the near future. It is true that the approach is ridden with many inherent flaws, just like any other method of measurement. In this paper, I do not intend to dwell on these

---

* Mr. Kauko Aromaa is emeritus Director of the European Institute for Crime Prevention and Control, affiliated with the United Nations (HEUNI) in Helsinki, Finland.
E-mail: kauko.aromaa@om.fi.

It should be noted, however, that Gallup Finland carried out a national victimisation survey already in 1945 (see e.g. Aromaa, Leppä 1973). At that time, however, this survey remained a curiosity and failed to start a new research tradition.
shortcomings. Instead, I approach the matter in a constructive fashion, trying to point out what the approach is good for, and what its currently under-utilised potentials could be.

Given that more unbiased information about crime is valuable for a better policy concerning crime, then better ways to measure crime and crime-related issues should be promoted and welcome in order to improve the understanding of crime-related issues among the general public and among policy-makers. With better information, policy-making is able to become more knowledge-based, and the general public is likely to accept knowledge-based policies if it is well-informed. At least this is the reasoning supported by those in favour of informed policy-making; there are also different opinions, for instance those advocating the idea that it is more important to do „justice“ to victims (by harsh punishments) than to try to promote a comprehensive approach to crime issues, including the control of crime. The overt politicisation of crime issues observed in many societies would, indeed, increase the importance of the availability of accurate and unbiased information about crime - its scope, trends, and damages. In the absence of such information, policy decisions risk to be taken on the basis of beliefs only.

Thus, let us assume, for the time being, that criminal policy based on knowledge about the scope, trends and social costs of crime and crime control is desirable. In that case, good information about crime-related issues is also desirable. In this framework, victimisation surveys are a valuable instrument for a number of purposes.

There are many variants of victimisation surveys. For the sake of brevity, I am only going to discuss the variant where nationally representative population samples are surveyed for their personal victimisation experiences, and their attitudes and opinions of issues related to crime and crime control (a further important dimension of the discussion would deal with the potentials of applying the victimisation survey approach for assessing victimisation problems of other groups than the „general“ population, such as disadvantaged, vulnerable minorities, or – on the other hand – businesses\(^2\)). The UN Manual on victimisation surveys that was published recently deals only with the general population variant of victimisation surveys (United Nations

\(^2\) Business victimisation is an obvious special interest since recorded property-related crime is in many developed countries dominated by crimes against businesses and other legal entities.
Office on Drugs and Crime, 2010). This Manual wishes to encourage adoption of the victimisation survey for routine crime data production globally.

A general restriction that needs to be acknowledged is that the usual victimisation surveys do not measure “crime”. Surveys often prefer to avoid the term “crime”, rather using colloquial language as they describe the relevant victimisation incidents and situations, asking if such things have happened to the respondent over a given period of time, for instance, the last 12 months. Sometimes, respondents are indeed also asked whether they thought that the victimisation incidents which they have mentioned in the interview actually were “crimes”. The answers to this differ widely, despite the fact that the event descriptions used in the surveys would to a criminal law expert mostly quite closely resemble crimes. “Crime” is such an abstraction and such a technical term that it is not well suited to be addressed in a population survey. Population surveys are better for assessing concrete everyday experiences of simple events. Consequently, victimisation surveys deal with issues related to crime – rather than “crime” itself –, as they address popular experiences of incidents, the descriptions of which by and large correspond to the definitions of specific offences in criminal codes or other legislation.

Policy decisions are in practice also made within a rather similar discourse as the one applied in population surveys: crime-related policy rhetoric will tend to apply such terms as youth violence, street violence, organised crime, public security, “serious crime”, public order problems and disturbances – and will often use the general term “crime” about any of these and other such concerns. Thus, the population survey, if it is applying concrete event descriptions, does not correspond very well to the political discourse that is more likely to make inaccurate generalisations. This defect is, to a degree, shared by interpretations given widely to more traditional crime information sources such as administrative crime statistics or prisoner statistics. Administrative data do, however, seem to be more easily applicable to sweeping statements on “violence”, “crime” and the like, probably because they use legal and political abstractions rather than real-life event descriptions.

---

3 The reference period of “last year” or “last 12 months” is, interestingly, a remnant from the early days of victimisation surveys: as they were commonly thought to reflect “crime” as administrative statistics (such as statistics on police-recorded crime), it seemed obvious that the reference period of one year should be used for the sake of comparability. Thinking about the phenomenon of victimisation, this reference period is not necessarily the “best” option.
Interests of knowledge

When we speak of knowledge-based criminal policy, reference is not made to just any kind of arbitrary „knowledge“. Instead, this discourse makes reference to the overall social costs of crime and crime control, and to the fair distribution of such costs. The first problem is to assess the situation in an unbiased manner. The second problem, then, is to see what can be done about it.4

A further issue is what is today often addressed in terms of the „what works“ paradigm, i.e. issues that refer to crime prevention and crime reduction, and the prevention or reduction of re-offending – in brief: what are the most justifiable and effective ways of spending resources on reducing the social harms caused by crime and crime control?

Within this frame of reference, the interests of knowledge served by victimisation surveys include objectives such as:

1) to learn about unrecorded crime (victimisation surveys unveil large amounts of unrecorded events that may be crimes). In practical terms, this means estimates of the overall prevalence and incidence of „surveyable“ victimisation experiences, and estimates of unrecorded crime.

2) to measure psychological harm and other consequences, and material damage and other costs caused by victimisation. Also broader cost issues may be approached.

3) to measure repeat, serial, and multiple victimisation, victim careers, accumulation of victimisation risks, vulnerable population groups.

4) to compare survey findings with police data. Victimisation surveys allow for insights into how recorded crimes are selected from all possible events that share certain characteristics, including the reporting behaviour of the population. Here, questions on reporting/not reporting crimes to the police and experiences related to reporting are asked.

5) to measure satisfaction with police performance both generally and in each concrete case.

---

4 Crime policy is, according to a now classic formulation by Patrik Törnudd (1971) defined by its objectives: “The aims of criminal policy i.e. the totality of decisions which primarily are related to crime – are twofold: 1) to keep the sum total of costs and suffering caused by crime and by society’s efforts to control crime as low as possible, and 2) to distribute these costs as justly as possible” (p. 29).
6) to assess popular confidence in the criminal justice system, including police, and punishment attitudes and expectations as to authority performance.

7) to give voice to the victims of crimes and their needs for support. This approach demonstrates that there is a large volume of events or experiences that may be crimes and opens the possibility of reassessing the relative importance of given types of crime-related events, in particular those that are typically not recorded in other standard sources.

8) to find information that is relevant in terms of the rights of crime victims and for constructing indicators related to such rights and needs to enforce them.

9) to learn about public opinion related to crime and crime control: knowledge-based and informed criminal policy should be aware of public opinion about these matters regardless of whether there is agreement or disagreement on what the central crime problems are or on how to deal with crime. The survey is also helpful for finding out what people understand by „crime“.

10) to learn about public fear or concern about crime (knowledge-based criminal policy must be aware of and address popular concerns related to crime and crime control). This is addressed by questions on fear and concern, and the deterioration of quality of life caused by crime.

11) to learn what people have done about victimisation (such as preventive measures adopted by the general public or corporate bodies subject to crime risks). Survey questions on precautionary and avoidance behaviour, and the use of protection measures serve this end.

12) to make international comparisons of rates and trends (national or local crime issues are often mistaken as unique and in need of extreme measures, while international comparisons may reveal that the situation is not unusual; also, if the victimisation survey would provide evidence supporting a contrary conclusion, this would be equally important). International comparisons will bring crime assessment into comparative perspective.

13) to measure trends nationally (shortcomings in the standard administrative crime recording systems, such as their inability to account for variations in reporting behaviour, may cause erroneous conclusions concerning trends of certain types of events that are reflected in victimisation surveys).
14) to make regional comparisons within one country (variations in standard administrative crime recording systems and of reporting behaviour may even hamper comparisons across areas within the same jurisdiction).

15) to assess the outcome of crime prevention programmes (more recently, this aspect has gained much support, as local crime prevention projects have become more popular).

The victimisation survey has also some unique features that are distinct from criminal justice-related administrative data:

16) the victimisation survey is flexible, it can use standard and changing modules at need.

17) the victimisation survey is able to combine events that are recorded and attended to by different agencies (health care, social services, police, non-government organisations).

18) the victimisation survey is able to combine events other than crime with the victimisation experiences (such as the physical safety approach that combines crime victimisation with accidents), and personal characteristics (lifestyle, intoxication, risk-taking behaviour).

This list is not likely to be comprehensive. Many more relevant interests of knowledge could probably be served by victimisation surveys. This list does, however, already demonstrate that the victimisation survey approach could provide better (albeit, of course, probably not the full) answers to a wide scope of relevant questions than what can be drawn from standard administrative crime data that are traditionally relied upon, such as police-recorded crimes, arrest statistics, or statistics on sentenced persons or prisoners. In particular, the focus is shifted from the offender to the victim and the consequences of crimes.

**Victimisation surveys have still not become standard information sources**

Even after a large volume of demonstrations of the multiplicity of uses that the victimisation surveys have in theory and in practice, most countries have failed to make systematic use of the new instrument. Even in those countries that have done so, their uses for knowledge-based criminal
policy have remained limited. This is a curious observation, deserving some attention.

Why such a useful instrument has been hard to gain recognition as one of the central and necessary criminal policy information sources has a multiplicity of reasons. One simple reason is material: it requires an extra budget and a new specialised production body as such data are not available on a routine basis similar to how administrative crime statistics are created as a side product of everyday authority activity.

If victimisation surveys are to be implemented more broadly and systematically, and on a routine basis, this may also require the emergence of a new category of skilled analysts in government bodies, whether statistics authorities or others responsible for crime data production. It takes special training to make the best of victimisation surveys, and such training is often not readily available.

However, the material reasons are not likely to be the only ones. Another reason could be that, in many countries, criminal policy issues have not (yet) become high priority issues, and therefore it is not very important to improve the relevant knowledge basis rapidly. In short, awareness of the value of the victimisation survey approach continues to be low among the strategic decision-makers who should be providing the required resources. This may have a link to the development of democratic institutions since crime policy issues gain in importance in democratic debate.

Eventually, this is an issue of political will. Governments have failed to recognise and accept their responsibility regarding crime control, crime damage reduction, and crime victims. It therefore seems that they have too often failed to develop their crime data sources, and continue to rely on the kind of data that represents 18th-19th century thinking (certainly very enlightened in those times).

A further reason could be that the current state of affairs is acceptable and even useful for some powerful segments of society, including law enforcement, the media, and many politicians. Survey results have often been met with disbelief, or even outright rejection. This may be in part because those accustomed to relying on administrative crime data are unfamiliar and distrustful about surveys that may be felt to be “just idle talk”; there has also been controversy about the “ownership” of crime and crime-related data which have traditionally been the monopoly of law enforcement and criminal justice authorities. Among such critics, survey-based data are being met with
suspicion since they are not speaking the same language as criminal law and
law enforcement experts.

This may in part be due to a failure in marketing the results, researchers
having been unable to provide plausible and convincing interpretations. Overall, the dialogue between researchers and strategic decision-makers
(including the media) has often not been very good. A parallel problem in
this respect may be that the news provided by victimisation surveys have
not been attractive because they have often been of a character that rather
de-dramatises crime issues, or does not support demands for additional
resources for law enforcement that refer to arguments related to „the
deteriorating crime situation“ or „threats to public security“, contrary to what
is often depicted in media representations.

The UN Manual on victimisation surveys represents significant progress
in terms of improving the possibilities for responsible decision-makers to
promote the application of this powerful instrument in their countries. In
this sense, it represents a major improvement. Once it becomes more widely
known that the Manual is available to anyone, the expectations increase
that victimisation surveys are finally adopted as a standard data collection
instrument where crime-related statistics are concerned, and that they are
being used to their full potential.

References

Aromaa, K., Leppä, S. (1973) Omaisuusrikosten yksilöuhrien tarkastelu [A survey on
individual victims of property crimes]. Helsinki: Institute of Criminology.

the District of Columbia On Victimization and Attitudes Toward Law Enforcement. Field

Survey. Field Surveys No. 2. Chicago: National Opinion Research Center, University of
Chicago.


(ed.) Scandinavian Studies in Criminology, Volume 3. Oslo-Bergen-Tromsö:
Universitetsforlaget, pp. 23-33.
Ankete o viktimizaciji – za šta su one korisne?

Autor analizira korisnost anketa o viktimizaciji. Rad je fokusiran na ona istraživanja u kojima se reprezentativni nacionalni uzorak ispituje o ličnom iskustvu viktimizacije, kao i o stavovima i mišljenjima vezanim za kriminal i kontrolu kriminaliteta. Autor ukazuje na prednosti korišćenja ovih anketa i objašnjava zašto većina država nije uspela sistematski da iskoristi ovaj instrument na pravi način.

Ključne reči: ankete o viktimizaciji, interes saznanja, politika kontrole kriminala.