

1 Sociology 4099: Victimology

Lecture Notes Week 2.3 : Victimization Surveys: The Findings

The major type of survey research utilized by victimologists has been the victimization survey. As noted last week, victimization surveys have been the preferred methodological tool of victimologists since the 1970's. These gather information directly from victims without the intermediary of the police. Generally, individuals, in a representative sample of the larger population, are sought out and questioned anonymously about their experiences of victimization, if any. Such victimization surveys essentially focus on types of crime where: (i) there is a direct and identifiable victim; (ii) a direct and potentially identifiable perpetrator; and (iii) those forms of criminal victimization for which some information is available. This, in effect, limits the focus to traditional categories of interpersonal crime, and avoids others such as, for example, corporate crime.

Victimization surveys arose for one simple reason: generally, a great deal more has been known about perpetrators of crime than about their victims. In the past, official crime statistics gave virtually no information on the victims of crime, nor on the incidence of crimes not reported to the police. Because of this, little could be said about which people were more likely to be victimized by crime, or about how many people were actually victimized.

Canadian Urban Victimization Survey (1981)

In Canada, the first attempt to solve this problem was the Canadian Urban Victimization Survey conducted in 1981. It looked at 7 major urban centres across Canada with a random sample of over 60,000 people. It found that there were more than 700,000 personal victimizations (i.e. sexual assault, robbery, assault, and theft of personal property), plus almost 900,000 household victimizations (i.e. break and enter, motor vehicle theft, household theft, and vandalism).

The survey found that the more serious the type of crime, the less likely for it to occur. *Gender* differences were notable. Women were 7 times more likely than men to be victims of sexual assault or personal theft. Men were almost twice as likely as women to be victims of robbery or assault. As for *age*, those under 25 had the highest rate of victimization in all categories of personal offences, which declined rapidly with age after this point. With regard to *Income* and victimization, with some qualifications, the higher the family income of urban residents, the more likely it was that they would experience some form of household victimization or personal theft. Finally, *lifestyle* was another important variable, with a strong positive relationship found between one's number of nights spent outside the home and rates of victimization.

Fear of crime was found to be a significant issue, but more so for those walking alone in their neighborhood at night. Women and the elderly were more likely to express fear in this regard (50% and 98% respectively), compared to 18% of men. For those who

have been the victim of sexual assault, these numbers increased considerably, even during the daytime - even though the incidence of sexual assault was relatively low compared to other offences.

The survey found that fewer than 42% of crimes were reported to the police, indicating that many more Canadians were victimized than official crime statistics would suggest. The most likely crime to be reported was theft or attempted theft of a motor vehicle (70%); the least likely was theft of personal property (29%). Women were found to have a higher reporting rate than males for sexual assault, robbery, and assault, and that those 65 and older were more likely to report incidents than younger victims.

The most common reasons given for failure to report an offence were that the crime was “too minor” (66%), that police could do nothing about it anyway (61%), and that it was too inconvenient/they didn’t want to take the time (24%). However, when broken down by offence category, the reasons for non-reporting by sexual assault victims varied in some important respects. Two thirds of women who had been sexually assaulted did not report the crime to the police. The most common reason was that police could do nothing about it (52%), but this was closely followed by 43% who cited concern about the attitude of the police or courts towards this type of crime (compared to a mere 8% of all victims of crime). In addition, fear of revenge is common among victims of sexual assault (33%), and female victims of assault generally (21%).

Finally, the data revealed that victims were most likely to report crimes which result in a significant financial loss, rather than those resulting in pain, injury and fear. Overall, it found that property crimes occurred more frequently than crimes of violence, that most of these resulted in low financial loss, and that victims themselves do not report them because they define the incidents as being too trivial to warrant police intervention. Crimes of violence were less frequent, and did not necessarily result in serious injuries, but there were serious issues raised about the consequences of making a report.

Since this pioneering survey, other surveys including information on victimization have been conducted in Canada. These include the 1993 Violence Against Women survey, the 1988, 1993, 1999 and 2004 General Social Survey, and the 1996 International Crime Victimization Survey. Highlights of each will be presented in turn.

The 1993 Violence Against Women Survey:

A random sample of 12,300 women age 18 and over were interviewed across Canada about their perceptions of crime and experiences of victimization. The results of this survey were enlightening. It found that:

* 51% of Canadian women have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual assault since the age of 18. Only 10%, however, were victims of such violence in the preceding year.

- * Women are at greater risk of violence by men they know (45%) than by strangers (23%). Many respondents reported past violence from both.
- * 39% of women have been victims of sexual assault (5% in the previous year). 25% of these involved unwanted sexual touching, and an equal proportion a violent sexual attack. A smaller proportion of these (17%) reported physical threats or assaults by men other than spouses (1% in the previous year).
- * 29% of women have been assaulted by a spouse or live-in partner (3% in prior year). More was reported in previous relationships than current ones (48% vs. 15%).
- * There is a continued risk of violence to women from ex-partners despite a divorce or separation. 19% assaulted by a previous partner said it was during a period of separation, and 1/3 of these said the violence became more severe during this time.
- * The most common forms of violence were threats. This was followed by pushing, grabbing and shoving, slapping, throwing something, kicking, biting, and hitting with fists. While the proportion who have been beaten up, choked, sexually assaulted, or had a weapon used against them are all less than 10%, in each of these between 400,000-800,000 women are estimated to have been affected.
- * Not only do Canadian women report significant levels of violence, a majority of those who have suffered violence have been victimized more than once. This is particularly evident in sexual violence. 60% who reported sexual assault by someone other than a spouse reported more than 1 incident (26% of these were so assaulted 4+ times).
- * Women are at risk of sexual violence in a variety of locations/ situations. 46% of sexual assaults occurred in a private place, 10% at work, and were not an uncommon risk in public locations such as bars, on the street, at dances, etc.
- * Wife assault did not merely involve low level violence such as threats, pushing, grabbing and shoving. Only 4% said they were merely threatened, and 5% said these low level assaults were the only things that happened to them. The majority of abused women were assaulted repeatedly, 1/3 more than ten times.
- * Men from previous relationships were reportedly more violent than others. 10% reporting violence from a current partner said it happened more than 10 times, compared to 41% who were assaulted by a previous partner.

As for the context behind such incidents, the survey found:

- * The percentage reporting emotional abuse is higher than those reporting physical or sexual violence (35% vs. 29%).

* Emotional abuse was used in conjunction with violence by the majority of violent men: 3/4 of women who were assaulted by a partner were also emotionally abused. A much smaller proportion reported emotional abuse without physical violence (18%).

* Obsessive and controlling behaviors are prominent in serious battering relationships. While present in the majority of violent relationships, the frequency of emotionally abusive and controlling behavior increases dramatically as the seriousness of the battering increases (in serious battering, it is used by 95% of abusers).

* Controlling and abusive men often find a woman's pregnancy a threat to his exclusivity of attention and affection. 21% of physically and sexually assaulted women were assaulted during pregnancy. Indeed, this was 4 times more frequent among women who experienced the most severe forms of violence.

Finally, the survey reported on the broader correlates of violent victimization:

* Young women 18-24 experienced rates of sexual assault twice that in the next age group (25-34), and had rates of wife assault three times higher.

* The rate of wife assault in new marriages (2 years or less) was almost three times the national average.

* Common-law relationships showed rates of violence 4 times higher than legal marriages.

* Single women and those with some (but not completed) postsecondary education report the highest rates of sexual assault.

* In wife assault, the woman's education is unrelated to risk, but men with less than high school assaulted their partners at twice the rate as those with university degrees. Similarly, men who were unemployed committed wife assaults at twice the rate of employed men.

* While households with low incomes have twice the national average level of wife assaults, those in the mid and high income ranges are about the same. Similarly, rates for sexual assault slightly decline as income rises, but not by much.

* Witnessing violence in childhood was a risk factor that this survey found to be very important. Men who witnessed their mothers being abused were up to 3 times as likely to be violent against their own wives as men who grew up in non-violent homes. Women, as well, who were exposed to wife-battering were twice as likely to be victims of violence as women from non-violent environments.

* Alcohol abuse was strongly correlated with violence. Rates of violence were 5 times higher for men who were heavy drinkers compared to non-drinkers, and 2 - 4 times

higher than for infrequent or moderate drinkers. Moreover, the level of violence inflicted tended to be more serious and more frequent.

* Rates of violent victimization vary from higher levels in western Canada to lower levels in the east.

* When all of these associated factors are weighed statistically, the most important predictors are verbal abuse/putdowns, followed by sexual jealousy, efforts to limit womens' autonomy/social contacts, age, the man's education, living in a common-law relationship, early exposure to violence, and the man's unemployment. Heavy drinking and household income come in at the bottom.

Ultimately, the VAWS helped us understand violence against women in Canada.

2004 General Social Survey:

Following up on similar surveys conducted by Statistics Canada in 1988, 1993, and 1999, in 2004 the General Social Survey was administered by telephone to 24,000 people aged 15 years and older living in all 10 provinces. Some of the key findings relating to victimization include:

- 28% of Canadians aged 15+ reported being victimized one or more times in the preceding 12 months, up slightly from 26% in 1999
- Increases in victimization rates were recorded for 3 of the 8 offence types measured: theft of personal property, theft of household property, and vandalism. There were no significant changes in rates of sexual assault, robbery, physical assault, and motor vehicle theft. There was a decrease in B&E
- Household victimization offences occurred most frequently (34% of incidents), followed by violent victimization (29%) and thefts of personal property (25%). About 12% of incidents could not be classified within the 8 offence types
- Residents of Western provinces generally reported higher rates of victimization than residents living east of the Manitoba/Ontario border. Two exceptions, however, include Nova Scotia, with the second highest rate of violent victimization, while Ontario's rate of personal property theft was comparable to those in the West
- The risk of violent victimization (per 100,000 population) was highest among Canadians aged 15-24. Other risk factors include being single, living in an urban area, and having a low household income (under \$15,000).
- For household victimization, rates per 1000 households were highest among renters, those living in semi-detached, row or duplex homes, and urban dwellers. Yet, for both household victimization and personal property theft, higher household income made both households and individuals more attractive targets for victimization

- A large proportion of Canadians never reported criminal incidents to police. In total, only about 34% of criminal incidents came to the attention of police in 2004, down from 37% in 1999. Household victimization incidents were most likely to be reported (37%), while thefts of personal property were least likely (31%)
- In 4% of all incidents, victims believed the act was hate-motivated (same as 1999). In 2004, 65% of these were believed motivated by the victim's race or ethnicity, 26% by their sex, 14% by religion, and 12% by sexual orientation
- Canadians who self-identified as Aboriginal were 3 times more likely than members of the non-Aboriginal population to report being victims of violent victimization. There was a significant difference between rates for visible minorities and non-visible minorities, while rates were lower among immigrants than non-immigrants (68 vs. 116 per 100,000 population)
- Although the proportion of violent incidents without a weapon has remained relatively stable since 1999 (69% in 2004 and 72% in 1999), violent incidents resulting in injury increased (25% vs. 18%)
- Most often, violent incidents took place in a commercial establishment or public institution (38%). Some form of workplace violence represented 43% of these.

The General Social Survey thus provides us with a useful, and up to date snapshot of criminal victimization in Canada over time.

International Crime Victimization Survey

Finally, of particular interest for victimologists is the International Crime Victimization Survey, which was conducted in 1989, 1992, 1996, 2000, and 2004. In each, Canada was one of more than a dozen participating countries surveyed in an attempt to provide comparable information on the incidence of victimization around the world (30 countries in this round). A standard questionnaire and similar techniques were used to gather information in each country. A random sample of persons 16+ were asked detailed information on 10 types of crime, including when, where and how often offences occurred over the past 5 years, whether offences were reported to the police, and whether their experiences were considered serious. Findings in 2004 include the following:

- 17% of Canadians aged 16 and over had been victims of at least one crime measured by the ICVS during the year preceding the survey. This rate was similar to the overall international victimization rate (16%)
- Victimization varied from one country to another, with Spain, Japan, Hungary and Portugal registering the lowest rates (between 9% and 10%). In contrast, Ireland, England & Wales and New Zealand were among the countries with the highest overall victimization rates.

- For most countries, the offences with the highest victimization rates were theft of personal property, theft from a car and theft of a bicycle. In Canada, the highest rate was for theft from a vehicle.
- Across all participating countries, slightly more than half the population (53%) reported a victimization incident to the police. Austria and Belgium had the highest reporting rates (70% and 68% respectively). Victims in Mexico were much less likely to report their victimization incidents to the police compared to all other countries surveyed (16%).
- Canada, along with Finland and Luxembourg, ranked relatively low, with a rate below the international average: only 48% of Canadian victims reported the incident to the police.
- While Canadians reported a lower proportion of incidents, when they did report, they were satisfied with the police response. In cases where Canadians reported theft from a car, burglary, robbery, sexual offences or assault, two-thirds reported that they were satisfied with how the police responded.
- Canada, along with Finland and the U.S., were among countries whose population was the most satisfied with the police. 86% of Canadians believed that the police were doing a good or excellent job at controlling crime in their area.
- Canada did not stand out from other participating countries - criminal victimization rates were very close to the international averages. Like the populations of the other 30 countries, Canadians were mainly victims of crimes against property. Their reporting rates were below the international average, but the findings show Canadians have a positive opinion of the job done by the police.

As can be seen, the ICVS, like the other surveys we have reviewed, provides a great deal of information on victimization, but provides the added value of placing Canada's experiences in a broader international context.

Next: problems with victimization surveys and an alternate approach.