

The Evolving Role of Self-report Surveys of Criminal Victimization in a System of Statistics on Crime and the Administration of Justice

James Lynch*

Dept. of Criminology and Criminal Justice University of Maryland
jlynch14@umd.edu

Routinely collected statistics on crime and the administration of justice are essential for developing laws and policies that are responsive to the crime problem and for holding criminal justice agencies accountable in the execution of those policies. Any statistical system on crime and the administration of justice should include the opportunity for the direct participation of citizens in providing information on the crime problem. This direct participation enhances our ability to check on administrative record data and bolsters the legitimacy of these statistics more generally. Victimization surveys allow citizens to have this direct participation. The specific role of victimization surveys in a statistical system will depend upon the credibility and technical proficiencies of the police, court and correctional agencies. This paper describes the preferred role of victimization surveys and the technological challenges in playing that role under different conditions of legitimacy and technical capabilities.

Key Words: Crime statistics, citizen participation, administrative records, victimization surveys.

1.0 Introduction

For most of the 20th century police and court administrative statistics have been the dominant vehicle for gathering data on crime and the government's response to crime. These data omit crimes that never come to the attention of authorities or that were never recorded by those agencies (Biderman and Reiss, 1967). In an effort to take account of the "dark figure" of unrecorded crime, nations explored the potential of self-report surveys as a source of data on crime. Almost 50 years after the first victimization surveys they have become a pillar of crime statistics (Lynch, 2006). At the same time technological, logistical and political issues are putting pressure on this methodology (Lynch and Addington, 2007; Groves and Cork, 2008). Unless ways are found to overcome these challenges, we risk losing this valuable resource. This paper discusses the role of self-report surveys in a system of crime statistics, identifies the challenges confronting this methodology and suggests strategies for confronting these challenges.

2.0 The Role of Victimization Surveys in a System of Crime Statistics

Having a self-report victimization survey as part of a system of crime statistics separates the collection of statistical data on crime from official responses to crime (Biderman and Lynch, 1991; Cantor and Lynch, 2000). Most statistics on crime are produced from administrative records maintained by agencies such as the police or the courts (United States Department of Justice, 2004). This interdependence between protective services and statistical systems has the potential to introduce biases or the perception of bias into crime statistics which lessens their utility.

One of the most often cited biases in crime statistics based on administrative records is the fact that many crimes are not reported or recorded. Other biases will occur when changes in the way in which protective services are provided change the way in which administrative records document service. Biderman and Lynch (1991) showed that when the police stopped sending patrol cars to burglary calls with little loss, the level of burglary in police administrative records increased. They speculated that the "screening out" of marginal events by patrol officers on the scene was no longer occurring when patrol cars were not sent in response to burglary complaints. This was not an intentional change in the way in which administrative records were kept but it

occurred just because of the interdependence of service with the documentation of service in administrative records.

Separating the collection of statistics from the provision of service introduces different values about the quality of the data collected. Self-report victimization surveys partake of the survey research discipline and that discipline's attention to scientific principles and data quality. In service providing agencies, the provision of service comes first and the documentation of service in administrative records systems is a lesser priority. Quality control efforts are much less extensive in administrative records than in self-conscious statistical collections.

Separating the collection of crime statistics from the provision of protective services encourages the perception of objectivity in the collection of those statistics. Agencies providing protective services have an interest in the picture of crime emerging from crime statistics and there is always the suspicion in the mind of the public that crime control agencies are altering crime statistics to make themselves look better. Victimization surveys are typically collected under the auspices of a national statistical agency which is seen as more object and disinterested in the collection and reporting of crime statistics.

Victimization surveys have advantages other than those flowing from the separation of statistical data collection from service provision. In the United States, for example, the major indicator of crime based on police administrative data, the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), provides only aggregated crime rates at the jurisdiction level and very little information on victims, offenders or the social context of crimes. If the public and policy makers want to know more detail about crime events, they must turn to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). This may be the case in other nations as well. Self-report surveys of victimization provide extensive information on victims, offenders and crime incidents that police administrative data does not. Moreover, this incident level data can be aggregated and disaggregated in ways that aggregated administrative data cannot be.

Finally, victimization surveys offer comparable data on victims and non-victims which is essential for analyses of victimization risk, while police administrative data include only victims. Analysts have used crime rates to analyze risk, but these rates must be aggregated to geographical units like blocks, census tracts or cities. This does not allow analyses of risk at the individual level where the matching of victims and non-victims can be much more fine-grained and facilitate the identification of factors increasing risk. Victimization surveys offer this opportunity conveniently.

3.0 Technological, Logistical and Political Challenges to Citizen Surveys

The role and advantages of victimization surveys in a national system of crime statistics will vary with the technical sophistication of the survey research industry as well as the legitimacy and managerial sophistication of the criminal justice system. As the volume of and demand for information increases, competition among government and private providers of information on crime will influence when and how victimization surveys are conducted. The role of victimization surveys in a system crime statistics will evolve as these factors shift.

3.1 Legitimacy of Justice Agencies and the Role of Victimization Surveys

The advantage of separating the collection of crime statistics from the provision of protective services has its roots in the perception of legitimacy that comes from the independence of statistical data collections. When the criminal justice system is regarded with suspicion, the importance of having a self-report survey of victimization is increased. The public and public officials responsible for the

criminal justice system can look to the data from the surveys to assure themselves that the police and other agencies are not “cooking the books.” It is also possible for agencies in the criminal justice system to be perceived as legitimate, i.e. independent of undue influence by the politically powerful, but inept with regard to the collection and presentation of statistical data. In this case, data from victimization surveys are valued because they are seen as being of higher quality than data from administrative records. Higher quality can refer to the inclusion of crimes not reported and recorded by the police. As administrative records from criminal justice agencies improve in quality this rationale for fielding victimization surveys will decline in importance. While this change in the capability of police organizations will not obviate the need for victimization surveys, it can lead to changes in the scope of crimes covered in victimization surveys.

The advantage of victimization surveys in providing detailed information on victims, offenders and crime events should also decline as the quality and availability of police administrative records on crimes known increases. Modern police organizations collect routine and detailed reports on calls for service, crime incidents and arrests. Some of these reports are highly structured and in a form easily transformed into statistical data. Even when these reports are in free text fields we have the technology to scan and parse these reports in a manner that makes them appropriate for statistical uses. If the police demand this type of detailed information on crime events for management purposes, perhaps this technology will be brought to bear on their administrative records, but until that time, victimization surveys will serve this function.

3.2 Problems of Household Surveys Affect Victim Surveys

The survey research industry is under duress and this threatens the viability of victimization surveys. Response rates for household surveys are declining and they are getting more expensive to conduct. Changes in telecommunications and phone etiquette make it more difficult to conduct telephone surveys. Many households do not have land lines and techniques for sampling cell phones are in their infancy. Telephone etiquette has changed so that more and more respondents screen their incoming calls making it easier not to participate in telephone surveys. As it becomes more difficult to do household surveys, the standards for what constitutes a good victimization survey becomes ambiguous with the result that one can have a number of competing surveys with very different results. This, in turn threatens the legitimacy of these surveys.

In addition to these problems which are general to the survey research industry, there are other issues unique to victimization surveys. In many places the crimes typically measured in victimization surveys are becoming increasingly rare events requiring larger samples to get reliable estimates of annual victimization rates. There are a number of solutions to the rare event problem other than simply increasing sample size including improved sample stratification and more sensitive cuing strategies. These solutions cannot be simply lifted from other surveys but are unique to victimization surveys and must be developed explicitly for victimization surveys.

3.3 Competition from private statistics or competing official statistics

The general acceptance of victimization surveys has encouraged more organizations to sponsor them with the result that we have competing surveys with very different estimates of specific types of crime. These competing estimates can raise questions about the validity of self-report surveys.

The problem of competing estimates occurs disproportionately in the case of difficult to measure crimes with strong constituencies. In the United States, sexual violence,

domestic violence and estimates of defensive gun use have been the object of multiple surveys with different sponsors. The definition of these crimes is a matter of debate as are the best methods for surveying households to identify these events. These issues of definition and measurement are not easy or trivial but typically they remain unresolved with every sponsor choosing their own definition of the crime and their own set of optimum design features for the survey. This has the unfortunate result of raising questions about the accuracy of victimization surveys.

4.0 Building Institutions to Preserve Victimization Surveys

4.1 Keeping the Principal Function of Victimization Surveys Current

When victimization surveys are introduced into a system of crime statistics, it is generally to compensate for the short comings of other components of that system and particularly the administrative records generated by agencies in the criminal justice system. These shortcomings can be a general lack of legitimacy among the citizenry, wide spread non-service and corruption or more limited problems such as poor record keeping or inefficiency. In the case of broad-based lack of legitimacy in the criminal justice system, survey based indicators on major classes of street crime and the criminal justice response to street crimes are essential. The survey should estimate the level and change in level of street crime which is largely the responsibility of the criminal justice system. In this way, the survey can serve as a check on the responsiveness and accountability of the criminal justice system. If the level and change in level of crime reported in the surveys varies from that reported in police statistics, then the public should ask why. If the trend based on survey data comport with that from administrative records, then we can have greater confidence in the picture of the crime problem emerging from administrative data and greater confidence in the bureaucracies that produce those trends.

In circumstances where the fundamental legitimacy of the criminal justice systems is not in questions and the administrative data from those agencies are of high quality, then it may be appropriate for the focus of victimization surveys to change from crimes that are typically the responsibility of the police to those crimes that we know are not well reported to and recorded by the criminal justice system. These crimes could include stalking, domestic violence, sexual violence, cybercrime or identity theft. Shifting scope of crime captured in victimization surveys in this way would make them less redundant with administrative record data and more complementary of those data. The survey would provide estimates for those classes of crime for which the administrative data are known to be non-existent or of poor quality and not for crime class where the police data are known to be of reasonable quality.

Still later in the evolution of crime statistics, the principal function of victimization surveys may shift more drastically to the point where estimating crime rates becomes less important than estimating other characteristics of the population that are relevant to crime but not crime itself. A number of years ago, questions were raised about whether police in the United States were stopping African Americans more than other racial groups for minor traffic infractions. To inform this issue the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) added a supplement to measure the frequency of traffic stops and the interaction between police and the citizenry during such encounters. This is an illustration of an estimate that is relevant to crime but is not an estimate of crime itself.

This evolution in the principal function of victimization surveys will evolve with the perceived legitimacy and the sophistication of agencies in the criminal justice system. Not to evolve with the system will mean that the relevance of victimization surveys will decline. It is also possible that changes in the principal functions of

victimization surveys will reduce some of the strains that changes in the crime rates and technology are placing on victimization surveys. The massive declines in common law crime over the last twenty years in industrialized democracies, for example, has reduced the precision of estimates of violent crime rates from victimization surveys. In contrast, being stopped by the police is much more prevalent than violent crime so that estimates of stops will still have reasonable precision with the current sample sizes. This is even more the case with phenomenon like the perceived legitimacy of the police for which everyone in the sample can be included in the estimates. Precise estimates can be obtained with relatively small sample sizes.

4.2 Establishing Quality Standards for Victimization Surveys

As conducting household surveys becomes more difficult generally and as the demand for these surveys increases, the number of competing estimates of crimes will increase as will the likelihood that these estimates will diverge. The costs of doing the surveys will increase as response rates decline and sponsors of these surveys will make different design decisions to get the resources they need to increase the response rates. Alternatively, they will live with increasingly lower response rates. At some point someone must ask, "When are these data too bad to use?" Traditionally standards for fitness for use were established using attributes of the survey design. Samples had to be of a minimum size, response rates had to be sufficiently high, instruments had to be pretested etc. If the survey had those design features, then the resulting data were deemed fit for use. As response rates declined and representative samples become more difficult to draw, survey research firms began to adjust or model their estimates to compensate for deficiencies in design. They argued that these modeled estimates were better than those based on the survey data alone. While this may be true, advocates of model-based estimates have not arrived at a standard for these estimates. If these standards were in place, then fewer competing estimates would be available or the most of the poorest quality surveys could be identified as such and given less weight.

Having these standards will be more effective when there are institutional arrangements designed to enforce these standards. In nations in which the victimization survey is conducted by the central statistical agency that agency will adhere to those standards and surveys conducted by other organizations will be perceived as less authoritative. In decentralized statistical systems, like that in the United States, this type of policing is more difficult. Data collections designed to produce national estimates are subject to the Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA) and they must be reviewed by OMB before they will be allowed in the field. OMB not only employs a design standard but it looks for and tries to eliminate redundancy in the statistical system. Many agencies in the U.S. government circumvent OMB scrutiny by labeling statistical data collections as research which is not subject to the PRA.

4.3 Institutionalizing Research and Development in Victimization Surveys

The crisis in the future of household surveys and among them victimization surveys, should have been anticipated. Research and development on ways to overcome the new challenges to household surveys is essential for saving this methodology including victimization surveys. Even less research and development has been done specifically for victimization surveys on problems like screening and sample stratification that must be tailored to the subject matter to be effective.

There are some signs of increasing interest in R&D on household surveys generally. Robert Groves, who recently left his post as the director of the United States Census Bureau, created a consortium of private research firms and universities to do more

research and development work on survey research. He also created a research directorate with Census to do high end research for sponsors. These efforts may provide some needed research on ways to meet the challenges facing household surveys.

The prospects for research and development on issues unique to victim surveys are not as encouraging. In the United States virtually all of the funding for research and development on issues specific to victimization surveys has come from BJS. This funding has come in 30 year intervals. While research and development on victimization surveys has been rare there has been a variety of approaches to the design of victimization surveys across agencies within the U.S. and cross-nationally. Had these efforts been coordinated so that design attributes were varied systematically and measures of data quality were uniformly included in the surveys, we may have learned much more about the optimum design of victimization surveys from these one off surveys. It may be possible for the United Nations to perform this coordinating function in the international arena.

5.0 References

- 1.0 Biderman, A.D. & Reiss, A.J., Jr. (1967). "On exploring the "dark figure" of crime." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. 374:1-15
- 2.0 Biderman, A.D. & Lynch, J.P. (1991) *Understanding Crime Incidence Statistics: Why the UCR diverges from the NCS*. Springer, New York
- 3.0 Cantor, David and James P. Lynch (2007) "Addressing the Challenge of Costs and Error in Victimization Surveys: The Potential of New Technologies and Methods." *Surveying Crime in the 21st Century*. Michael Hough and Michael G. Maxfield (eds.), Monsey, New York, Criminal Justice Press
- 4.0 Cantor, D. & Lynch, J.P. (2000). "Self report surveys as measures of crime and criminal victimization." In Duffee, D. (ed.) *Criminal justice 2000: Measurement and analysis of crime and justice* (Vol. 4). U.S. Department of Justice: Washington, DC.
- 5.0 Groves, Robert and Daniel Cork (2008) *Surveying Crime: Options for Conducting the National Crime Victimization Survey*. Washington, DC National Academy of Sciences.
- 6.0 Hough, Michael and Michael G. Maxfield. (2007) (eds,) *Surveying Crime in the 21st Century*, Monsey, New York, Criminal Justice Press
- 7.0 Lynch, James P. (2006) "Problems and Promise of Victimization Surveys for Cross-national Research." In *Crime and Justice: An Annual Review*. Michael Tonry and David Farrington (eds.) Vol. 34
- 8.0 Lynch, James P. and Lynn Addington (2007) "Conclusion." In *Understanding Crime Incidence Statistics: Revisiting the Divergence of the UCR and the NCVS*. James P. Lynch and Lynn Addington (eds). New York, Cambridge University Press. (2007)
- 9.0 U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, (2004) *Uniform Crime Reporting Handbook*, Washington, D.C.