

New Zealand National Survey of Crime Victims 1996

This report presents the findings from the first comprehensive national survey of crime victims, comprising interviews with a random sample of the population aged 15 and over. The survey is designed to provide an alternative measure to police statistics of crime victimisation; to identify the extent to which the risks of victimisation vary between social groups; to provide information about the circumstances and impact of offences; to describe the effects of crime and victims' response to it; and to provide a range of other crime-related information.

The Nature and Extent of Crime

In general, the survey found that there were an estimated 2 million offences (including attempts but excluding commercial and business offences) against households and against individuals aged 15 and over in New Zealand during the 1995 calendar year and that only a small proportion of the offences disclosed in the survey (less than 13%) were recorded by the Police.

Violent offending and sexual offending, including threats, made up almost two-thirds of the total offences disclosed in the survey. However, many of the violent offences involved threats of violence or threats of damage to property, which clearly vary enormously in seriousness and significance; and many were sexual offences which had a large sampling error. If we exclude threats and sexual offences from our count, assaults, wounding and robbery make up about a quarter of the total offences, only slightly above the figure reported in the 1996 British Crime Survey.

For grievous assaults, other assaults and threats, we distinguished between violence by those known well to the victim (including family violence) and violence inflicted by casual acquaintances or strangers. Grievous assaults were roughly evenly divided between the two groups. Other assaults and threats, on the other hand, were almost

three times more likely to be committed by those known well to the victim than by strangers or casual acquaintances.

There are essentially two reasons for the gap between police statistics and the number of offences disclosed in the survey: not all offences come to the notice of the police; and of those that do, not all are recorded by them.

In this survey only a little over 40% of the cases in which we were able to collect information on reporting came to the notice of the police. There was considerable variability in reporting rates between one offence and another, with nearly 90% of theft or unlawful taking of motor vehicles being reported, and only a quarter of damage offences and a third of assault offences. The willingness of victims to report crime was primarily dictated by the seriousness of the offence in question - its intrusiveness, the degree of threat involved, the extent of injury, damage or loss and, to some extent, its emotional consequences for the victim. However, other factors - in particular, the relationship between the victim and the offender - also influenced the reporting decision. It is also clear that some social groups were less willing to report offences than others: males and young people were less likely to report all offences, and Pacific Island respondents were less likely to report violence.

Of those that did come to the notice of the police, a considerable number were not recorded by them. Again, the pattern varied between offences. Approximately 80% of reported burglaries appeared to get recorded as such, by comparison with less than half of the reported damage offences and less than one third of reported thefts from inside or outside the home. There are a number of possible reasons for the fact that some reported offences were not recorded: the police may have regarded the complaint as fabricated or mistaken; they may have thought the evidence insufficient to substantiate an offence; they may have regarded it as too trivial to warrant the paperwork; or the incident may have been coded as one type of offence in our survey but recorded by the police as a different offence.

Although the survey findings indicate that there is much more offending than is disclosed by the official statistics, it would be wrong to jump to the conclusion that it is desirable that a greater proportion

of offending be reported to the police. It is true that a considerable number of apparently serious offences - including wounding and sexual violation - went unreported to or unrecorded by the police. It is also noteworthy that some groups appeared more reluctant to report than others. In at least some of these cases, reporting may have resulted in the detection of a serious or persistent offender, or at least the provision of much needed support for the victim. However, the offending which needs to come to the notice of the criminal justice system is in fact only a small proportion of the range of behaviour which could potentially do so, and the fact is that the vast majority of the offences which went unreported or unrecorded were perceived by victims to have been relatively trivial and were thus handled in other ways. Victims' perceptions in this respect can, of course, change. The important implication of the survey data, therefore, is that overall trends in official crime statistics should be regarded with caution, since they are highly susceptible to changes in reporting and recording practices.

The Distribution of Victimisation

The total offences disclosed in the survey were not evenly distributed: some victims were repeatedly victimised. The distribution of violent offending was particularly heavily skewed. Thus only 0.5% of the total sample (or 6% of the victims of violent and sexual offences) were subject to five or more such offences, but they accounted for a massive 68% of such offending. Amongst such victims, the average number of violent and sexual offences was 12.

This finding has profound implications for crime prevention. If victimisation, especially violent victimisation, is concentrated in small pockets of the population, then (unless crime displacement occurs) substantial crime reductions are likely to be achieved by focusing crime prevention efforts on those who are particularly at risk of multiple victimisation. Even if some crime is displaced to other people who would otherwise have been non-victims, which is unlikely at least in relation to violent victimisation, the consequence of crime prevention efforts targeted at repeat victimisation would be at least to

spread crime more evenly throughout the population and thus to dilute its impact on any one individual.

The risk of victimisation also differed between social groups. In relation to gender, about the same proportion of women as men were subject to some form of violent or sexual offending on one or more occasions (the prevalence rate). Moreover, while the average number of such offences to which women were subject (the incidence rate) was much greater, this gender difference did not reach statistical significance. The reason for this is that the higher incidence rate amongst women resulted almost solely from the fact that a small number of women were subject to a large number of repeated sexual attacks; because the sample of such multiple victims was small, the standard error (ie the sampling error) was very large. Nevertheless, it seems likely that, given the greater risk of sexual violence to which women are exposed, the pattern we have observed would be repeated and would reach statistical significance in a larger sample. In relation to other assaults, there were no significant gender differences, although it appeared that the nature of the assaults differed: the incidence and prevalence rates for assaults by strangers and casual acquaintances against men were much higher than those against women; conversely, women were much more likely than men to be assaulted by those they knew well.

There were differences in the overall victimisation rates of different age groups, with a general pattern of decreasing incidence and prevalence with increasing age. In fact, with the exception of arson/wilful damage, this pattern was observed for every offence category. However, the differences did not always reach statistical significance. The main statistical effects were observed in relation to violent and sexual offending, general theft and individual property offending in aggregate.

Maori had significantly higher rates of both the prevalence and incidence of assaults and threats than New Zealand European/European. A similar pattern was also evident in relation to both the prevalence and incidence of indecent assault and the prevalence of sexual violation, although given the small sample size the differences were not statistically significant.

The same trends did not emerge in respect of individual property offences. While the incidence of general theft was roughly the same amongst New Zealand European/European as Maori, it was lower amongst Pacific Island respondents, and, when individual property offences were taken as a whole, both the prevalence and the incidence rates were higher amongst New Zealand European/European, with the difference between New Zealand European/European and Pacific Island respondents being statistically significant.

There was a slight tendency for the prevalence (but not the incidence) of violence to be inversely related to socio-economic status, but the relationship between socio-economic status and both the prevalence and the incidence of individual property offences was in the opposite direction. Although these differences did not reach levels of statistical significance, one would expect that if the sample size were increased they would, since both of these relationships are broadly in line with other surveys.

The distribution of the prevalence of violence and burglary was examined in more detail by the use of a method of multi-variate analysis called logistic regression, which enabled possible interactions between different socio-demographic variables to be taken into account.

In relation to violence, the analysis generally confirmed the picture already presented: there was an inverse relationship between age and risk; there was a tendency, which did not quite reach statistical significance, for Maori and Pacific Island respondents to be more at risk; and there was no relationship between gender and risk, reinforcing the conclusion that women and men are equally at risk of violence, although they are exposed to different types of violence. In addition, the analysis showed that marital status influenced risk, with those in the divorced/separated category having the highest risk.

In relation to burglary, only the frequency of going out at night turned out to be significantly associated with the risk of burglary, with those who never went out at night, not surprisingly, being less at risk. There was also a marginal trend for the prevalence of burglary to increase with household size. Other factors - such as socio-economic status,

the nature of the household, whether the house was owned or rented, and respondents' perceptions of their neighbourhood - did not significantly affect prevalence.

Lifetime Prevalence of Sexual Violence or Partner Abuse

We also obtained data on the extent to which respondents had been victims of sexual violence or partner abuse at any time during their lives. As expected, women reported a much higher prevalence of both sexual victimisation and partner abuse during their lives than men. For example, 11.6% of women reported that someone had had, or had attempted, sexual intercourse with them against their will, compared with only 1.5% of men; and 15.3% of women who had ever been in a "partnership" reported some form of partner abuse, compared with only 7.3% of men. This gender difference persisted across all ethnic groups, although it was particularly marked for Maori.

However, contrary to expectation, there were no age differences in the lifetime prevalence of some forms of sexual violence or partner abuse, and victims in the younger age groups were more likely to have experienced multiple forms of sexual violence. There were no clear ethnic differences in the lifetime prevalence of sexual violence, but Maori disclosed much higher rates of partner abuse.

Victims' Satisfaction with the Police

The survey asked victims who reported offences to the police whether or not they were satisfied with the police response. In the main, it found that victims were happy with the support they received from the police. Most thought that the police were seen as polite and pleasant in their dealings with victims. However, a significant minority of victims - in particular, victims of violent offences (ie non-domestic assaults and threats), younger victims, students, those engaged in home duties, beneficiaries, and Maori and Pacific Island victims - were dissatisfied with the police response.

The major reasons for victims' dissatisfaction fell into two distinct categories: they thought that police officers appeared uninterested

and that they provided inadequate feedback on the progress of the case; and they were concerned that the police had failed to catch the offender or to recover their property, or did not seem to be doing enough to investigate the offence. This suggests that the major sources of dissatisfaction over which the police have control (ie apart from the failure to catch the offender or to recover the victims' property) have to do with the presentational style of police staff. Paying attention to what victims say, being seen to be taking them seriously, providing more feedback on what is being done or, if nothing much can be done, explaining why, would help remedy this situation. Indeed, explanations as to why offenders are unlikely to be caught or why property is unlikely to be recovered might also go a long way towards offsetting victims' dissatisfaction with the perceived 'failure' of the police in this area.

The Circumstances and Impact of Violence

The survey findings challenge many of the images of violence portrayed in the media. Even excluding family violence and violence by people known well to the victim (for which we did not have sufficient data), assaults and threats were as likely to occur at home and at work as on the street. Much of the violence was fairly minor in terms of injuries and items stolen: in most robberies, there were no injuries and nothing was taken; and in most assaults, even when injuries were inflicted, they were relatively minor and only infrequently involved more than bruises and scratches. Moreover, much of the violence was described by victims as not having much impact on them, with more than half of the victims of assaults, threats and robbery saying that they were "just a little affected" by the incident, and only a little more than 10% saying that they were "very much affected".

In more than half of the assaults and threats, the offender(s) were believed by their victim to be under the influence of alcohol. At the same time, 35% of assault victims, 16% of robbery victims, and 13% of victims of threats said that they were under the influence of drugs or alcohol at the time of the offence. Overall, this is suggestive of a greater link between offending and alcohol or drug use than between

victimisation and alcohol or drug use. However, this should be regarded as a tentative conclusion. The data were derived from victims' assessments: there are reasons for victims to under-report their own involvement in alcohol or drugs; their assessment of the offender's situation some time after the event may not have been accurate; and many victims did not know whether or not the offender was affected by drugs or alcohol.

Excluding family violence and violence by people known well to the victims, the typical victims of violent incidents were young men, and they were more likely than other groups to have violence perpetrated against them in a pub or club. In contrast, women aged 25 to 39 were more likely than other groups to have their violence perpetrated against them in a home-based setting.

The Circumstances and Impact of Burglary

Where the time of the burglary could be pinpointed, marginally more took place in the evening or at night than during the morning or the afternoon. On a daily basis, the risks of burglary on the weekend were only slightly higher than during the week. A significant proportion (20%) of victims could not specify the time and/or the day when the burglary took place, suggesting that there were an appreciable number of burglaries where the victim was away on holiday or for the weekend.

In almost a third (31%) of the burglaries, the victim was able to say definitely that someone was at home at the time of the burglary. In 40% of these cases, the people at home became aware of the burglary at the time. However, confrontations with burglars were extremely rare.

Something was stolen in almost three-quarters of burglaries. In 18% of the burglaries where property was stolen, all or part of the property was recovered. In just over half the burglaries, the property stolen or damaged was covered by insurance, and in two-thirds of these the victim had made or intended to make a claim. Nevertheless, even after insurance had been paid, 26% of the households victimised said that they were over \$1000 out of pocket. Furthermore, these were

only the immediate costs: such households were likely to have incurred increased insurance costs as a result of the offence and may well have incurred further home protection costs as well.

Only 5% of victims reported no personal reaction to the burglary. In those cases where some reaction was recorded, 17% described the incident as having a strong effect on the household, 28% saw it as having quite a lot of effect and 53% saw it as having just a little effect. In general, the reactions reported were muted. Most victims were simply angry and/or shocked; reactions such as fear and disturbed sleep were rare.

In many burglaries, there was no forced entry. It is not surprising to find, therefore, that 25% of the burglary victims had no special security measures in place at the time of the offence. Of those who did report special security measures, most mentioned deadlocks or double locks, security chains, safety window latches and/or security bolts. Only 1% of victims claimed to belong to a Neighbourhood Support Group, or to be part of a group of neighbours keeping an eye on each other's property, suggesting that they did not see this as a security measure or an effective crime prevention device. Overall, the burglary victims in this survey reported lower levels of security than burglary victims in the 1996 British Crime Survey.

Meeting the Needs of Victims

Part of the New Zealand Crime Prevention Strategy is to 'address the concerns of victims and potential victims' (Crime Prevention Unit, 1994). This involves taking steps to minimise the fear of crime which can have negative effects on people's lives, to prevent repeat victimisation and to aid victims' recovery from the effects of offending. This survey investigated both respondents' awareness of victim support services and their perception of those services in meeting this last objective.

Almost two-fifths of respondents had no knowledge of community services, apart from the police, which were available for victims of crime and almost a third mentioned only one. There were also clear differences in knowledge between various socio-economic groups:

groups with significantly lower levels of awareness were men, Pacific Island and Maori respondents, older respondents and those from lower socio-economic status groups.

Where victims do report offences to the police, it is now recognised to be "good practice" that they should be provided with information about other agencies which may be able to help them deal with the aftermath of the offence. Sometimes, as with Victim Support, their name may be provided to that agency for further follow-up. In this survey, however, only 12% of those who had reported the offence to the police recalled being subsequently contacted by the organisation. More generally, very few victims had contact with any type of victims' services, including Victim Support. Where contact was made, the advice or help provided was to a large extent appreciated.

There is some evidence that there is a need for better targeting of support services: some of those contacted by support agencies had little need for such services; conversely, others who were significantly affected by the crime - at least some of whom were probably in need of such services - were missed; and some victims specifically stated that they wanted additional support or help but did not receive it.

Fear and Concern about Crime

The survey asked respondents a range of questions about crime in their neighbourhood, which were largely aimed at exploring their perception of the importance of crime as a social issue. A number of significant findings emerged from these questions. First, only one third of the respondents thought that crime was a problem in their own neighbourhood. Secondly, amongst those who did think this, they were much more concerned about burglary than about any other offence, with over three-quarters mentioning it as a problem. This provides some support for the greater attention which has been paid to burglary in policing priorities in recent years. Thirdly, there was no clear relationship between either the incidence or prevalence of victimisation and people's perceptions of crime problems, indicating that people's concerns about crime are not derived primarily from their own experience. Fourthly, people's perceptions of local problems do not focus exclusively or even primarily upon crime; they were often

just as concerned or even more concerned about other features of the neighbourhood - uncontrolled dogs, teenagers hanging around, rubbish and litter lying about - which indicated that the neighbourhood was not homogeneous, cohesive or properly controlled. Finally, despite the frequent media coverage of rising crime rates in the official statistics, more than half of the respondents thought that crime had remained the same in their own neighbourhood, and only 4% thought that there was a lot more of it.

Respondents were also asked a series of questions about their fear of crime. In particular, they were asked how often they went out at night; whether they walked alone in their neighbourhood after dark and felt safe in doing so; how worried they were about being a victim of specific offences; and how worried they were about other accidents and misfortunes.

The majority of respondents said that they went out after dark; only 7% never did so and of those only a small minority cited crime-related reasons for this. The majority of respondents also said that they walked alone in their neighbourhood after dark and felt safe in doing so; and even most of those who did not, said that they would feel generally safe if they did so (although there were significant gender differences in this respect).

When respondents were asked how much they worried about being the victim of 11 specific offences, those who said that they were "very worried" comprised over 30% of the sample in relation to two offences, and about 20% in relation to another seven. However, this finding may suggest no more than that 20% of respondents experience a transient feeling of significant anxiety in particular situations rather than a permanent emotion of anxiety which preoccupies their lives.

Levels of fear about crime were generally no higher than anxieties about other things. Respondents tended to be just as worried about the prospect of illness, a road accident or an accident in the home as they were about burglary, assaults by strangers or car theft. Fear of crime, then, is nothing out of the ordinary: it is simply part of a broader pattern of anxieties which arise out of the threats and uncertainties of everyday life. However, levels of fear differed significantly from one

socio-demographic group to another. In particular, women, younger people, Maori and Pacific Island respondents and lower socio-economic status groups expressed greater worry about crime.

In general, the survey's findings suggest that people's fears about crime are influenced by the risk they confront and the impact which crime is likely to have upon them. Thus the experience of recent victimisation impacted upon fear of crime, although this was stronger in relation to property offending than violent offending; and there was also a positive relationship between fear and the risk of victimisation. Where groups expressing greater levels of worry did not have a higher risk of actual victimisation than others, their greater levels of fear were explicable in terms of their greater vulnerability and other social disadvantage.

Crime Prevention Strategies

The survey gathered information on the strategies adopted by people to prevent household crime and personal victimisation and, to a lesser extent, on the effectiveness of those strategies. In relation to personal victimisation, it found that a large proportion of respondents took some precautionary measures to protect themselves against crime when they were out at night; that one in four sometimes carried a weapon (or something that could be used as a weapon) for the specific purpose of protecting themselves against crime when they were out at night; and that those reporting the highest levels of fear of personal victimisation - in particular, women and those aged 15-24 - were also more likely to take precautionary measures.

In relation to household victimisation, it found that while security measures to prevent burglary - such as safety latches, outside sensor lights, deadlocks and security chains on doors - were quite common, such measures were not as prevalent as in England and Wales. Moreover, most thought that their houses would be "very" or "fairly" easy to break into.

Most respondents thought that security precautions against burglary were at least to some extent effective. We are not able to say with confidence from our data whether their perceptions in this respect

were valid, since we were unable to compare the number or type of security measures which victims and non-victims had in place at a particular time. However, a comparison of the security measures which victims of burglary had in place at the time of the offence with the security measures reported by all households at the time of interview reveals a marked difference between the two. Victims at the time of the offence were substantially less likely than all households at the time of interview to have had virtually every type of security measure, suggesting that security measures do have a preventive effect.

In the light of this, the relatively low levels of security measures taken are a matter of some concern. However, it is the houses of lower socio-economic groups that appear to be most lacking in this respect. This suggests that physical security is not always the panacea for burglary: not everyone can afford effective security measures, and the danger is that good physical security in some houses may simply 'displace' the crime to other neighbourhoods or residences which are least able to absorb its impact. The challenge is to develop crime prevention strategies which are accessible and which reduce the risk of crime amongst all social groups.