



VICTIMISATION AND FEAR OF CRIME



Andrea Tünde Barabás
National University of Public Service
Faculty of Law Enforcement, Department of Criminology
Budapest, Hungary

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Abstract: This study presents the main results of 'The Opinion of the Population of Budapest on Crime, Victimisation and Restorative Justice', a research project funded by the EU and led by the author for the National Institute of Criminology (OKRI).

INTRODUCTION

An individual's subjective sense of security may be significantly influenced by how they see the performance of law enforcement agencies, i.e. whether they are satisfied with their work or think that they are not able to protect him or her from the criminals. As such, police and investigating authorities lay great emphasis on the crime clean-up or investigation success rates. These figures in practice measure the effectiveness of crime control by indicating the number of offenders who have committed known criminal acts. At the same time the population's fear of crime is very often not correlated with the actual criminal situation or even with the objective sense of security of those directly affected.

For the past few decades, an increasing number of people have shared the view that it is not enough to prevent crime but it is of equal importance that the fear of crime should be reduced. The subjective sense of security, in other words the perception of the crime rate, can be affected by several factors. It can be influenced to a great extent by the impression transmitted by the media, suggesting permanent violence and a steady increase in the number of criminal cases, by the utterances of politicians when they promise to fight against growing criminality, on the basis of their own experience in their neighbourhoods, by the criminal acts suffered by other people, and other problems.

LATENCY AND FEAR OF CRIME

The phenomenon of latency is scientifically accepted in criminology: a certain proportion of criminal acts are never discovered and they never become known to the authorities. By some estimates the number of these 'hidden cases' is at least twice or even four to five times and, according to some people, up to ten times higher than the number of registered crimes. The proportion of such cases is compared to the tip of the iceberg. In the absence of actual data one can only find out more about the cases that do not become known through empirical examinations.

Besides administrative problems the fact, *that incidents remain hidden is mainly related to citizens' willingness to report crimes as criminal acts are mostly (in approximately 70% of cases) discovered on the basis of the reports and notices filed with the police.* This means that latency is basically due to the fact that for some reason those concerned fail to report crimes to the authorities.

There are several circumstances that may contribute to this fact. For instance, those concerned may have some negative experiences, gained either personally or through their immediate environment, regarding official procedures, and they come to the conclusion that it is not worth filing a report with the police (as they have been treated unfairly or they do not believe that the offender will actually be arrested).



Further reasons may be simple fear, physical (violence) or psychological (shame, blackmail) barriers, the relatively low value of the damage suffered, or the fact that the perpetrator is a relative or an acquaintance of the victim (Van Dijk et al., 2007).

Victim surveys, first conducted in the USA and the United Kingdom, were introduced in order to explore and understand the circumstances and the reasons of victimisation as well as the needs and fears of the victims. The primary purpose of these surveys was to find out what the rate of victimisation was in reality, how many and what kinds of incidents did not become known to the authorities and why, what circumstances were instrumental in victimisation, and how the lives of victims were influenced by suffering a crime (Irk, 2004).

Since the rapid development of victim studies, surveys regarding fear of crime have constituted one of the most essential features of these investigations. The question of whether victims exhibit more fear of crime than non-victims is still quite controversial. (Kury, 1998) The empirical evidence supporting a fear-criminal victimisation relationship is relatively weak and mixed (Winkel, 1998).

VICTIM STATISTIC AND THE REALITY IN HUNGARY

In the 1980s, before the democratic transformation of the political system in 1989, the crime rate in Hungary was relatively low (140,000 to 180,000 criminal cases per year) in contrast to the current level, and in 80% of these cases legal proceedings were launched against the offenders, i.e. they were 'caught' by the police. Currently, the corresponding figure is 50 to 55%, i.e. only half of the investigations are successful.

The effectiveness of crime clearance (or lack of it) directly affects the victims and, in the worst case, it may even shake public trust in the law enforcement agencies and lead to an increase in their fear of crime. ⁽¹⁾ Besides, any negative outcome in the law enforcement process may reduce the victim's inclination to file a report with the police next time, thus increasing the number of incidents going unreported. The authorities are therefore very interested in reinforcing public trust, for which purpose statistical 'magic' is sometimes also used in addition to effective criminal investigation activities.

The criminal cases registered in The Hungarian Unified Criminal Statistics of the Investigation Authorities and the Prosecution Service (*Egységes Nyomozóhatósági és Ügyészeti Bűnügyi Statisztika*) do not cover all the acts actually committed and suffered at a given place and time, and therefore they do not cover the number of victims either. These statistics provide information on high-priority criminal acts as well as on the offenders and the victims of such acts that have become known to the authorities.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Within the framework of the research entitled 'The Opinion of the Citizens of Budapest on Crime and Restorative Justice' ⁽²⁾, in 2009 we carried out a survey with a sample of 500 adult residents in Budapest and asked them questions related to crime, victimisation, fear of crime and latency. This survey was representative on the basis of both sex and age.

We found that *the residents of Budapest do not have a realistic picture of crime and, they misjudge the relevant trends*. Only 3% of those interviewed could roughly guess, while 55% greatly underestimated and one-third of the interviewees somewhat overestimated the number of criminal acts that became known in 2008.

- (1) Citizens' lack of trust often reflects their general perception about the weakness of the state itself and results in their doubting it. It is also representational of a community that lacked trust, moral consensus and informal social control. Because of the variety of its origins, fear of crime requires combined methodological tools and occasionally an interdisciplinary analysis (Zarafonitou, 2009).
- (2) The survey, entitled 'The Opinion of the Population of Budapest on Crime, Victimisation and Restorative Justice', was conducted in the framework of the international research project 'Mediation and Restorative Justice in Prison Settings' subsidised under the Criminal Justice Programme of the European Commission (JLS/2008/JPEN015-30-CE-0245615/00-52).



As regards victimisation, the results of the previous surveys were confirmed. Contrary to the 2% victimisation rate, shown in the official statistics, *approximately one-fifth (20%) of the respondents said, in the survey, that they had fallen victim to crime during the year directly preceding the interview.* Altogether 50 respondents mentioned more than one criminal act. The 152 respondents who had become victims of crime suffered altogether 259 criminal acts in the year before the interview, of which 99 suffered only one act. This rate of victimisation is ten times *higher* than the official rate. Looking back on their lives, only 37% of those interviewed reported that they had never been victims of crime before.

The criminal acts suffered in 2008 were reported to the police *in just over half of the cases (52%).* The respondents preferred not to report the incidents they classified as theft, robbery, damage to property, bodily harm, vandalism or domestic violence, whereas in the incidents considered as harassment, car break-in, car theft, burglary or abuse of data they went to the police to report the crime (mainly because of the insurance regulations). This result confirmed the observations that latency varies by types of crime. As such, for incidents of minor importance, where reporting would only mean an additional burden for the victim, or those where the victim is defenceless, is afraid of the perpetrator or is ashamed or blames himself/herself (e.g. incidents of domestic violence or sexual assault), latency is significant (compared to the results of Van Dijk et al., 2007). We also found that the fear of crime and feeling of insecurity increases with the seriousness of the victimization. Fear of crime and the insecurity feeling increases with the seriousness of the victimisation and/or with the number of victimisations as well (Kury, 1998). At the same time, the low willingness to report crimes did not show any correlation with the respondent's sex or age.

It became clear from the survey that those who have become victims of crime at some time in their lives regard their residential neighbourhood as much less safe. This is obviously related to their state of mind arising from victimisation. However, it should be also remembered that the most frequent answers given were burglary, car theft and theft from cars, which acts are often connected to people's places of residence, and therefore the above correlation is logical.

CONCLUSION

The results of our research confirm that the issues of latency and the sense of fear, security and insecurity must be specifically addressed among the population affected, with particular regard to those who have already fallen victim to crime. Similar to the international trends, the actual rate of victimisation, which remains outside the range of vision of the authorities, is significantly higher in Hungary, than indicated by the official statistics. This is not enough for the development of a concept for successful crime prevention. ⁽³⁾

The situation is not unique: feelings of unsafety in the streets are most widespread among inhabitants of many European countries. This finding wholly confirms the earlier research results (Zarafonitou, 2009; INSEC, 2005). ⁽⁴⁾ As it was found in the INSEC project, the crime rate and the extent of the fear of crime do not overlap at all.

We have to face the fact, that people are also aware of the causes of latency, as there is probably no family in Budapest today without at least one close or distant relative or acquaintance who has suffered a criminal act that remains hidden. With records being limited to registered criminal cases and the victims involved in officially instituted criminal procedures, the authorities do not have knowledge of all victims. ⁽⁵⁾

(3) As pointed out by the UN in the Vienna Declaration of 2000, when formulating a valid crime prevention concept it is not enough to rely on police records; the actual number and characteristics of the victims must also be known.

(4) The most important observation, which emerged from the Greek victimisation survey, was the relatively low levels of victimisation in comparison to the high levels of fear of crime revealed. The result of the INSEC project is clearly shown by the fact that crime was less feared in the research area of the worst area, which was permanently and strongly infested by crime, than best area, in which a crime rate was significantly lower (using the question of 'How often do you leave your house or apartment after dark?') (INSEC, 2005).

(5) It is confirmed by my earlier observation in the nationwide victim survey led by OKRI (Barabás, 2004).



There are many factors that play a part in the victims' failure to report criminal acts to the police. One of the most important is the distrust of the authorities and the scepticism – arising from previous experience – concerning the success of the procedure or that the damage suffered will not exponentially increase during, although it may be recovered at the end of, the official procedure.

Such discernment may serve as a basis for the development of preventive measures. Crime prevention based on a strategic approach – including interventions which are aimed, in addition to mitigating the effects of crime-generating factors, at reinforcing society's ability to defend itself and at reducing the detrimental financial and moral effects of crime – can only

be effective with regard to the victims of crime if we correctly assess the circumstances of victimisation and the different target groups and determine the concrete actions to be taken on the basis of such assessment.

We should specifically remember that not only the punishment and rehabilitation of offenders but also preparation for appropriate self-defence of the people, with particular regard to those especially exposed to assault by criminals, can be effective tools to combat crime. The application of new techniques, i.e. the tools of situational crime prevention, will lead not only to a reduction in the number of criminal cases and potential criminal acts but also to the sense of security among the population being enhanced in the longer run.

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