

CRIMINAL VICTIMISATION IN AUSTRALIA – NATIONAL DATA

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In broad terms, there are two sources of data on criminal victimisation in Australia. These are crime statistics recorded on administrative systems, such as police databases, and data attained by surveys of people on their experiences as victims of crime, such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics national crime victimisation survey.

There were no uniform crime statistics in Australia until the mid-1960s when the Australian Conference of Police Commissioner laid the foundations for such (Mukherjee 1981). Until then every state and territory police department would publish their own statistics, which they still do. In 1966, however, the police used standardised definitions for selected serious reported to report jurisdictional crime statistics for the years 1964 and 1965. In the mid-1970s, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) commenced a project to further standardise the collection and reporting of police crime statistics. To further this end, in 1990 the ABS (with the support of the Police Commissioners) established the National Crime Statistics Unit (NCSU), and by 1993 the police were reported statistics on a calendar year basis (Wundersitz, Thomas & Marshall 1996) against a set of uniform offence classifications and counting rules.

Since 1996, the NCSU has published annually statistics about victims of selected offences that were recorded by police. There are, however, limitations on these statistics. For example, despite endeavours to standardise national collections, discrepancies continue as statistics are encumbered by jurisdictional differences in law and in data collection methods. Another limitation is that not all crime is reported to the police or recorded by them. Surveys of individuals are a way to capture data on their experiences of crime and to explore issues such as the reasons individuals report or do not report crime to the police but these as well do not necessarily give true crime rates (Skogan 1976, 1981; Sparks).

The first surveys of crime victims in Australia were carried out in the early 1970s (Wilson & Brown 1973; Congalton & Najman 1974). In 1975, as a component of the General Social Survey, the ABS conducted the first nationwide study of crime victims, based on a stratified multi-stage area sample of 18,694 respondents, aged 18 years and over, throughout Australia, except the Northern Territory, remote and sparsely populated areas. The crimes covered were breaking and unlawfully entering dwellings, motor vehicle theft, robbery, theft, fraud, forgery and false pretences, assault, and sex offences¹, as well as public nuisance offences.

The results were made public in 1979 and subject to considerable analysis (see, for example, Biles & Braithwaite 1979; Braithwaite & Biles 1980a, 1980b; Braithwaite, Biles & Whitrod, 1982). The survey confirmed the existence of the “dark figure” of unreported crime. Furthermore, the survey revealed substantial differences by offences in the reportability rate and in the risk of becoming the victim of certain crimes. The finding on reportability rates was like those of surveys conducted in the United States under the auspices of the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (Hindeland, Gottfredson, Dunn & Parisi 1977; Braithwaite & Biles 1980a; Indermaur 1995). Critics also highlighted discrepancies in the survey methodology. For example, respondents' conceptions of crime did not always correspond with legal definitions, and there was no means to test whether respondents

wilfully concealed or exaggerated the extent of their victimisation (Braithwaite & Biles 1980b; Indermaur 1995).

The ABS followed that survey with National Crime and Safety Survey reported publicly in 1983, 1994, 1999 and 2002. These surveys were designed to collect crime and safety data from individuals in selected households. They covered, among other issues, the social and ecological aspects of crime victimisation. The first survey was completed by personal interviews whereas the other surveys were conducted by mail-back collection and formed part of the Monthly Population Survey (MPS) as an adjunct to the Labour Force Survey (LFS). The survey collected data on safety, including feelings of safety and perceived neighbourhood problems, then data on experiences of crime and reporting behaviours. The National Crime and Safety Survey included a random sample of households selected using a multistage, area-based, sample design; and, all persons aged 15 years and over in these households were selected as respondents. Households in sparsely populated areas were excluded. It ceased in 2005.

Also, during this eraⁱⁱ, the ABS carried out the Women's Safety Survey (1996) and the Australian Institute of Criminology coordinated the Australian component of the International Crime Victims Survey (Walker 1991, 1993; ABS 2000)ⁱⁱⁱ. The former survey was sampled from private households, but again sparsely populated areas were excluded. Women aged 18 years and older, who were the usual residents of the households, were selected as respondents. In private, trained female interviewers conducted face-to-face interviews with consenting respondents. The latter survey sampled private households with at least one telephone connection, and random digit dialling was used to select the households. One respondent aged 16 years and over was selected from each household.

The General Social Survey (1975) found that nine per cent of respondents were victims of assault. The same assault prevalence rate (9 per cent) was reported in the 2000 International Crime Victims Survey. The Women's Safety Survey found the prevalence of assault was 5.9 per cent. The National Crime and Safety Survey found that 4.7 per cent of its respondents were victims of assault. Notably, the lowest prevalence of assault in Australia (0.8 per cent) was reported in the Crime Statistics drawn from police data on assault reported to, and recorded by, police. Consistently, survey data showed whether individuals reported crime to the police depended on its nature. For example, General Social Survey (1975) and the Crime Victims Survey (1983) showed 89.3% and 94% respectively of motor vehicle theft were reported to the police, whereas 28.2% and 25% respectively of rape offences were reported. Other surveys disclosed similar reportability rates, for instance, the latest Crime Victimization Survey showed.

The ABS introduced a different method of collection for the 2008-09 Crime Victimization Survey. Consequently, crime victimisation data from that survey onwards is not directly comparable with data from the previous surveys. The ABS advise that some comparisons can be made; for example, some state and territory data can be compared with that attained in the 1993, 1995 and 1998 Crime and Safety Surveys. The survey samples cover, with some exceptions^{iv}, persons aged 15 years and over who were usual residents of private dwellings. The data are collected by personal interviews by telephone or at selected dwellings, and it covered non-violent and violent crimes. The survey also collects information about selected characteristics of incidents for each crime type, such as the location of the incident and the victim's relationship to the offender. It, in addition to gathering data on victims' crime reporting behaviour and information on victims of repeated crimes, has since 2013, gathered data about the misuse of various types of personal information. In 2019, an extra series of questions on home security measures installed in households was added to the survey. Unlike the earlier series of crime victimisation surveys that were conducted irregularly, the Crime

Victimisation Survey is conducted regularly. The findings of the tenth annual survey were made public in 2019.

Comparative data from the survey as carried out in 2008–09 and 2017–18 shows the national victimisation rate decreased for six categories of property crime: break and enter premises; attempted break and enter premises; motor vehicle theft; theft from a motor vehicle; malicious property damage; and, other theft. Likewise, except for sexual assaults that remained steady, the national victimisation rate decreased for violent crimes, including assault, threatened assault and robbery. The ABS (2019), however, urges caution when examining patterns in victimisation rates over time.

Both police crime statistics and victim surveys have their limitations. Not all crime is reported to police, for instance, and respondents to surveys may not be aware they were victimised. While some police do not accurately record crime, some victims may mistakenly perceive incidents as not criminal. In both circumstances, crime is not recorded or reported. Having two sets of data, however, can be advantageous when used in conjunction with each other.

Police crime statistics and national crime victimisation surveys are not the only sources of data on victims of crime in Australia. Government departments (other than the police), non-government organisations, research institutes and others collect data and statistics on crime and criminal behaviour. The Australian Institute of Criminology, for example, undertakes a survey of identity crime and misuse of personal information, which is part of the Australian Government's National Identity Security Strategy. The 2018 survey found about one quarter of respondents had experienced misuse of their personal information at some time during their life; but also that the total out-of-pocket losses experienced were at \$2million Australian dollars substantially lower than the \$2.9million reported the previous year (Jorna, Smith & Norman 2020).

Another example is the longitudinal Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey (Melbourne Institute 2020), which is a large-scale, nationally representative household panel survey that started in 2001. Annually, HILDA collects information on people's demographics, life events, health and subjective well-being. Respondents asked to report the major events, such as violent crime and/or property crime that have happened in their life during 12 months prior to the survey. Crime victims have consistently reported significantly lower levels of subjective well-being than non-victims, which reveals a likely link between crime and well-being.

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ⁱ Questions about sex offences were asked of females aged 15 years and over.

ⁱⁱ The ABS also conducted Crime and Safety Surveys in New South Wales (1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2008), Western Australia (1991, 1995, 1999 and 2000), South Australia (1991, 1995 and 2000), Victoria (1994 and 1995), Tasmania (1998) and Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory (1995).

ⁱⁱⁱ Another national survey formed part of an international survey of crimes against businesses. It addressed, among other issues, the incidence and characteristics of crimes against businesses as well as the costs of preventing these crimes.

^{iv} Those excluded are members of the permanent defence forces; certain diplomatic personnel of overseas governments, overseas residents in Australia; members of non-Australian defence forces (and their dependants); students at boarding schools; patients in hospitals; residents of homes (for example, retirement homes and homes for persons with disabilities); and, inmates of prisons.