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Problems and Promise of Victimization Surveys for Cross-National Research

ABSTRACT

In the late 1960s self-report surveys of criminal victimization were controversial and new. Now, they are common, a mainstay of statistical systems and a familiar research tool. More complex questions have arisen concerning the validity and reliability of victim survey data, including whether they can be used in cross-national comparisons of crime and criminal justice issues. Victim survey data are sufficiently valid and reliable for use in cross-national comparisons. Victim surveys can tell us a great deal about crime cross-nationally that police administrative data cannot. While surveys in principle should be more comparable across nations than police administrative data, in practice this comparability cannot be assumed. Self-consciously comparative surveys, such as the International Crime Victimization Survey (ICVS) produce more comparable data across nations than nation-specific surveys do. Nation-specific surveys produce higher-quality data on their specific nation than the ICVS does. Steps should be taken to enhance the quality of ICVS data and the cross-national comparability of nation-specific surveys.

The practice of asking crime victims to report their victimization experience in sample surveys was rare until the late 1960s. At that time a number of factors encouraged intense interest in the idea of using victim reports to estimate the volume of crime in the United States. The impetus for a victimization survey came largely from the level of crime and urban unrest at the time in the United States and efforts of the federal government to improve the criminal justice system. The

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