

Conklin J.E.♦

UDC: 343.9

Criminology: The Risk of Victimization

Abstract: Because of the methodological problems with each of the three major measures of crime, none provides us with a perfect measure of the “true” amount of crime. When all three measures agree on the extent and distribution of crime, we can have some confidence in the conclusions. When the three measures disagree about the extent and distribution of crime, as they sometimes do, it is difficult to know which one to use. However, each measure can be employed to good advantage by criminologists to answer certain kinds of questions.

Key words: criminology; victimization; crime risk; statistics; methodology; causes of offenses.

In 1985, the Bureau of Justice Statistics of the U.S. Department of Justice began to use the results of its NCS victimization surveys to calculate the risk of being the victim of a violent crime during a given year. The Bureau’s Crime Risk Index can be used to compare the risks faced by different subgroups of the population (for example, (whites and blacks, men and women, the young and the old, high- and low-income groups). It can also be used to compare the risk of being the victim of a violent crime with the risk of being in a fatal car accident or contracting a certain disease.

The initial application of the Crime Risk Index found that each year 3 percent of Americans are victims of violent crime (defined as rape, robbery, and assault). The risk of victimization in a violent crime is higher for males than for females, higher for blacks than for whites, higher for those aged sixteen to twenty-four than for other age groups, and higher for low-income groups than for high-income groups.

In 1987, the Bureau of Justice Statistics began to use the NCS data to calculate the risk of being a victim of a violent crime or a theft at some time during one’s lifetime. This measure may provide a better indicator of the costs of crime to individuals than do annual crime statistics, which an analyst at the Bureau said “provide a false sense of security.” He added, “People are worried about the possibility that at some time in their lives they will be robbed or raped or assaulted, or their homes will be burglarized” [2; 6, p. 1].

The Bureau estimated that one in every 133 Americans will have his or her life ended by a murder. The percentage of people who will be victimized once or more during their lifetimes (starting at age twelve) are:

- Rape and attempted rape - 8%
- Robbery and attempted robbery - 30%
- Assault and attempted assault - 74%
- Robbery or assault, resulting in injury - 40%
- Personal theft, including attempts - 99%

♦ Conklin John E. – Professor of Sociology at Department of Sociology at the Tufts University, Medford, MA, U.S.A.
E-mail: john.conklin@tufts.edu

Further analysis of the NCS data allows even more refined calculations of risks'. Thus, 11 percent of black women and 8 percent of white women will suffer a rape or an attempt during their lifetimes. Fifty-one percent of blacks but only 27 percent of whites will be victims of robbery or an attempt; 37 percent of males but only 22 percent of females will be victims of such a crime. Males are also more likely than females to be victims of an assault or an attempt, by 82 percent to 62 percent. Virtually everyone, regardless of sex or race, will be the victim of a personal theft or an attempt. During a twenty-year period, three-fourths of households will have a burglary, and one-fifth will have a car stolen.

These figures must be updated regularly, for if crime rates change, then people's lifetime risks will also change. This new method of using the results of the NCS surveys can help people make more accurate assessments of the risks that they will be crime victims than they can by using annual police statistics.

Another problem is that victimization surveys may overestimate the amount of crime that occurs. Respondents may incorrectly interpret some experiences - such as the loss of a wallet - and report them as crimes. Overestimation of crime rates can also occur if people report crimes that occurred before the period about which they are being questioned. This problem of "telescoping" may result from a faulty memory or from the respondent's wish to have something to talk about with the interviewer. The problem of telescoping may inflate victimization rates by as much as 20 percent, leading to estimates of crime rates that are higher than actual rates [1]. Overreporting can also be encouraged by interviewers who prod respondents to remember crimes, both to keep the interview interesting and to ferret out the "hidden crime" on which the victimization survey is predicated [7, p. 71-78; 8, p. 99-103].

Because of these and other methodological problems, the results of victimization surveys should not be regarded as "true" measures of crime. The surveys do measure some of the crime that is not reported to and recorded by the police. However, a comparison of victimization survey results and FBI UCR statistics concluded that "if one defines crime as criminal acts serious enough to be reacted to by both citizens and the police, then [the evidence indicates that] the UCR are at least as valid and probably more valid than the data from victimization surveys" [3, p. 491].

Even if they provided a valid measure of certain kinds of crime, victimization surveys have not given us a complete and balanced picture of crime. They have not been used to measure white-collar crime, organized crime, or victimless crimes [4, p 205-222]. Victimization surveys provide little or no information on offenders, as do FBI data on arrested suspects. To develop a full picture of crime, the surveys must be supplemented with other kinds of data.

Another shortcoming of victimization surveys is that they have been used primarily to look at the amount and distribution of crime rather than to test or develop theories of criminal behavior [4, p. 205-222]. Victimization surveys have repeatedly shown that much crime is not reported and recorded, but they have added less to our understanding of the social processes that generate crime; as a result, they have contributed relatively little to the development of policies to reduce crime.

Crime can be measured by police statistics or by questioning participants in the incident through a survey. Victimization surveys ask a cross section of the population about its experiences as victims of crime during a specific period, often six months. Another way to measure crime is to interview a cross section of the population, or a more limited sample such as high school students, about their involvement in crime and delinquency as offenders. Self-report studies reveal that much

crime that respondents will admit to in confidential interviews or on self-administered questionnaires never makes its way into police statistics.

Self-report studies confirm the conclusion of victimization surveys that the dark figure, or hidden amount of crime, is large. For instance, a study that asked 180 boys, most of whom had been in trouble with the law, about their involvement in twenty-two crimes and delinquent acts found that the boys admitted to an average of 680 offenses. A study of male heroin users that employed self-report questionnaires found that the drug users confessed to committing an average of 337 crimes per year. Research on forty-nine incarcerated robbers found that they admitted to a total of 10,505 offenses during their careers, an average of 214 crimes per offender [5, p. 59-68]. Those and many other studies dramatically demonstrate that official crime statistics undercount the amount of crime.

Self-report studies have several methodological shortcomings that account for their failure to provide an ideal measure of crime [1]. The questionnaires used in the studies sometimes lack validity; that is, they do not accurately measure the amount of crime that respondents have committed. Subjects may fabricate behavior to impress interviewers, or they may fail to mention some offenses out of fear that the information will be passed on to the police, in spite of guarantees of anonymity. At least two studies show that some kind of external control over lying is needed to ensure the validity of self-report instruments.

Self-report studies have been criticized for using school or neighborhood samples that fail to include officially labeled, chronic delinquents. Critics question the assumption of many self-report researchers that “official delinquents are not different from adolescents located at various other points along the delinquency continuum”. These critics urge researchers to locate and study more official delinquents, because data indicate that the factors explaining relatively minor transgressions are not necessarily the same factors accounting for the actions of chronic delinquent offenders.

Another problem with self-report studies is the way they have been carried out. The use of many different self-report questionnaires by researchers means that their results are often not comparable. Self-report studies would be much more useful if the same questionnaire were administered over time to national samples. This would allow us to generalize about the amount of crime in the population as a whole and to look at changes in the amount of crime over time. We have accumulated some data of this sort on victimization experiences, but we do not yet have such information on self-reported violations of the law. In fact, we know relatively little about self-reported crime by adults, for the vast majority of self-report studies have been carried out on samples of juveniles.

Self-report studies are also flawed in that they ignore certain kinds of behavior. They rarely include questions that add to our knowledge of white-collar crime or organized crime. The way questionnaires are written usually makes it difficult to compare the results of self-report studies with official crime statistics or with NCS data. This is partly a result of the use of self-report questionnaires with juvenile samples, for it means that respondents are asked about acts that would be crimes if they were adults as well as about juvenile status offenses such as truancy and underage drinking.

Some self-report studies classify juveniles as delinquents if they admit to one or more delinquent acts. Questionnaires that ask about large numbers of acts are more likely to classify a high proportion of respondents as delinquents, even though many of them might be only minimally involved in trivial acts of delinquency. Self-report studies should emphasize the frequency of delin-

quency and crime and the seriousness of the acts, rather than whether an individual has ever engaged in any act that violates the law.

Because of their methodological shortcomings, self-report studies cannot be employed to assess the efficiency of official crime statistics, even though these studies do confirm that there is a large dark figure of crime. They have proved useful, however, in telling us about the characteristics of people who violate different kinds of laws with various degrees of frequency. This information can be compared with official data on arrests, convictions, and sentences to assess the fairness with which the criminal justice system treats different kinds of people [1].

Because of the methodological problems with each of the three major measures of crime, none provides us with a perfect measure of the “true” amount of crime. When all three measures agree on the extent and distribution of crime, we can have some confidence in the conclusions. When the three measures disagree about the extent and distribution of crime, as they sometimes do, it is difficult to know which one to use. However, each measure can be employed to good advantage by criminologists to answer certain kinds of questions. For instance, victimization data and official crime statistics can be used to examine trends in crime rates. Self-report data cannot be used for that purpose, but they can help us to understand the impact on delinquency of child-rearing methods and membership in peer groups, issues not dealt with by either official statistics or victimization surveys. Used appropriately, each measure can contribute to a fuller understanding of criminal behavior.

References

1. Brantingham Paul and Brantingham Patricia. *Patterns in Crime*. New York: Macmillan.
2. Bureau of Justice Statistics. *Capital Punishment*. Washington, DC: US. Department of Justice.
3. Gove Walter R., Hughes Michael, and Geerken Michael. Are Uniform Reports a Valid Indicator of the Index Crimes? An Affirmate Answer with Minor Qualification// *Criminology*, p. 451-501.
4. Johnson Kirk A., and Wasielewski Patricia L. A Commentary on Victimization Research and the Importance of Meaning Structures // *Criminology*, p. 205-222.
5. Inciardi James A. *Problems in the Measurement of Criminal Behavior* // *Criminal Behavior: Reading in Criminology*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, p. 59-68
6. Koppel Herbert. *Lifetime Likelihood of Victimization*. Washington, D.C.: US Department of Justice.
7. Levine James P. The Potential for Crime Overreporting in Criminal Victimization Surveys. *Criminology*, p. 71-78
8. Singer Simon I. A Comment on Alleged Overreporting. *Criminology*, p. 99-103.
Original source – John E. Conklin. *Criminology*. 5th ed. A Simon & Schuster Company. Needham Heights, Massachusetts.

Конклин Дж. Э. ♦

УДК: 343.9

Криминология: риск виктимизации

Аннотация: Из-за методологических проблем с каждым из трех основных показателей преступности ни один из них не дает нам идеального показателя «истинного» уровня преступности. Когда все три показателя согласуются в отношении масштабов и распределения преступности, мы можем иметь некоторую уверенность в выводах. Когда три показателя расходятся в отношении масштабов и распределения преступности, что иногда случается, трудно понять, какой из них использовать. Однако криминологи могут с пользой использовать каждую меру для ответа на определенные вопросы.

Ключевые слова: криминология; виктимизация; риск преступности; статистика; методология; причины правонарушений.

Библиография

1. Brantingham Paul and Brantingham Patricia. Patterns in Crime. New York: Macmillan.
 2. Bureau of Justice Statistics. Capital Punishment. Washington, DC: US. Department of Justice.
 3. Gove Walter R., Hughes Michael, and Geerken Michael. Are Uniform Reports a Valid Indicator of the Index Crimes? An Affirmate Answer with Minor Qualification// Criminology, p. 451-501.
 4. Johnson Kirk A., and Wasielewski Patricia L. A Commentary on Victimization Research and the Importance of Meaning Structures // Criminology, p. 205-222).
 5. Inciardi James A. Problems in the Measurement of Criminal Behavior // Criminal Behavior: Reading in Criminology. New York: St. Martin's Press, p. 59-68
 6. Koppel Herbert. Lifetime Likelihood of Victimization. Washington, D.C.: US Department of Justice.
 7. Levine James P. The Potential for Crime Overreporting in Criminal Victimization Surveys. Criminology, p. 71-78.
 8. Singer Simon I. A Comment on Alleged Overreporting. Criminology, p. 99-103.
- Первоисточник – Джон Э. Конклин. Криминология. 5^е изд. Компания Simon & Schuster. Нидэм-Хайтс, Массачусетс.