Victimisation surveys: innovative approaches

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Two introductory anecdotes

- The ICVS Estonia 1993: doubts as to the usefulness of victimisation surveys
- The Euro-Parliament and the European victimisation survey: doubts because of the costs of victimisation surveys, likely also to be linked to doubts as to the usefulness of victimisation surveys
SDG 16: The SDG 16 has been defined to have twelve targets. For few of these, victimisation surveys have some relevance

• “significantly reduce all forms of violence … everywhere”: victimisation surveys may be used to estimate the incidence and prevalence of victimisation to interpersonal violence in the adult population, with a number of reservations related to non-response, refusals to cooperate, misunderstandings, memory failure etc. Thus, baseline rates, variations of these, and changes over time may be monitored.

• “end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children”: children are usually not comprised in the target population of standard victimisation surveys. However, special surveys (e.g. using proxies or other informants who may have observed child abuse etc.) may be designed to address the target.
• “substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms”: victimisation surveys have been used to estimate the incidence and prevalence of corruption and having been asked for bribes, as experienced by the general population, and to monitor changes in these rates. Large parts of corruption and bribery remain beyond the scope of standard victimisation surveys. However, special surveys (e.g. business victimisation surveys) may be designed to improve the coverage of this target.

• “develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels”: victimisation surveys may be used to assess how the adult population has experienced the performance of public institutions, e.g. what they think about the performance of police, prosecutors and courts, or how they have been dealt with when asking for services from different authorities. This topic is related to the corruption and bribery issue. Also in this case, business victimisation surveys may be valuable for additional coverage of the target.
As for measuring the remaining SDGs, victimisation surveys do not seem to represent much direct potential
Interests of knowledge

- Victimisation surveys may serve many different interests of knowledge. First, we may have a look at the most recent Korean victimisation survey. In this case, the interests of knowledge have been defined clearly. The purpose of the survey is
  - to measure the dark figure of hidden crime rates
  - to identify the vulnerability factors of crime victimisation
  - to identify Korean people’s perception and attitude on crime
  - to provide baseline data in the establishment of crime prevention, crime victim protection and support policy.
More about interests of knowledge

• The Korean list reflects a rather standard approach to the expected usefulness of the victimisation survey.

• However, the victimisation survey has great potential that is currently often under-exploited. The standard general adult population survey is only one of many variants, and is only able to address some interests of knowledge. For some purposes, other target groups may be more suitable.

• Of possible other interests of knowledge, we may note, e.g., the following:
  
  • to compare survey findings with police data, i.e. how police-recorded crimes are selected from all relevant events
  
  • to learn what people have done about victimisation (such as preventive measures by the general public or by corporate bodies
  
  • the victimisation survey is flexible: it can use standard and changing modules at need. If a new topic is considered to be relevant, a new module can be easily designed and incorporated in the questionnaire.
  
  • the victimisation survey is able to combine events that are the responsibility of different agencies (health care, social services, non-government organisations and support agencies). The victim has first-hand knowledge of his/her contacts with all of these.
  
  • the victimisation survey is able to combine events other than crime with the criminal victimisation (such as accidents). It can also combine victimisation with personal characterises of the respondent.
More about interests of knowledge

• These few examples are of course not comprehensive. Many other relevant interests of knowledge can be served by victimisation surveys.

• These examples do, however, already demonstrate that the instrument could provide better answers to a wide scope questions than what can be drawn from standard administrative crime data, such as police-recorded crimes, arrest statistics, or statistics on sentenced persons or prisoners.

• In particular, the focus is shifted from the offender to the victim, and the circumstances and consequences of crime. Also, perceptions and attitudes are important to monitor, and administrative crime-related statistics are not helpful to this end.
The problem of costs

• A core problem of victimisation surveys is that they have to be carried out as separate exercises, in contrast to administrative crime data that are created as a side-product of the regular work of the relevant agencies. They require a separate research body with the relevant research skills and resources. They also require a cultural environment in which the population feels that it is acceptable or even desirable that their experiences and attitudes are being monitored.

• The high cost may be a major obstacle to carrying out victimisation surveys even in the case that there is a broad consensus as to their desirability. Costs may be reduced at several points of the data collection process. Eventually, also data analysis and reporting are a cost factor.

• In the data collection process, relevant points include the target population and the sampling frame, the sample size, the survey mode that determines the cost of establishing contact and of the data collection itself, coding and recording of the data.
Data collection 1: Target population and sampling frame

- After the objectives of the survey have been defined, the target population needs to be established. For certain types of victimisation, quite different target populations may be required. These may be something else than the general adult population.

- Next, a suitable sampling frame needs to be defined. Basically, it is necessary to define from what register the survey sample is to be drawn, and to see what are the deficiencies of the selected register/source in terms of representativity. No register is perfect. Typically, institutionalised persons are not included, or homeless persons. Also, no register is fully up to date.

- Sometimes, no population register is available. Then, classic solution has been to use starting addresses. If address registers are not available, starting addresses may be determined, e.g., by the random walk approach (general resident population), or relying on snowball samples (e.g. unregistered immigrant minorities)
Sampling frames, continued

- Sampling frames include lists of
  - population registers, electoral registers, birth registers and medical registers can be used as sampling frames for individuals.
  - postal address files or electoral registers could be used as sampling frames for households
  - driving licence lists may be used as a sampling frame for persons old enough to have such a licence
  - telephone number listings may be used as a frame for homes or persons with telephones
  - a list of businesses or organisations in a business directory may be used as a sampling frame for businesses
  - Sampling frames usually do not exactly comprise the target population, there is under-coverage (some elements of the target are missing) and over-coverage (some elements do not match the definition of the target population).
Economising on target population and sampling frame

- The representativity of the sample is important, but it is possible - and often done - to exclude hard-to-reach and marginal parts of the target population, and focus on those who are readily available and willing to cooperate.

- In effect, this typically happens in standard surveys: contact attempts fail, or the fieldwork time frame is too short to allow for repeated contact attempts.

- The resulting non-response is not random. This is a major source of problems in regards of the representativity of the final data. In terms of cost reduction, this must be accepted; and depending on the survey objectives, stricter or more liberal criteria may be applied.

- This should, however, not result in sloppy sampling. Sources of error in the sample need to be assessed carefully.
The European victimisation survey was turned down probably for many reasons. One of these was likely to be the proposed sample size. The idea was to carry out 5000-8000 interviews per country. With an approximate cost of 100 Euros per interview, and 28 Member States to be surveyed, the cost was estimated at 30 Million Euros.

The statistical argument was that a given high accuracy of the statistical estimates was necessary for the work to be acceptable.

Does it really make sense to require that the accuracy of the statistical estimates is very high? Might we not have achieved a roughly similar outcome with a sample of 1000 or 2000 respondents? How accurate do we need to be? Are we only interested in total population averages (rates), or do we seriously need accurate estimates for detailed breakdowns of the sample?

Are we more concerned with, e.g. victimisation rates or with structures and patterns within the sample? Could we accept that large samples are used for very important overall victimisation estimates, while much smaller samples might suffice for monitoring some central features over time? Is it certain or even likely that the analysis is going to take full advantage of the potentials of the large sample? Experience has shown that this is often not the case.

In the ICVS tradition, the survey was, for many countries, limited to big cities or capital cities. This resulted in substantial savings in data collection as the interviewers did not need to cover large geographical areas. Sample sizes in the ICVS were around 2000 interviews.
Data collection 3: Survey mode, establishing contact

- The most expensive alternative is to send an interviewer to the potential respondent. The advantage is that the personal contact allows the interviewer to identify the respondent, and to make sure he/she understands what the respondent is saying. The CAPI approach allows the responses to be coded and entered into a database immediately. A drawback is that in a face-to-face situation, some types of events are not readily disclosed. This bias can be diminished by using a laptop questionnaire (or a chart) that is handed over to the respondent when sensitive matters are discussed (CASI). The interview may cause distress to the respondent, and special measures may be required for an ethically sustainable outcome.

- The next option is the telephone survey. Modern technology allows for automatic dialling, if a random digit dialling sample is used; the CATI approach makes the process quite reliable. On the telephone, refusals may be more likely. Some delicate issues may be more readily disclosed over the telephone, while there is also the risk that somebody is overhearing the conversation. Persons without access to a telephone cannot be reached.

- Less costly is to do a postal survey with or without follow-ups. The data must be coded and entered into a database separately. Nowadays, this can be done automatically, diminishing the processing costs. Responses to postal enquiries may be in some respects more direct, but also less complete than in face-to-face or telephone interviews. The response rate may often be lower than in the face-to-face and the telephone mode.
• Web surveys are the most recent and most cost-effective approach. In this mode, respondents receive a letter that invites them to participate in the survey. Quite many people have been found to agree to cooperate. The response rate, however, tends to be lower than in the other survey modes, and the outcome seems to be more biased in terms of education and social status.

• As computer literacy and access to the internet become more widespread, the biases of the web sample may be expected to become less accentuated.

• In a recent Finnish experiment, three survey modes (face-to-face, telephone, web) were compared. It was observed that the mode that secures better secrecy will yield higher victimisation prevalences, and the differences between modes are larger when more sensitive questions are asked. The study found that none of the three modes could be regarded as being superior. The response rate was lowest for the web survey (25 %), and highest for the telephone mode (62 %), while the face-to-face mode had a response rate of 50 %. The victimisation rates tended to be higher for the web survey than for the other modes, and the rates found by the telephone mode tended to be lower.
Data collection 4: questionnaire size, coding, recording data

• A cost element is the size of the survey instrument. It is necessary to restrict questionnaires to avoid respondent fatigue. In the face-to-face mode, a bit longer questionnaires may be applied than the telephone mode. For web surveys, the questionnaire should probably be still shorter and less complicated. If a computer can be used to support the interview, also more complex questionnaire structures can be applied.

• Often, only a fraction of the questions that “might be of interest” are eventually utilised for the analysis. Good pilot studies and “survey laboratory” type preparatory work are essential when deciding on this issue.

• Nowadays, face-to-face and telephone interviews are often computer assisted, as of course is the web survey. Coding and entering the data the place immediately, thus separate coding and data entering costs and errors are omitted. Also automatic processing of postal questionnaires has brought the costs down.
To be considered: combine survey modes

- A more cost-effective solution could be a combination of the existing approaches, a mixed-mode survey. First, identify all possible contact information on the sampled persons. Then, send a letter (paper or e-mail) to all, inviting them to participate in the survey. A good percentage will do so; it then pays to send a reminder to those who did not.

- Next, contact the remaining persons by telephone. Again, a good percentage will respond; again, it pays to try again several times if contact is not established.

- Next, send a mailed questionnaire to those who did not reply yet, and use again reminders. A fair percentage will respond.

- Finally, send an interviewer to those who still did not respond. Again, a fair percentage will reply.

- For this approach, one needs to allow a longer time frame for the fieldwork; the work cannot continue forever. An advantage of this approach is that each mode is applied to respondents who originate in the same sample. This will simplify the weighting problem when the data are analysed.
Analysis and reporting

- Analysis and reporting are not always calculated as a cost element at all. This is of course not correct. In the worst case, much effort and resources are spent in creating a good data file, but analysis is only carried out a superficial level. Then, the full potential of the data is not exploited.

- In a comparative framework, standard questionnaires are used. There are at least three problems related to this.

  - First, the standard list of victimisation items may miss some locally important types of victimisation.

  - Second, it is not always clear how the resulting indicators or statistical estimates can be interpreted.

  - The third problem is that respondents may have very dissimilar feelings about being asked questions of personal experiences by unknown interviewers or questionnaires.

- These issues deserve careful consideration. The remedy for these dilemmas is careful preparatory work. Testing and qualitative work in the preparatory stage of the work are essential. Such preparatory work requires a lot of local expertise. If the job is externalised, there is the drawback that local expertise and capacity are not built. Without local capacity development, the victimisation survey remains something that is just “for those international people up there”, rather than becoming established as a regular core element in the body of national crime-related statistics.

- If these issues are not resolved, we may again hear an echo of the Estonian minister’s comment: “All this is very interesting, but in what way is it useful?”