

THE VOICE OF VICTIMS OF CRIME: ESTIMATING THE TRUE LEVEL OF CONVENTIONAL CRIME

by Anna Alvazzi del Frate*

Abstract

Since its launch in 1989, the International Crime Victim Survey has attracted growing interest from the research community and policy makers. In addition to providing an alternative source of data on crime to complement official statistics, the Survey offers internationally standardized indicators for the perception and fear of crime. At the country level, the International Crime Victim Survey is used to monitor differences in crime and perceptions between countries and over time. By collecting social and demographic information on respondents, crime surveys also allow analysis of how both objective and subjective risks of crime vary for different groups within the population, in terms of age, gender, education, income levels and lifestyles. Data from recent sweeps of the Survey are presented in order to analyse global crime levels and trends.

INTRODUCTION

The main objectives of the International Crime Victim Survey include:

- Providing comparative indicators of crime and victimization risks, indicators of perception of crime and fear of crime, performance of law enforcement, victim assistance and crime prevention
- Promoting crime surveys as an important research and policy tool at the international, national and local levels
- Enhancing adequate research and policy analysis methodology
- Creating an opportunity for transparency in public debate about crime and reactions to crime
- Encouraging public and criminal justice concern about citizens' participation in the evaluation of criminal policy and particularly in partnership in crime prevention
- Promoting international cooperation by providing an opportunity for a large number of countries to share methodology and experience through their participation in a well coordinated international research project

*Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Officer, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

The International Crime Victim Survey shares with national crime surveys the objective of measuring crime beyond the information provided by police statistics. Indeed, one of the most important aspects of the Survey is its ability to measure the quantity of crime that is not reported to the police. The reasons for the non-reporting of crimes have to do with the inaccessibility of the authorities, which makes reporting difficult, complicated reporting procedures and a lack of confidence that reporting victimization to the police will result in solving the crime or punishing the perpetrator. Such measurements of unreported crime demonstrate that reports of official crime levels as outlined by Shaw, van Dijk and Rhomberg [1] provide only part of the picture and that citizens' elementary right of access to justice, and that of victims to be heard and protected are not met. This is particularly true in developing countries and countries with economies in transition and among vulnerable groups such as women and children.

The study of corruption, including "street-level corruption" and the perception of corruption among the general population, is an important and unique feature of the Survey. The perception of corruption can be monitored over time and compared with an objective measure.

Participation in the Survey has been facilitated by the international community and donors who have taken an interest in and supported the reform process towards a market economy and a democratic political system. It is, however, important to repeat the collection of data on a regular basis. The fifth "sweep" of the Survey is planned for 2004.

Overview of the international crime victim survey, 1989-2002

Initially called the International Crime Survey, the International Crime Victim Survey was carried out for the first time in 14 developed countries in 1989. Subsequently, in 1992, a face-to-face interview for the questionnaire was developed to enable the participation of countries in which telephone interviews would not have been feasible at the time. From that time, it became possible to conduct standardized surveys on crime in a number of countries for which very little information on crime was available. The third Survey was conducted in 1996 and the fourth in 2000; the project now includes more than 70 countries, all of which have participated in the survey at least once. The fourth Survey was carried out in 2000 and included 17 national surveys and 31 city surveys (16 capital cities in Central and Eastern Europe, 4 in Asia, 7 in Africa and 4 in Latin America). (For a detailed list of survey participants, see table.)

Countries and territories that participated in the International Crime Victim Survey at least once, 1989-2002

(N = national survey; C = city survey)

<i>Country or area, by region</i>	<i>Type of survey</i>	<i>Country or area, by region</i>	<i>Type of survey</i>
Africa		Western Europe	
Botswana	C	Austria	N
Egypt	C	Belgium	N
Lesotho	C	Denmark	N
Mozambique	C	Finland	N
Namibia	C	France	N
Nigeria	C	Germany	N
South Africa	C	Italy	N
Swaziland	C	Malta	N
Tunisia		Netherlands	N
Uganda	C	Norway	N
United Republic of Tanzania	C	Portugal	N
Zambia	C	Scotland	N
Zimbabwe	C	Spain	N and C
Asia		Sweden	N
Azerbaijan	C	Switzerland	N
Cambodia	C	United Kingdom	
China	C	England and Wales	N
India	C	Northern Ireland	N
Indonesia	C	Central and Eastern Europe	
Japan	N	Albania	C
Kyrgyzstan	C	Belarus	C
Mongolia	C	Bulgaria	C
Papua New Guinea	C	Croatia	C
Philippines	C	Czech Republic	C
Republic of Korea	C	Estonia	C
Latin America		Georgia	C
Argentina	C	Hungary	C
Bolivia	C	Latvia	C
Brazil	C	Lithuania	C
Colombia	C	Poland	N and C
Costa Rica	C	Romania	C
Panama	C	Russian Federation	C
Paraguay	C	Slovakia	C
North America		Slovenia	
Canada	N	The former Yugoslav	
United States of America	N	Republic of Macedonia	C
Oceania		Ukraine	C
Australia	N	Yugoslavia	C
New Zealand	N		

The regional breakdown used in the Survey is intended to be an approximate grouping of countries that are geographically close to each other and that share some cultural values. However, countries within each region may differ significantly in terms of gross domestic product and their ranking on the United Nations Development Programme human development index (www.undp.org/currentHDR_E/).

Methodology

The Survey targets samples of households in which only one respondent, aged 16 or above, is selected. National samples include at least 2,000 respondents, who are generally interviewed using the computer-assisted telephone interview technique. In the countries where that method could not be used because of insufficient distribution of telephones, face-to-face interviews were conducted in the main cities, generally with samples of 1,000-1,500 respondents.

The questionnaire includes sections on 11 types of “conventional” crime, for which standard definitions are provided. Questions on consumer fraud and corruption are included; those are also accompanied by standard definitions. The questionnaire is also used to gather data on whether crimes were reported to the police, the reasons for not reporting crimes, attitudes towards the police, the fear of crime and crime prevention measures.

Of the eleven “conventional” crimes, some are “household crimes”, that is, crimes that can be seen as affecting the household at large. Respondents report on all the incidents involving household crimes that are known to them. A first group of crimes deals with vehicles owned by the respondent or other members of his or her household: theft of car; theft from car; car vandalism; theft of bicycle; and theft of motorcycle. A second group refers to breaking and entering burglary; and attempted burglary. A third group of crimes refers to crimes experienced personally by the respondent: robbery; theft of personal property; assault or threat; and sexual incidents (women only). Finally, the questionnaire addresses two more types of crime that may have been experienced by the respondents: consumer fraud; and bribery or corruption.

Regular meetings of survey coordinators from participating countries have helped to facilitate the translation of concepts and definitions into the various languages.

Data analysis

Each sweep of the Survey provides an enormous amount of information. In-depth analysis of the database is one of the objectives of researchers across the world. The wealth of data produced can hardly be analysed between two consecutive sweeps of the Survey. Analysis of the Survey has been carried out mostly within comparable groups of countries, for example, national surveys in the “industrialized countries” city surveys in Central and Eastern Europe and the developing countries [2]. Analysis of the main comparative results concerning industrialized countries was published upon completion of the first, second, third and fourth international crime victim surveys [2-5]; results from developing countries and countries with economies in transition were made available in numerous publications [3-9]; and results from the International Crime Victim Survey 2000 were also widely published [10-13]. The present article will deal with some of the main findings of the Survey conducted in 2000. For international comparisons across groups, only respondents located in urban areas with populations of more than 100,000 are considered from national surveys.*

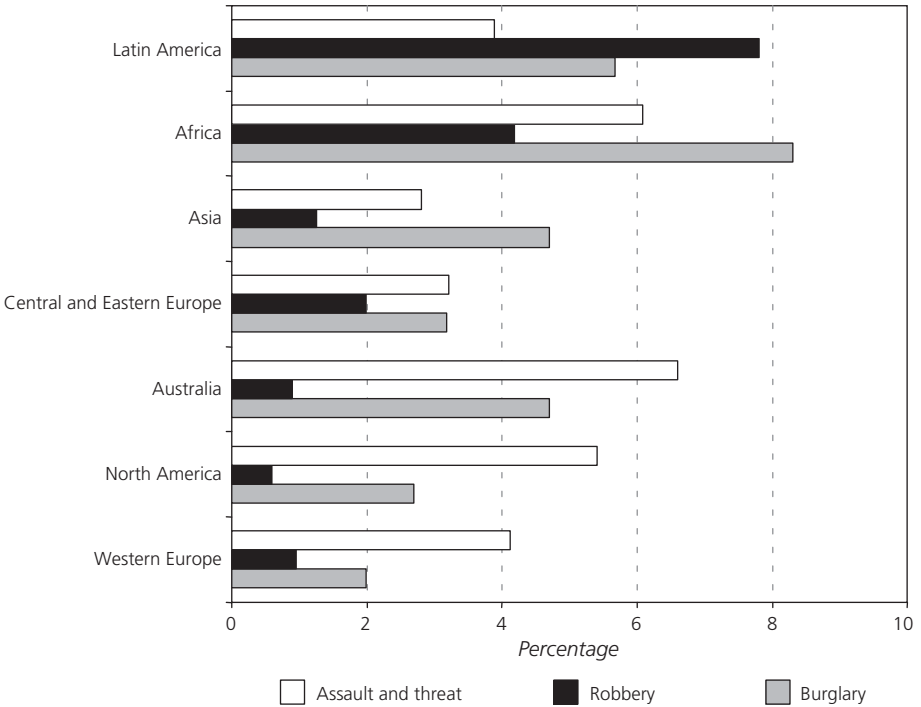
The crime count

The Survey provides an overall measure of victimization in the previous year through any of the 11 conventional crimes included in the questionnaire (which do not include consumer fraud and corruption). On average, approximately 28 per cent of respondents suffered at least one form of victimization over the twelve months preceding the interview. Overall victimization of around 27 per cent was observed in four out of six regions of the world (Western Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, North America and Australasia), while in Africa and Latin America much higher levels of victimization were observed (35 and 46 per cent respectively).

Figure I shows prevalence rates for burglary and robbery in the six world regions and Australia. In the Survey, burglary is defined as house-breaking for purposes of theft. It is a crime against the household that may involve very secure or poorly protected residences. While, in the industrialized world, burglars frequently steal objects of a very high value, such as jewellery or stereo equipment, burglary in developing countries is often aimed at stealing food, domestic appliances, linen or cutlery. In regions

*More information is available at the International Crime Victim Survey web site (www.unicri.it/icvs). It should be noted that, due to the increased number of participating countries, the groupings by region described in the present article differ from those discussed in earlier publications, such that direct comparisons with data presented elsewhere are not possible.

Figure I. Victimization rates for burglary, robbery, assault and threat, one-year period



where households have installed various levels of protection against burglary, such incidents tend to involve damage to doors, locks or windows. The Survey shows that this occurs more frequently in Western Europe, North America and Australia. Interestingly, the Survey shows that high levels of damage also occur in Africa during incidents of burglary.

The consequences of burglary in terms of monetary value may be very different in different contexts, although it is generally considered very serious, since it is a violation of the domestic sphere. It is therefore a crime that is well remembered by survey respondents and provides a reliable indicator of property crime.

Robbery is defined as theft from the person by use of force, thus involving direct contact between victim and offender (called “contact” crime). The crime category of assault and threat is defined in the Survey as personal aggression, by a stranger, relative or friend, without the purpose of stealing and is another contact crime. Although physical consequences in most cases may be minor, the crime may well have significant emotional repercussions for victims.

Figure I shows the regional distribution of victimization rates for burglaries, robberies and assaults and threats, as observed in the Survey. The differences among the regions were larger for the two crimes involving property of which the highest number occurred in Africa and Latin America. Burglary was over four times more frequent in Africa than in Western Europe. Robbery was approximately eight times higher in Latin America than in either Western Europe, North America or Australia. The data on robbery confirm the regional distribution of this crime as observed in official statistics on reported crime.

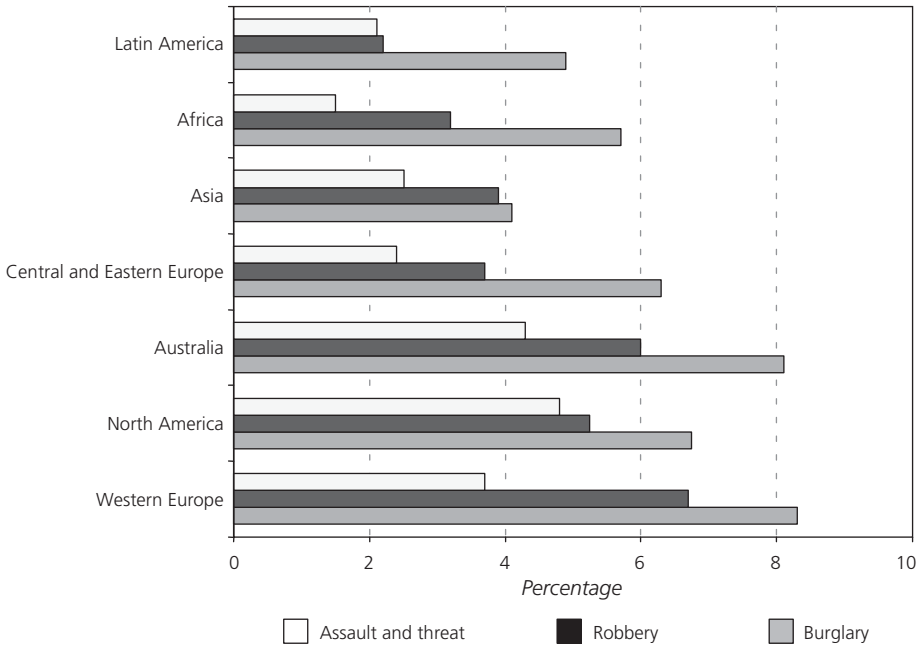
Rates of assault and threat showed smaller variations among regions: they were lowest in Central and Eastern Europe and Asia, and highest in Africa, North America and Australia.

Previous analysis using the Survey data at the aggregate level showed a negative correlation between the human development index and property crime [7]. The 2000 Survey data confirmed that levels and effects of victimization are more pronounced in the developing countries than in the rest of the world. That contrasts sharply with the fact that official recorded crime levels in developed countries are far higher than in developing countries [1].

Crimes reported to the police

Crimes are more frequently reported to the police in Western Europe, North America and Australia than in the other regions, thus showing an opposite trend with respect to the frequency of victimization. It is concluded that in the regions where more crime occurs, the police know less about it.

In general, car theft was the most frequently reported crime, followed by burglary (see figure II). However, the considerable differences that exist among countries and regions in respect of insurance coverage (since a valid report to the police is a requirement in order to submit a claim to an insurance company, it is expected that reporting is more frequent in the areas where house insurance is more common) and the ease of reporting (determined by factors such as access to the police, availability of telephones, and so forth) result in different reporting patterns. Burglary was more frequently reported in Western Europe, North America and Australia.

Figure II. Crimes reported to the police

Robbery was also frequently reported in Western Europe, but much less in the other studied regions, in particular in Latin America, where only one victim of robbery out of five reported to the police. Again, this is consistent with the conclusions reached by Shaw, van Dijk and Rhomberg [1]. It appears that the greater the level of crime, the smaller the number of citizens willing to approach the police. More than 50 per cent of the Latin American victims of robbery who did not report the crime to the police said they did so because “the police would not do anything” and approximately 25 per cent of them said that they feared or disliked the police.

Assault and threat was the least frequently reported crime, with rates around or below 40 per cent in all regions. Significantly, levels of reporting did not show any variations since the previous analysis of the 1996 Survey results.

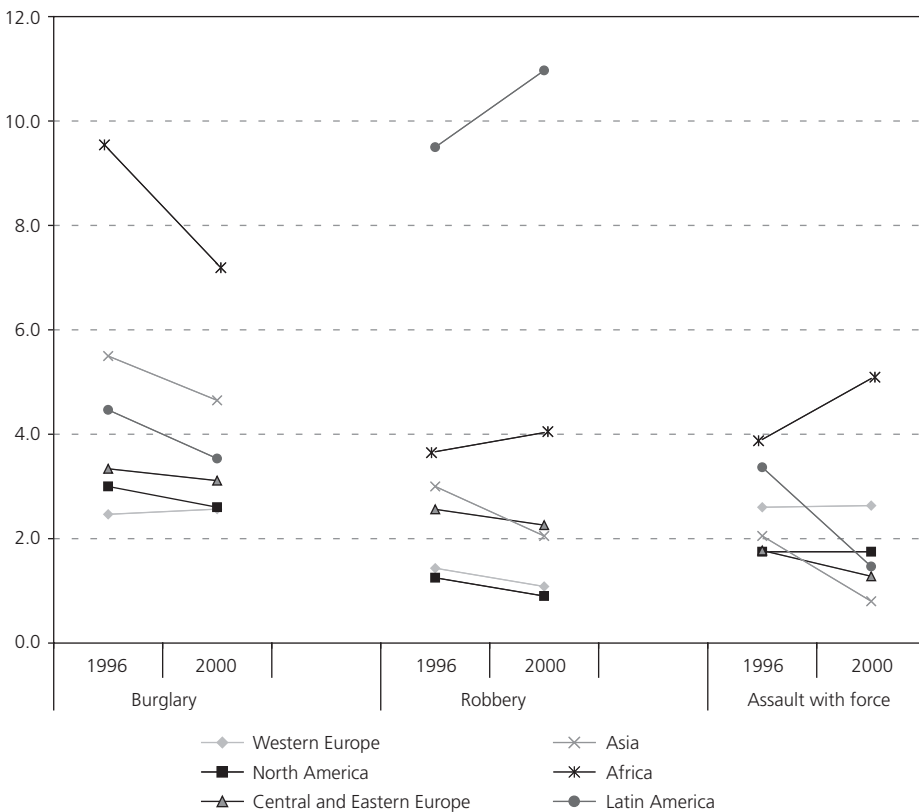
Trends in victimization, 1996-2000

An analysis of regional trends can be made by comparing victimization rates in the countries that took part in both the 1996 and 2000 sweeps of

the Survey.* The comparison reveals that victimization rates are consistent in most regions and modest variations have been registered, with an overall trend downwards for the three types of crime considered.**

The biggest changes, both upwards and downwards, were found in Latin America and Africa, where rates of robbery increased considerably (contrary to what was observed in the other regions) and burglary decreased more sharply than in the other regions (see figure III). This conclusion is again consistent with the analysis of Shaw, van Dijk and Rhomberg [1].

Figure III. Trends in victimization, selected crimes, 1996-2000



*The analysis of trends at the regional level only included the 31 countries that participated in the International Crime Victim Survey in 1996 and 2000. Fewer countries are therefore included in each region and they are not the same countries as those presented in the analysis of the 2000 Survey. Possible inconsistencies in sampling procedure suggest that some caution should be exercised in reading trends, especially as regards developing countries.

**This section deals with data on burglary, robbery and assault with force, that is, only the portion of incidents in the assault and threat category that involved the use of force.

As regards assault with force, aside from the relatively steady trend observed in Western Europe and North America and a slight decrease in Central and Eastern Europe, developing countries show large variations that do not allow for easy interpretation. While Asia and Latin America showed a downward trend, assaults increased in Africa.

Corruption and consumer fraud

Questions on the direct experience of respondents with corruption or bribery of public officials are one of the unique features of the Survey.* Due to the scarcity of available information, corruption is often measured by surveys. The International Crime Victim Survey offers the advantage of addressing citizens with questions on corruption from the point of view of crime and victimization, thus highlighting that having to pay a bribe is a form of abuse of power that entails being victimized. Such an approach facilitates understanding of the question across cultures and partially lifts the burden from the respondent to admit that he or she also did something wrong by agreeing to pay. International Crime Victim Survey data have been extensively used for assessing corruption in several areas, if not as an absolute measure of the phenomenon, at least to compare with other available indicators [14-15].

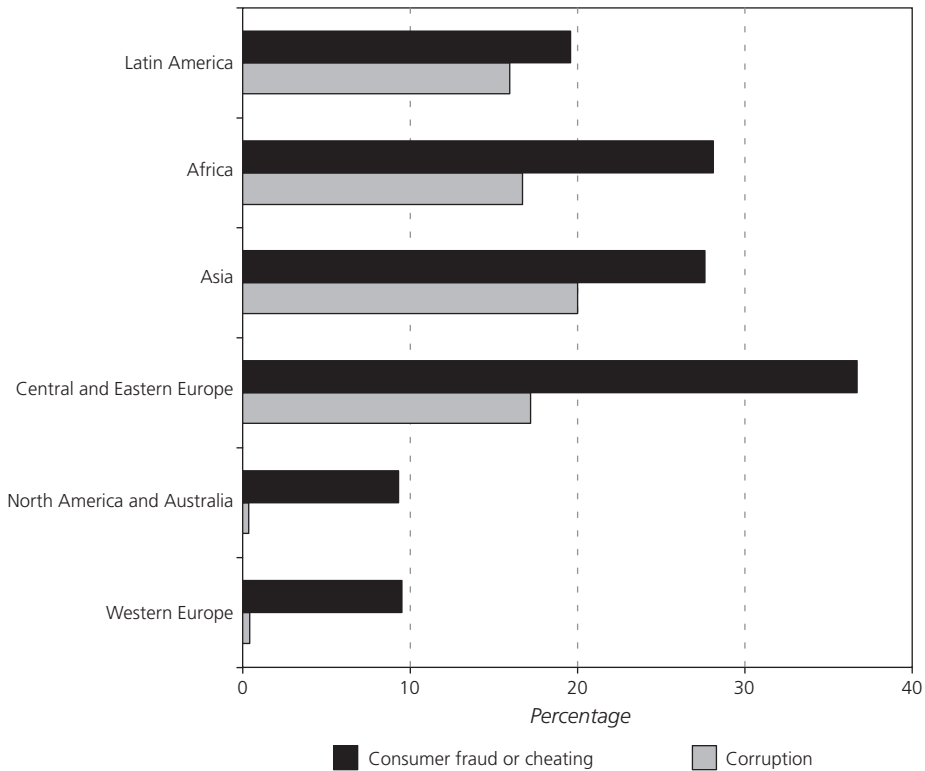
There is a high level of consistency between 1996 and 2000 results from the Survey, with a slight decrease in victimization rates for both corruption and consumer fraud. As regards regional comparisons, it should be noted that corruption in Western Europe, North America and Australia is almost non-existent, while it is a widespread phenomenon in the rest of the world.

The analysis of the type of public official who most frequently demanded bribes revealed the extensive involvement of police officers in corruption. This is a critical issue in the complicated relationship between the police and the community that is also reflected in the overall assessment of police performance.

Consumer fraud of some sort, especially when dealing with retail stores, was experienced by some 9 per cent of respondents in Western Europe and in North America and Australia. Victimization rates for such fraud were much higher in the other regions and especially in Central and Eastern European countries (see figure IV).

*The question on corruption was as follows: "In some areas there is a problem of corruption among government or public officials. During 1999, has any government official, for instance a customs officer, police officer or inspector, in your own country asked you or expected you to pay a bribe for his service?"

Figure IV. Victimization rates for corruption and consumer fraud, one-year period

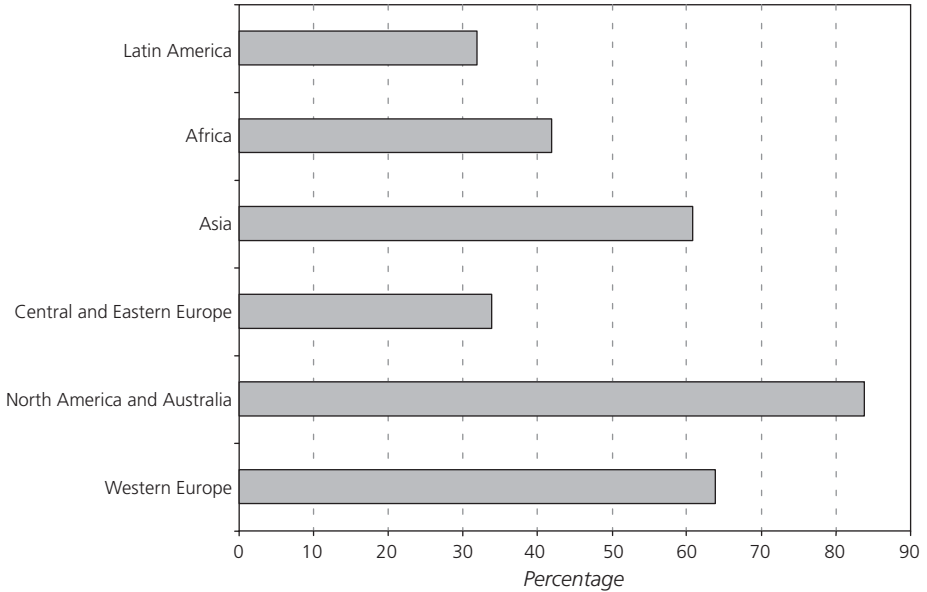


Assessment of police performance

The section of the Survey dealing with the assessment of police performance (figure V) revealed that respondents in Latin America, Central and Eastern Europe and Africa had low levels of satisfaction with police efforts in preventing and controlling crime.* This suggests that in many countries there is still much to be done by police services in order to gain public confidence.

Because of a change in the 2000 questionnaire, it is not possible to analyse directly trends in public opinion of police performance. It appears, however,

*The question on satisfaction with the police in controlling crime was as follows: "Taking everything into account, how good do you think the police in your area are at controlling crime? Do you think they do a very good job, a fairly good job, a fairly poor job or a very poor job?" Figure V shows percentages for the answers "very good" and "fairly good".

Figure V. Satisfaction with the police in controlling crime

that respondents tended to express their opinion of the police more freely than in previous sweeps of the Survey. Indeed, the percentage of respondents falling in the “don’t know” category was very small.

A correlation was observed between satisfaction with the police and reporting to the police for the various types of crime. The correlation is stronger for reporting assault and threat, which is the least reported type of crime (r 0.473, N = 47). It appears, therefore, that a good perception of the police may increase public cooperation with that service.

Conclusion

By disclosing previously unrevealed aspects of crime and victimization at the international level, the International Crime Victim Survey has become an indispensable source of information for researchers, policy makers and the international community. In particular, inclusion in indexes (such as the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index (www.transparency.org/cpi/index.html#cpi) and global reports (such as the *Human Development Report* (www.undp.org/currentHDR_E/), the *Global Report on Crime and Justice* [16], the *World Report on Violence and Health* [17], the *European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics* [18], the *Global*

Corruption Report [14] and *Crime and Criminal Justice in Europe and North America, 1990-1994* [19]. The International Crime Victim Survey has also been included in the United Nations *Manual for the Development of a System of Criminal Justice Statistics* [20].

It is expected that, in the future, the International Crime Victim Survey will become an even more solid source of data, because a greater number of countries will be included and those which have already participated will continue to do so, thus reinforcing the longitudinal series. An effort in the direction of further standardization of data collection is currently being made by the group coordinating the project [21]. The involvement of institutional partners such as the Justice Department of Canada, the Ministry of Justice of the Netherlands and the Home Office of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, together with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute ensures the monitoring and coordination of activities at the central level. It is also expected that, in future, the International Crime against Business Survey and the International Violence against Women Survey, which are currently under development, will play important roles in complementing the International Crime Victim Survey in the areas of crime against businesses and violence against women.

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