

Kauko Aromaa
Director
European Institute for Crime Prevention
and Control, affiliated with the United
Nations (HEUNI)
POB 444, 00531 Helsinki, Finland
Tel +358 10 366 5281
Fax +358 10 366 5280
e-mail kauko.aromaa@om.fi

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Session A1 – Objectives and policy
relevance

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO HAVE CRIME STATISTICS – AND OTHER INFORMATION ON CRIME?

1. Crime as a policy target

Considering why crime statistics should be produced and what is their relevance, a definition of crime-related policy-making is useful. For this purpose, I choose to present an analytic definition rather than one that continues to be very popular but fails to express concrete priorities. With this I refer to the popular idea that sees crime policy as “combating crime” or “the fight against crime”.

The more analytic definition, starting with the objectives of criminal policy, was coined some 35 years ago by Finnish criminologist and social philosopher Patrik Törnudd:

“The aims of criminal policy – i.e., the totality of decisions which primarily are related to crime – are twofold:

- 1) to keep the sum total of costs and suffering caused by crime and by society’s efforts to control crime as low as possible, and
- 2) to distribute these costs as justly as possible” (Törnudd 1971, 29).

This definition directly defines a number of information requirements, all of which perhaps cannot be met by standard crime-related statistical information sources, but to which policy-relevant statistics should be related.

2. Crime – the dimensions to be monitored

As a social phenomenon, crimes may be seen as the outcome of an interaction between three basic logical elements: the motivated offender, the suitable victim or target, and the intervening control element, the “capable guardian” (e.g. Felson 1986). Each of these is fundamentally important for the resulting crimes that are outcomes of this interaction.

Within the framework of existing definitions of crimes in the law, the everyday interactions of potential offenders, crime opportunities, and control interventions decide what crimes actually occur. Reporting and recording practices decide which ones of these are captured by the monitoring instruments called statistical sources related to crime.

3. Crime vs. different types of sources

Now, relating such concerns to existing information sources, they may be represented in a framework that refers to how comprehensive each source may be in relation to the total scope of the

target phenomenon. The pyramid or “iceberg” analogy is useful here. The basic observation is that a large proportion of all events that meet the legal definitions of “crime” is not captured by the authority-based working statistics. The “dark figure”, or unrecorded crime, was understood to exist already in the relatively early days of crime statistics.

Prisoner statistics thus only cover the "tip" of the iceberg, court statistics encompass a larger slice of the tip, and police statistics again represent a much larger portion of the iceberg. However, even this source is only able to reflect a minority of all real-world events that correspond to the legal definitions of all crimes. For a considerable number of crimes, victimisation surveys and studies of self-reported criminal behaviour are able to provide a much fuller picture. However, none of these are measuring the whole of the iceberg.

4. Crime statistics as social indicators: what are the possible objectives or uses of crime statistics like

Swedish statistics chief Sten Johansson discussed some 25 years ago the relevance and usefulness of statistical information in his work “Mot en social rapportering” [Towards Social Reporting] (1979). He analyses the basic principles for social reporting, considering what should be required of social indicators to have them correspond to needs of a systematic description that is comparable both internationally and over time. According to his argumentation, indicators – or the statistical time series – can be used for four basically different purposes.

They can be used to

- estimate the size order of different problems in the concern area,
- show which persons are affected by the problem
- demonstrate the relationships between different problems
- provide warning signals regarding the problems they describe.

Johansson is also saying what indicators are not able to do. They can not

- demonstrate which problems are most important
- explain why the problem exists
- advise what measures should be taken
- tell whether the measures taken have been effective

Johansson recommends that indicators should be constructed in a way that they comprise two types of elements. First, an indicator should have *static* elements that do not vary over time and that therefore can be used for a basic description. It should however also have *dynamic* elements that are describing change factors, a change dimension, or change aspects in the phenomenon to be analysed and evaluated.

While Johansson discussed social indicators in a general sense, all of this can be directly applied to crime statistics

5. Uses according to the UN Crime Statistics recommendations

The United Nations has recently produced a Manual for the development of a system of criminal justice statistics. According to the Manual, the used of criminal justice statistics can broadly be divided into three interdependent areas: administration, planning, and policy research and analysis.

Administration: any organization or agency should be capable of monitoring its own activities. In general terms, management can be characterized as a process of organizing a set of resources to accomplish established goals and objectives. Effective management requires information to determine whether the goals and objectives are being accomplished in a timely and orderly fashion, and whether the resources are being used efficiently and effectively.

Planning: Planning involves identifying alternative procedures for attaining some future goal. For example, for the court administrator planning may involve identifying ways of reducing case processing time or developing a more efficient way to produce trial transcripts. For the prison administrator, it may involve the development of a better classification system so that resources can be allocated to identified needs and objectives.

Policy research and analysis: Policy analysis refers to attempts to determine the effects of changes in policy, law or procedure or in the environment, and to develop strategies in the light of these anticipated effects. For example, a policy analyst may want to determine the effects of demographic shifts, such as a decline in the median age of the population or a continua migration of unskilled labourers, on the crime rate or the effects of crime-rate shifts on the workloads of police, courts, and prisons. The analyst might also be interested in the effect of policy or procedural changes on the criminal justice process, such as the level of increase in judicial capacity that would be effected by a change in case-filing procedures reducing the average case-to-case period by five percent. Or, the policy-maker basic information about processes determining a given prison population would be valuable as this would open considerations as to how to influence the size and structure of this population. (Manual... p. 1 - 3)

Such uses are by necessity, at least to a degree, in conflict with each other. The implication is that any statistics derived from the described environments are likely to be compromises between the different objectives, in particular as it is a general requirement of statistics derived from authority routines that they should require a minimum of extra effort.

6. EU objectives: what is expected of statistical sources on crime in recent EU policy work

In the realm of the European Union, an increasing interest in crime statistics has been emerging, related to the idea that for EU citizens, crime and safety are issues of major concern. In work related to this concern, it has recently been stated that one of the main deficiencies in the area of justice and home affairs is the lack of Community statistics on crime and criminal justice. Schmidt and Olsson state that “to be able to respond to public concern and to work towards developing the area of justice, freedom and security, it is necessary that policy makers have access to knowledge both on the scale of the problem to be addressed and on what efforts at European level can give the intended result of reducing crime. In this policy area, as in others, it is of course necessary to develop policy which is soundly based on knowledge and on evidence about crime, as well as on the measures taken to prevent and fight crime.” (Schmidt & Olsson 2004)

Such statements are to be welcomed as they would very likely mean that, at least within the EU, new efforts to produce improved crime information are to be expected in the near future. What still seems to remain open is a more analytic problem definition, or a specification of the exact objectives of such work.

7. Information sources on crime

7a. Traditional statistical sources on crime

The traditional statistical sources on crime and criminal justice were aptly described by Risto Lättilä in the previous presentation. As to a brief historical overview, these sources are placed on the time axis as follows; this presentation also shows a few very recent development trends:

Crime-related statistics in Finland since the beginning of the 20th century

prisoner statistics					
court statistics					
police statistics	1927.....				
crime damage statistics		1974	1980	1988	
victimisation statistics		1980	1988	'93	'97 '03
International Crime Victimisation Survey			'89 '92....	'96...'	'00...'04
violence against women surveys					'97
International violence against women survey					03/04/05
self-reported delinquency statistics					'95/96/98/00/02

The traditional sources are undergoing improvement processes continuously. However, some quite obvious improvements in particular to the crime statistics produced from police-level data still remain to be made. (Here I refer to the Finnish situation, which would seem to be among the more advanced one even in a European framework). From crime data, we still do not have statistics on crime damages, and neither are statistics on victims of recorded crimes produced even though such information actually is contained in the police records. Similarly, a number of characteristics of crime events that might have relevance for crime prevention work have just not been extracted from the raw data. Also, police data could comprise information on popular reactions to and satisfaction with police services, or systematic reviews of repeat victimisation and repeat offending.

7b. Complementary information sources on crime of a statistical nature

Considering the policy objectives related to statistical information on crime and criminal justice, large areas of concern are not covered by the traditional sources. There are many complementary ways to address, for example, the issue of unrecorded crime, or the fear of crime, or popular attitudes to crime to state just a few concerns. One option is to look at other authority and agency sources (for instance health care records, etc.). Another is to approach the population directly, making use of postal or interview surveys. The major advantage here is that the selection of events and cases that occurs in the authority recording process is avoided, as the respondents are approached without pre-selection according to whether the relevant events are reported to the authorities or not. A further advantage is that all members of the population can be approached, not only those who have come to the attention of the authorities.

In the following, a closer look at the advantages of the victimisation survey approach is taken. This is done in order to illustrate why the victimisation survey is currently being regarded as the most urgent complement to the existing basic crime information of today. Also, the purpose is to prepare the way for Session A 2 in which victimisation surveys are dealt with more extensively.

First, interests of knowledge that may be served by victimisation surveys comprise objectives such as:

- 1) to learn about unrecorded crime and crime damages. Victimization surveys unveil large amounts of unrecorded events that may be crimes
- 2) to compare survey findings with police data. Victimization surveys allow for insights into how recorded crimes are selected from all possible events with certain characteristics, including the reporting behaviour of the population.
- 3) to give voice to victims. This approach demonstrates that there is a large volume of events or experiences that may be crimes and opens the possibility of reassessing the relative importance of given types of events, in particular those that are typically not recorded in other standard sources.
- 4) to learn about public opinion related to crime and crime control. Knowledge-based and informed criminal policy should be aware of public opinion about these matters regardless of whether there is agreement or disagreement on what the central crime problems are or how to deal with crime.
- 5) to learn about public fear or concern about crime. Knowledge-based criminal policy must be aware of and address popular concerns related to crime and crime control.
- 6) to learn what people have done about victimisation. This refers, i.a., to preventive measures adopted by the general public or corporate bodies subject to crime risks.
- 7) to learn about multiple or repeat victimisation processes and mechanisms related to these. Another aspect relevant to crime prevention, such processes are highly relevant for an improved understanding of risks and what to do about them.
- 8) to make international comparisons of rates and trends. National or local crime issues are often mistaken as being unique and in need of extreme measures, while international comparisons may reveal that the situation is not unusual; also, if the victimisation survey would indeed provide evidence supporting a contrary conclusion, this would of course be equally important.
- 9) to measure trends nationally. Shortcomings in the standard recording systems, such as the inherent inability to account for variations in reporting behaviour, or variable recording procedures and counting rules, may cause erroneous conclusions concerning trends of certain types of events that are reflected in victimisation surveys.
- 10) to make regional comparisons within one country. Variations in recording systems and of reporting behaviour may even hamper comparisons across areas within the same jurisdiction.
- 11) to assess the outcome of crime prevention programmes. More recently, this aspect has gained much support, as local crime prevention projects have become more popular.

This list is not likely to be comprehensive. Further relevant interests of knowledge could probably be served by victimisation surveys too. This list does, however already demonstrate that the victimisation survey approach could provide better (albeit, of course, not comprehensive) answers to a wide scope of relevant questions than is the case with the standard traditional crime indicators, such as police-recorded crimes, arrest statistics, or statistics on sentenced persons or prisoners. However, in order to fully live up to many of the potentials described above, victimisation surveys should be carried out with relatively large population samples for regional and local monitoring, and on a regular basis, preferably relying on a continuous data collection design that would account for seasonal variations. For the full potential, they should also be reportable with only short time lags, as close to a real time framework as possible.

The interests of knowledge listed above should be relevant to criminal policy makers. In the following, this is complemented with a few observations of what victimisation surveys have already been able to provide. On the practical level, victimisation surveys have provided:

- 1) estimates of the overall prevalence and incidence of “surveyable” victimisation experiences,
- 2) estimates of unrecorded crime,
- 3) measures of repeat, serial and multiple victimisation, victim careers, accumulation of risks, vulnerable groups,
- 4) reporting/ not reporting victimisation to the police,
- 5) precautionary and avoidance behaviour, use of protection measures,
- 6) psychological harm and other consequences, and material damage and other costs caused by victimisation, and other cost issues related to crime,
- 7) fear and concern, deterioration of quality of life caused by crime,
- 8) confidence in the criminal justice system, including police; punishment attitudes; expectations,
- 9) satisfaction with police performance both in general and in each concrete case of police contact,
- 10) finding out what people understand by “crime”.

The victimisation survey has many special strengths, some of which are

- 1) the victimisation survey is a flexible instrument, it may contain static, standard modules as well as modules that are designed for each survey separately. The static modules provide data that allows comparisons, the unique modules may be applied for assessing acute, newly identified problem areas.
- 2) it is able to combine events that are handled and recorded by different authorities or agencies (health care, social services, police, NGOs), and where none of these sources is able to provide a comprehensive overview.
- 3) it is able to combine victimisation experiences with other events (such as the example of assessing physical safety), as well as with personal characteristics (lifestyle, alcohol, risk behaviour, offending behaviour).

These lists are of course not comprehensive, either. It is also likely that new applications are being invented as experience accumulates.

All of the previous remarks relate to victimisation surveys of the general population. There are numerous other applications of the victimisation survey approach. One important development is its application to special populations rather than general population samples. Such special populations have group-specific victimisation experiences that are not sufficiently addressed by general population questionnaires. Also, such special populations may not be large enough to be adequately covered by a general population sample unless such a sample is extremely large. Special populations may comprise, for example, women, men, vulnerable minorities such as immigrants or ethnic minorities. Furthermore, the approach may be applied to other special groups – we have examples such as prisoners, schoolteachers, or judges and prosecutors. Another application that is currently being promoted in some realms is the business victimisation survey: as general population surveys are good for addressing the personal and household-related victimisation experiences of the population, a large sector of victimisation remains beyond its reach. This sector comprises an important category of crime targets, the legal entities, i.e. businesses and other agencies. A business victimisation survey is thus providing further important complements to crime-related measurement.

8. Conclusions

I hope I have been able to convince you that crime and criminal justice statistics are highly relevant for policy-making. Policy decisions are being taken anyway, based on bad data if good ones are not available. It should be obvious that it is better if such decisions are based on valid, relevant and timely information than not. A next issue to be debated forever are, then, priorities. It is likely to be humanly impossible to produce statistics on everything, and even if this were possible, a similar limitation would concern the consumer of the information. Therefore, a dialogue, and in particular a responsible and informed dialogue will be the way to solve this dilemma. The participants in this dialogue are all those involved in decision-making and in data production; it is in this dialogue that statistics become politics.

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