I - Introduction and Background

In a Coordination Action called Assessing Deviance, Crime and Prevention in Europe (CRIMPREV) funded by the European Commission under FP6 and coordinated by the Groupe européen de recherches sur les normativités (GERN), one work package was devoted to Methodology and Good Practices. The last workshop of this workpackage focused on a comparison of crime data based on general population surveys with criminal statistics. National reports were prepared by Marcelo Aebi (U. Lausanne, for Switzerland), Bruno Aubusson de Cavarlay (CNRS/CESDIP, for France),

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From a historical perspective, national crime victimisation surveys have been launched in the 1972 in the USA to better inform the ongoing political debate on crime and violence. The surveys were introduced as a means to produce estimates of the numbers of crimes that had not been affected by recording practices of police forces (Lynch, Addington, 2007). For this reason the concepts used in the National Crime (Victims) Survey follow to the maximum extent possible the legal definitions of the Uniform Crime Reports. In Europe the first crime victim surveys were set up by criminologists rather than statisticians. Their studies used questions on victimisation that were framed in colloquial language. Unlike the NCVS in the USA, most European surveys typically present prevalence and incidence rates per 100,000 as their key findings rather than estimated absolute numbers. In order to make tentative comparisons with the statistics of crimes recorded by the police, results of European surveys must be adjusted post hoc to better approach the legal definitions used in police administrations (the identifications of comparable subsets in both series). Subsequently incidence rates per 100,000 persons or households must be grossed up to numbers of crimes experienced by the total population. The comparisons in Europe are further complicated by the fact that figures of police-recorded crimes are often less rigorously standardized than the UCR in the USA. In Switzerland, few statistics on recorded crimes are available at the federal level. Police statistics have also in some countries, including England and Wales, undergone major changes in recent years.

In the present study scholars from France, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Kingdom have sought to compare results of national crime victimisation surveys with police figures over a time span of several years. In Germany, victimisation surveys at the national level have only been executed a few times and most relevant literature is based on one-off, local surveys. Local crime surveys have mainly been conducted for academic purposes. A recent development is the study of victimisation risks with the use of police figures as contextual information in multi-level analyses. In Italy a national survey has recently been launched but relatively little work has yet been done on comparing data from the two sources at the national level. The Italian report outlines some of the concep-
tual problems of comparing survey results with police figures but presents no empirical findings.

II - Comparing Level Estimates

The reports on the comparisons between national levels of crime in France, England/Wales, The Netherlands and Switzerland according to both sources show that such comparisons are indeed far from straightforward. The results nevertheless confirm that for almost all types of crime, estimates of the numbers of crimes committed according to victimisation surveys are significantly higher than those recorded by the police. They also show that even the estimated numbers of crimes reported to the police by victims are much higher than the police figures. The latter findings suggest that in all countries police forces apply discretion in their decisions to make an official notification of citizen’s reports. Together, the results lead to the conclusion that in Europe official counts of crime consistently and seriously underestimate the true volume of crime.

In the French report the observation is made that proven divergences should be an impetus for police forces to take a critical look at their discretion in processing or not processing victim reports. More insight is needed in the back box of police recording. At the same time, all reports comment on the many limitations of survey estimates as well. The list of limitations and sources of possible error is long. Surveys among households omit victimisations of businesses and of tourists and other non-residents. They also omit to count victimisations of minors below 16 years old and of those living in institutions. Due to their modest sample sizes, the surveys have limited potential to measure other rare, serious crimes including aggravated assault and rape. Homicides cannot be measured other than by asking respondents about family members who may have been murdered. Surveys also have limited capacity to produce estimates of complex or victimless crimes such as trafficking in illegal products and services and grand corruption. Surveys furthermore struggle with measuring correctly multiple or serial victimisations, especially those committed by intimates. Finally, victimisation surveys suffer from measurement problems inherent in all survey research such as memory decay of respondents asked to report on past events, forward time telescoping, and biases in sampling designs and in net samples due to non-response. All survey results, finally, are subject to statistical sampling error.

With the exception of forward time-telescoping and statistical sampling error, limitations and proven sources of error tend to deflate rather than inflate the estimated numbers of actual crimes. They can therefore be said to possess their own “dark numbers”. The initial idea of surveys providing a measure of the general crime problem superior to that of police figures must be revisited. It seems more realistic, as stated in the German report, to conceive victimisation
surveys and police figures as measures of different types of criminality that can complement each other rather than as competing measures of the same phenomenon. The emerging consensus among the rapporteurs was that surveys are better at assessing the level of petty thefts, including vehicle theft, burglaries, acts of vandalism and simple assaults than systems based on police administrations. The level of car theft/joyriding can probably be measured adequately by both systems, although this is not the case in France where police statistics provide too little detail. Police –based systems seem better placed at measuring very serious crimes such as homicides. According to the French experience population surveys provide a more comprehensive picture of drugs use among the general population. However, such surveys possess their own biases by underrepresenting in their samples the homeless and other marginalised groups where drugs use may be more prevalent. Police-based data on drugs offences committed among marginalized groups can complement the survey data on drugs use among the public at large.

III - COUNTRY COMPARISONS

On the assumption that the size of the dark numbers is roughly similar across countries, it is sometimes believed that police statistics, although underestimating the volume of crime, can yet provide a reliable ranking of districts or countries in terms of crime. This hypothesis can be tested for European countries by comparing the standardized police figures of the European Sourcebook (Aebi et al., 2006) with those of the European component of the ICVS (Van Dijk et al., 2007). Figure 1 depicts the relationship between overall victimisation rates and numbers of crimes recorded by the police.

Figure 1: Percentages of victimization by any crime in 2004 and police recorded crimes per 100,000 population in 2000 in selected EU Member States

As can be seen in Figure 1 at a glance, the number of crimes recorded by the police bears hardly any relationship to the ICVS-based measure of crime. The countries with the highest numbers of police re-
corded crimes are Sweden, Finland, United Kingdom and Denmark. According to the EU/ICVS, the level of crime, however, is relatively low in Finland and medium to high in Sweden. Countries with the lowest numbers of police-recorded crimes include Estonia and Ireland, both countries with levels of crime significantly above the European mean according to the ICVS. In the cases of Ireland and Estonia the blatant divergence between the two sources is probably caused by deficient recording of crimes by the national polices.

Comparisons between survey results and police figures across countries should preferably be made for specific types of crime. The crime types chosen for a more detailed analysis were motor vehicle theft, theft total, robbery, assault, sexual violence and total contact crimes. Although the operationalisations of the offences in the ICVS do not correspond exactly with those used in the Sourcebook for police-recorded crimes (e.g. sexual incidents are a broader category than rape), the comparison of the individual types of crime should in theory produce better results than that of overall victimisation with total recorded crime. In order for the police to be able to record a crime experienced by a victim, the victim must have reported his experience to the police. Since reporting rates vary across countries, a better match is to be expected if national victimisation rates are adjusted for differential reporting. Police-recorded crimes were compared with both the victimisation incidence rates and for incidence rates corrected for reporting (incidence rates of reported victimisations). Results are presented in table 1.

Table 1 - Correlations between the ICVS victimisation rates and the recorded crime levels for 7 types of crimes in 2003/04 in 27 industrialised countries. Sources: 2000-2004/2005 ICVS, 2005 EU ICS and European Sourcebook 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crime type</th>
<th>Incident rates and Recorded</th>
<th>Reported and Recorded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motor vehicle theft</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theft</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assault</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total contact</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For most types of crime, incidence victimisation rates are only weakly correlated to numbers of police-recorded crimes (e.g. 0.20 for robbery and 0.37 for assault). The correlations between the two measures of the levels of different types of crime are stronger when victimisation rates are adjusted for reporting to the police, with the exception of motor vehicle theft (a type of crime that according to the English report is almost always reported). In other words, there is closer correspondence in relative risks of crime when account is taken of differences in reporting to the police. The comparison of statistics on police recorded crime with survey-based estimates of the true levels of crime confirms that police figures cannot be reliably used to compare levels of crime across EU countries.
**IV - Trend Analyses**

Assuming that proportions of dark numbers are constant over time, change estimates from both sources might be correlated, even if level estimates are not. Comparisons of trends are complicated by the fact that in many countries either police statistics or surveys or both have been redesigned. The results of the comparisons at country level are mixed. Trends in Switzerland show more convergence if the comparison is made over a longer time period. In Germany available data from three national surveys showed trends roughly similar to those appearing in national police statistics but this did not hold for the new States in East Germany where reporting and recording has been variable over time. Local surveys in Germany have often indicated trends diverging from those appearing in local police figures. In England/Wales, the Netherlands and Switzerland, serious property crimes (e.g. burglaries and car thefts) showed roughly similar national trends over a longer time period according to both measures. The level of these types of crime peaked around the mid nineties of the last century according to both sources. The results concerning long term trends in other types of crime, however, show distinct divergences. In the Netherlands both total violent crime and vandalism have remained stable since 1980 according to the national surveys whereas police figures show a clear upward trend. A focussed analysis showed that the upward trend in police figures is largely caused by a lowering of the threshold for recording reported offences by the police. In England and Wales police recorded non-serious crimes including simple assaults have since the late 90s gone up while survey results show a steep decline. This divergence is likely caused by changes in police recording practices including a newly adopted national recording system. In Switzerland too, rates for violent crime have since the mid nineties gone up more steeply in police figures than according to survey results. In France rates of burglary have gone down with almost 50% since 1995 according to the survey while police figures have remained constant. Aggravated assaults have gone up much more significantly according to police statistics than crime surveys (Zauberman, Robert, Nevanen, Didier, 2008). Police figures on violence have supposedly expanded as a result of newly introduced legislation. By and large, the results from the four countries indicate that long time trends in many types of crimes have been divergent due to improvements in police recording of victim reports and, to a lesser extent, increased reporting.

In our analysis of international data, we have also looked at congruence between the change estimates during the last few years (ICVS: 1999-2004; recorded crime: 1999-2003). Comparisons were made between (i) trends in incidence victimisation rates and harmonised police figures; and (ii) trends in incidence victimisation rates adjusted for reporting and trends in harmonised police figures. Table 2 shows results.
The trends in either victimisation or reported victimisation and police recorded crime during a period of 4 to 5 years hardly correlate at all. In the case of sexual crimes, they correlate negatively. Only for motor vehicle theft and robbery weak positive correlations were found. Other studies have likewise found that crime victim surveys and police figures often produce strikingly different change estimates among developed nations (Farrington, Langan, Tonry, 2004; Cook, Khmilevska, 2005).

The conclusion that trends in crime statistics from two sources are divergent does not by itself suggest that one of the two reflects trends in real crime better than the other. In England, Stephed and Sivaratjasingam (2005) found that decreases in rates of victimisation by violent crime matched decreases according to hospital admissions but differed from the increases in police-recorded violent crimes. Their interpretation of this divergence is that police recording had been improved due to new policing priorities and greater capabilities. This interpretation confirms the conclusions of the four country reports mentioned above. The available evidence suggests that police recorded crime data are too much affected by changes in recording practices to be useful as trend measures of crime. To determine trends in actual crime, especially also in a comparative perspective, periodically repeated crime victim surveys seem an indispensable tool.

**V - Understanding divergences between police figures and survey findings**

The divergences between the level and change estimates of the two sources call for a theoretical interpretation (Van Dijk, 2007). Criminal justice systems can, within existing budgets and organizational means, respond adequately to only a given number of crimes per year. If more crimes enter the system than can be processed by police, prosecutors, courts or prison departments, this generates an institutional need to control the input of new cases. The most efficient way to achieve this is a systemic denial to make official records of less serious crimes reported by victims. Such selective recording by the police is known to take place even in criminal justice systems which adhere to the legality principle and require police forces to report to the prosecutors on all crimes known to them. Selective recording, whether formalized in guidelines or not, will not pass un-
noticed by the public. If victims sense that their reports are dismissed routinely, they subsequently adjust their reporting behaviour downward. In this way, the criminal justice system effectively controls its input and thereby its workload. The system does not acknowledge the existence of any more crime than what it can properly handle within existing resources. Crime is recorded by the system to the extent that resources permit.

From this theoretical perspective, the number of police-recorded crimes must primarily be seen as an indicator of the capacity of national law enforcement systems to process crime cases. Since the available means of police systems and prosecution are generally scarce and determined by factors other than the volume of crime, such as tax revenues, the relationship between police-recorded crimes and the level of crime will always be tenuous at best. More recorded crime reflects availability of more resources rather than more crime. By the same token police figures are likely to distort changes in levels of crime as well. In years of sudden increases in the number of crimes reported to the police, police administrations and prosecution services will be clogged. Reporting victims will have to wait longer, and responsible officers will be inclined to increase thresholds for recording. These processes may in turn discourage (repeat) victims from reporting. Police figures will therefore reflect crime surges in a deflated way. In years of sudden decreases of crimes reported to the police, available human resources will be freed, and larger proportions of reported crimes will subsequently be recorded, inviting more reporting by victims. Decreases in actual crime will thus partly be offset by better recording and more reporting, resulting in a deflated reflection of the decrease in police statistics of crime.

In the case of France, England and Wales, The Netherlands and Switzerland sudden decreases of various forms of crime over the past ten years have probably freed resources that could now be used for other purposes. This situation may well have invited the adoption of new legislation or/policing priorities to tackle urgent problems of crime. This factor seems to have caused increases in police-recorded crimes such as burglaries in France and violent crime in England/Wales, The Netherlands and Switzerland. These politico-bureaucratic dynamics can help to explain why the dramatic drops in crime observed in crime surveys in recent years are in many countries not fully reflected in police statistics.

VI - Conclusions and Policy Implications

The comparisons between the level of crime according to police figures of recorded crime and results of victimisation surveys in selected European countries, have confirmed that police figures of recorded crime cover only a relatively small part of the victimisations experienced by the public. The size of the dark numbers appears to differ significantly between European countries. Most notably dark
numbers tend to be larger among some of the new Member States of the Union. Although levels of crime in Central and Eastern Europe no longer differ much from those in the West, the levels of police-recorded crime remain remarkably low (European Sourcebook, 2003, 2006). In 2000, the European countries recorded on average 4,333 crimes per 100,000 people. Most Central and Eastern European countries show crime rates far below this European average. The analyses confirmed that the size of the dark number is also variable over time. In many European countries victims of crime have over the past twenty years become somewhat more ready to report victimisations to the police. More recently, police forces in some West European countries have significantly lowered their thresholds for recording less serious crimes. As a result, decreases in actual levels of volume crime are not adequately reflected in police figures of these countries. Limited availability of resources for the police and the criminal justice system at large seems to be responsible for the lagging behind in police figures of crime by the new members of the European Union. Our interpretations suggest that if resources for law enforcement and criminal justice among the new Member States of the EU catch up with those elsewhere in the Union, police figures of crime in these countries are bound to rise steeply, even when the level of crime may in reality have remained stable or decreased as steeply as elsewhere.

The EU Action Plan 2006-2010 envisages the development of comparative crime statistics among the Member States including a common module for victimisation surveys. The conclusions of the workshop underline the need of promoting standardized victimisation surveys in the European Union. Without such instrument comparisons between the level and movements of volume crime across the Member States will remain a hazardous and politically contentious undertaking. The use of police figures of recorded crime for such comparative purposes will almost inevitably result in drawing erroneous conclusions, especially concerning trends in crime among some of the new Member States. In many countries a standardized survey will complement existing national surveys such the ones in France, Italy, the Netherlands, United Kingdom and Switzerland. A standardized comparative survey should therefore be relatively modest in scope and sample size. The questions on victimisation experiences should focus on those offences that surveys can measure best. It seems nevertheless important to also include a set of standardized and well-tested questions on feelings of unsafety and attitudes towards the police since assumptions about such opinions shape criminal policies in many countries as much as levels and trends of actual crime.

Although the launch of a standardized European victimisation survey seems indispensable for the development of coordinated policies in this domain, this instrument should not be regarded as a sufficient
source of comparative crime information in Europe. For a fuller picture of European crime problems survey results must be complemented as a minimum by statistics on police recorded homicides and complex crimes. These core statistics should, where possible, be complemented by secondary statistics from health institutions on violence, including sexual violence (death certificates and hospital or emergency units admissions), data from self report studies on delinquency and drugs use and victimisation surveys among businesses. Added to these should be the assessments from other specialised state institutions and NGO’s of grand corruption, financial fraud, money-laundering and human trafficking.

In the debate, it was observed that the production and dissemination of crime statistics is in many countries subjected to bureaucratic and political infighting. In order to promote a proper reception of future European statistics, they should preferably be presented in the form of a comprehensive annual European Report on Trends in Crime and Justice. To prevent undue political interference in the preparation of such report, its production should be overseen by an independent board of experts comparable to that of the European Centre for Drugs Monitoring in Lisbon.

References


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