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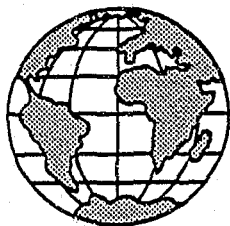
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International Summaries

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Behavior and Attitudes of Victims: A National Study

In response to the public's fear of violent crimes, French researchers analyze victim responses in an effort to enhance crime prevention efforts and improve victim assistance programs.

by Renee Zauberman, Philippe Robert,
Claudine Perez-Diaz, and Rene Levy

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ACQUISITIONS

Introduction

In 1987 French researchers conducted a two-phase statistical study to assess how victims responded to crimes and how they felt about their experiences. First, researchers worked with a representative sample of 11,156 French men and women above the age of 15 and identified 2,291 people who had experienced crime within the previous 2 years. Next, researchers administered questionnaires to victims of theft, burglary, violent attacks, sexual assaults, family violence, consumer fraud or other business-related offenses, and labor law violations. Researchers also conducted indepth interviews with 1,716 of the victims.

Comparing Crime Victims With the General Population

Percentage of the Population

Statistics indicated that very few French had actually been victims of violence: only 2.6 percent of the sample said they

had suffered violent assaults; 1.3 percent, domestic violence; and 0.4 percent, sexual assault. The low figures, however, may reflect reluctance by victims to talk about these offenses.

A larger number of people reported property offenses: 6.3 percent of the overall sample said they had been victims of burglary; 6.3 percent, consumer fraud; and 8.8 percent, theft. Similar results were found in the 1989 International Crime Survey, which analyzed data from 14 countries, including the United States and Great Britain.

Breakdown of Victim Categories

Gender. For the three most common offenses (theft, burglary, and consumer fraud), male and female victims were equally represented. Women were more frequently victims of sexual assault, while men made up the majority of business crime victims.

Age. This study and other international surveys concluded that people between 25 and 49 years of age are most likely

to become victims of crimes. As a group, young people under 25 years of age remained relatively unaffected by burglary, consumer fraud, and commercial crime; they did, however, represent a disproportionate number of the victims of violent crime. Likewise, victimization rates were lower among people over 50 years of age; with the exception of burglary and commercial crimes, these people rarely became crime victims.

Occupation. Midlevel employees and professionals represented over half the victims in all crime categories. Different occupations seemed vulnerable to particular types of offenses. For instance, self-employed craftsmen and business owners suffered more burglaries and business crimes, while blue-collar workers more frequently suffered labor law violations, sexual assault, and domestic violence. Researchers found that farmers very rarely became crime victims.

This is a summary of *Les Victimes Comportement et Attitudes enquete nationale de victimization*, CESDIP: Paris, 1990. *Deviance et controle social*, No. 52. 2 volumes, 875 pages. Summary published fall 1990.

Geographic location. As would be expected, vulnerability to crime—especially property offenses—was greater in areas with large populations. Inhabitants of Paris and its suburbs were the most frequent crime victims, especially of burglaries and sexual assault. In other large French cities, thefts were common. In midsized towns, domestic violence crimes predominated. Inhabitants of small towns or country people were rarely among the victims.

The Victim Experience

Using a questionnaire, researchers sought additional information from the victims. Researchers asked for facts about the circumstances of the crime, the criminal justice system, and other services available to help victims. Other questions focused on the emotional aspects of victimization: victims' reactions to the crime, their satisfaction with police and social services, and their general outlook on life.

Recognizing that there are often only subtle distinctions between various crimes, researchers assigned each victim's case to one of the following eight categories: theft, consumer fraud, residential burglaries, aggressive attacks, labor law violations, domestic violence, sexual assault, and delinquent acts. Some crimes, including domestic violence, business crime, and sexual violence, had very small samples. Scientists analyzed these crimes by combining conventional statistical techniques with cross-tabulation.

Circumstances of the Crime

Location. The statistical analysis indicates that similar offenses tended to take place in specific settings. As expected, the victim's residence was the site for most burglaries and domestic violence incidents. Public places,

including transportation systems and streets, were the scenes of the majority of sexual assaults. Public places were also the backdrop for approximately 50 percent of the thefts, while barely 16 percent occurred in the victim's residence.

These findings contrast with studies in other countries. American research found that sexual assaults take place most frequently in the victims' homes. While British research shows approximately 50 percent of all thefts occur in the workplace, only 6.7 percent of the French thefts took place in that setting.

Acquaintance with the offender. The study found that the offender was a stranger in 90 percent of the theft and burglary cases and 75 percent of the consumer fraud, violent assault, and sexual assault victim cases. These figures contrast with the findings of the 1989 International Crime Survey, in which approximately 50 percent of all offenders were listed as acquaintances; the international study, however, did not treat domestic violence as a separate category.

Use of weapons. Offenders were armed in very few of the theft (8.2 percent) and burglary offenses (5 percent). Use of weapons was more common in domestic violence cases (17.1 percent) and assaults (34.8 percent).

The French percentage of armed offenders in most assault cases corresponds roughly with the findings of the 1989 National Crime Survey, conducted in the United States by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS). An exception is sexual assault cases: the BJS study found that approximately one-third of the offenders in the United States were armed, but the majority of French sexual assault victims did not mention a weapon.

Resources Available to the Victims

Reporting to the police. Many victims did not report the crime and cited their troubled relationship with the criminal justice system as the reason. Of all crimes, the highest reporting rates involved theft (72.9 percent) and burglary (76.2 percent). Fewer than half the victims of other crimes, however, reported the offense. For instance, only 43.3 percent of the assault victims, 34.1 percent of the domestic violence victims, and 26.3 percent of the sexual assault victims turned to the criminal justice system. Consumer fraud, labor law offenses, and business offenses were reported even less frequently. Only 2 to 6 percent of the victims reported these cases; instead the victims attempted to settle matters themselves.

Victims who did involve the police cited civic duty as their main reason for reporting the crimes. Theft and burglary victims said their insurance companies, which could provide some restitution, required that all crimes be reported. Others, especially burglary victims, wanted to see the offender punished.

Court system. Victims rarely saw the courts as an option, primarily because the offender was frequently unknown. The courts were used to some extent by victims of labor law violations (48.9 percent) and business violations (24.5 percent).

Insurance. For victims of theft and burglary, reporting the loss to the insurance company proved the most satisfying recourse. More than 80 percent of these victims carried insurance, and most (72.2 percent of the theft victims and 73.3 percent of burglary victims) filed claims. Of these, 56.9 percent of the theft victims and 49.4 percent of the burglary victims said they

were satisfied with the way the company handled the case. In fact, researchers found that victims were far more satisfied with the response of their insurance companies than with their treatment by the police.

Confronting the offender. Victims also attempted to settle the matter directly with the offender. Though rare in burglaries and thefts, this approach was commonly used by victims of assault (28 percent), sexual assault (42.1 percent), domestic violence (68.3 percent), consumer fraud (74.2 percent), labor law violations (77.4 percent), and business crime (81.6 percent).

Other resources. The victims mentioned a range of other resources: families (especially in sexual assault, domestic violence, and labor law violations); suppliers of security devices (used by 40 percent of the burglary victims); and consumer groups (23.1 percent of consumer fraud victims). Though policymakers emphasized victim services, these were used by less than 2 percent of the overall victim population. Even then, the most frequent clients were domestic violence victims who have no other resources.

Effectiveness of Victims' Actions

Very few victims (5.2 percent for theft, 4.8 percent for burglaries, and 20 percent for assaults) felt the police were successful in clearing their cases. These rates were significantly lower than official police statistics, perhaps because victims were not always informed on the outcome of police work. Victims who worked with police said they were dissatisfied with law enforcement's lack of success: only 33 percent of the theft, burglary, and assault victims felt the police did a good job. Despite this general dissatisfaction, more than 80 percent of these victims said they would

report similar cases to the police again, perhaps because they felt they had no other alternatives.

Overall, victims claimed that none of the steps they had taken were really effective. For example, 80 percent of the burglary and theft victims, and 70 percent of the victims of assault and business crimes were dissatisfied with available resources. Similar dissatisfaction was expressed by 60 percent of the victims of consumer fraud, labor law violation, sexual assault, and assault.

Most victims, especially fraud victims, saw direct confrontation with the offender—even when it was unsuccessful—as the most beneficial course of action.

Victims' Psychological Reactions to the Crime

Anger, hostility, and fear were common to all victims. Some said the crimes made them lose confidence in their fellow human beings. Victims' reactions, however, varied with the type of offense and the extent of perceived damage.

Overall, property losses or damages troubled victims more than physical injuries, perhaps because property damages were experienced more frequently. When victims did suffer physical injuries, as in the case of violent assaults, they usually recovered. Victims of domestic violence, who were repeatedly exposed to violence, suffered the greatest number of permanent injuries; 43 percent of these victims reported permanent damage and had greater concerns.

In all offenses, the seriousness of the damage determined the victim's reaction and decision about referring the case to the authorities. This was especially true with assault victims, who fell

into two groups. The first group (60.4 percent) suffered no serious injuries, considered the incidence of minor importance, and sought no police involvement; they tended to be slightly younger, less fearful of crime, and less inclined to resist during an assault. They also showed greater awareness of the social causes of crime (such as unemployment). This awareness, perhaps, is linked to a more liberal outlook on life.

The other group (36.1 percent of the victims) suffered major injuries, took the matter seriously, and involved the police. The divergence in the actions of violence victims appears to be based mainly on the extent of damage, since no striking social or ideological differences were found between the two groups.

Violence. Nearly 80 percent of the victims, especially those of domestic violence and sexual assault, expressed anger and hostility. Feelings of fear were also reported by 75 percent of the victims of assault and domestic violence and 95 percent of those suffering sexual assault. Though anger and hostility subsided quickly, fear often remained. Loss of faith in fellow human beings—a frequent reaction by victims of property and business crimes—was expressed by barely 50 percent of the victims of violence.

Property offenses. Reactions of these victims indicated that burglary—the violation of a person's private space—has greater psychological impact than the simple loss of an object. In fact, 24.6 percent of the victims of theft and 49.1 percent of the burglary victims reported worries about additional losses. Because the offender in these cases often remains anonymous, no specific trust had been violated.

Business crimes. Loss of confidence in fellow humans was the predominant feeling among victims of consumer fraud (72.2 percent), labor law violations (77.4

percent), and business offenses (79.6 percent). Perhaps these reactions stem from the very nature of commercial relationships, which are founded on good faith.

Victims' Perceptions of Damages

Though victims share many common feelings, researchers found that victims of the same offense fell into separate groups, each reacting differently. What seemed to make the difference in the reaction was the manner in which the victims perceived their damages.

Burglary and theft. Victims of these property crimes fell into two groups: those who reacted very strongly and those who attributed little importance to the incident.

Strong reactions. One large group of victims, most of whom felt they had suffered serious damages, had extreme reactions to the crime. These victims were predominantly homemakers, retirees, and others who did not work outside their homes. Though these segments of the population rarely experienced crime, the victims displayed strong feelings of insecurity. Researchers also found that victims who placed a high value on private property tended to dramatize the crime and reported their cases to the police to seek revenge. Politically, this group tended to favor the center and right.

Casual approach. A second major group was more casual about the crimes, often remaining distanced and almost unaffected. The majority of this group were younger, urban people whose politics tended toward the liberal or the left.

Consumer Fraud. Victims of consumer fraud and other business-related crimes fell into three groups.

Reacted strongly. These victims (36.6 percent) reacted very strongly to the offense, even when their losses were fairly minor. They took no steps against the offender, perhaps because they lacked the material and educational resources to obtain justice. Most in this group were blue-collar workers who maintained a conservative world view and supported a law-and-order approach to criminal justice.

Sought recourse. The second group (28.1 percent) also saw the fraud as a major loss. They were not inclined to settle the case themselves; instead, they enlisted the help of consumer protection groups or initiated steps through a lawyer. These victims were predominantly midlevel professionals who often served in the public sector. Researchers were unable to identify clear political orientations.

Confronted the offender. The last group of victims (32.9 percent) showed no strong emotional reaction and considered the offense a minor issue. They preferred to settle the matter directly with the offender. Professionally, these victims were upper level managers, business owners, or academic professionals. They tended to be wealthier inhabitants of larger cities. Well educated, these victims held liberal political views, despite their experiences.

What Researchers Learned About Victims

The purpose of the study was to gather information about how victims responded to crimes and how they felt. Using this information, researchers could assess whether services were meeting victims' needs.

Victims had several options, including turning to consumer organizations, reporting the incident to the police, and

settling the matter themselves. Only those who attempted to settle the matter themselves, however, reported a high degree of satisfaction.

Consumer groups. One of the most surprising findings was the lack of success of consumer organizations. They emerged as highly fragmented interest groups intent on influencing legislation and administrative decisions, but ill-equipped to deal with individual consumer problems.

Criminal justice system and the police. The study also revealed that victims saw the criminal justice system as inadequate, a perception found in previous studies of police performance. Victims often feel that the police merely register the vast majority of reported offenses as a matter of form, working efficiently only on the cases they initiate themselves. This gap between the expectations of police performance and their actual performance increased negative attitudes among victims and feelings of insecurity among others in the general population.

Alternative services for victims. In light of victims' views that current services—including the criminal justice system—are ineffective, alternative services will take on new importance. The study's detailed insights into the diverse circumstances in which crimes occur should be especially helpful to those involved in crime prevention. Finally, the study demonstrates the benefits of private resources, including insurance and security companies.

The Assistant Attorney General, Office of Justice Programs, coordinates the activities of the following program Offices and Bureaus: National Institute of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and Office for Victims of Crime.