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The International Crime Survey;
a tool for the planning and evaluation
of national crime policies

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1. Taking Crime Seriously

Crime rates have increased in almost every major industrialized country except Japan in the past three decades. Victimization by crime has become a common feature of life in an urban setting across the world. According to opinion polls, crime is among the primary concerns of the public. Governments have become aware that conventional law enforcement approaches do not longer suffice. Administering the criminal law is still the cornerstone of a sensible crime policy but law enforcement activities, in order to be effective, need to be supplemented by crime prevention efforts of various sorts. The two main preventive approaches are a. the reduction of legal, social and technical opportunities to commit crimes and b. community development to address the root causes of crime (Waller, 1991). This new type of integrated **crime policy** calls for more planning, coordination, monitoring and evaluation. In short, for a policy which meets the same standards of administrative sophistication as governmental policies in the areas of education, health, housing and employment. The responsibility for an integrated crime policy lies with different government bodies at the ministerial level. These bodies need to be provided with reliable data about the national crime problems at hand. If governments are serious in their efforts to address the urgent problems of urban crime, they must make an investment in the collection of comparable crime figures.

2. The need of an International Crime Survey

To date, by far the major effort has been put into analyzing crime rates in different countries on the basis of offences recorded by the police ('police figures'). However, police figures have substantial limitations for comparative purposes. First, reports of crime by victims form the major bulk of incidents that the police have available to record; any differences in the propensity to report to the police in different countries will seriously jeopardise comparisons, and rather little is known about these differences. Second, comparisons of police statistics are severely undermined by differences in legal definitions, and by technical factors to do with how offences are classified and counted.

In many countries recently, an alternative count of crime has been obtained through crime surveys. These ask representative samples of the population about selected offences they have experienced over a given time, whether or not they have reported them to the police. Typically, such surveys also ask respondents' opinions about crime, fear of crime, and so on. However, by no means all countries have conducted such surveys, and those that have done so have used different methods which make their results extremely difficult to use for comparative research. The climate ripened for a **standardized international survey**

as more was understood about the methodology of crime surveys, and the value of their information. In 1987 a Working Group was set up comprising Jan van Dijk (overall coordinator), Ministry of Justice, the Netherlands; Pat Mayhew, Research and Planning Unit, Home Office, England; and Martin Killias, University of Lausanne, Switzerland. An invitation to join in the survey was sent to some twenty-odd countries. Fifteen countries eventually took part in a fully co-ordinated survey exercise. The countries were:

Australia (Australian Institute of Criminology); Belgium (Ministry of Justice); Canada (Department of Justice, Research and Development); England and Wales (Home Office); Federal Republic of Germany (Bundeskriminalamt, Max-Planck Institut); Finland (National Research Institute for Legal Policy); France (Ministry of Justice); Japan (National Research Institute of Police Science; Japan Urban Security Research Institute); The Netherlands (Ministry of Justice); Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Office); Norway (Ministry of Justice); Scotland (Scottish Home and Health Department); Spain (Ministry of Justice); Switzerland (l'Office Federal de la Justice); USA (US Department of Justice).

In addition, local surveys using the same questionnaire were conducted in *Poland* (Ministry of Justice), *Indonesia* (Guru Besar Kriminologi, Penologi, Victimologi dan Hukum Pidana, Surabaya). In 1990 the International Crime Survey was carried out in Germany, including the former DDR, South Korea (Seoul) and Greece (Athens).

In the majority of countries 2,000 of respondents were interviewed by telephone, using the new technology of computer assisted telephone interviewing. Respondents were asked about eleven main forms of victimization. Those who had been victimized were asked short questions about the place where the offence occurred; its material consequences; whether the police were involved (and if not why not); satisfaction with the police response; and any victim assistance given. In addition, some basic socio-demographic and lifestyle data were collected. Some other questions were asked about: fear of crime; satisfaction with local policing; crime prevention behaviour; and the preferred sentence for a 21-year old recidivist burglar. The results were published in the book *Experiences of Crime across the World* (Van Dijk, Mayhew, Killias, 1990) and subsequently in several other publications.

3. Some key results of the 1989 survey

In the figures 1, 2 and 3 we present the key findings of the survey.

Figure 1: Victimization rates for fourteen different types of crime in seventeen countries in 1988

	Total ¹	Europe ²	England & Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Neiher- lands	West Germany	Switzer- land	Belgium	France	Spain	Norway	Finland	USA	Canada	Australia	Warsaw	Surabaja	Italy ³
Theft of car	4.2	4.6	6.6	5.3	5.2	1.8	1.9	0.9	4.0	7.3	5.0	2.7	1.7	6.3	2.8	8.0	4.6	0.3	5.4
Theft from car	14.8	16.6	13.4	12.9	8.5	15.2	14.8	8.4	8.7	21.0	24.6	9.0	8.2	26.7	18.5	17.2	19.8	11.0	23.9
Car vandalism	16.9	18.6	17.3	14.9	10.3	21.6	22.1	13.4	17.9	19.6	16.0	11.2	10.5	21.7	18.8	20.8	16.0	5.7	23.9
Theft of motorcycle ⁴	1.2	1.5	0.4	0.4	0.4	1.3	0.9	4.1	1.4	2.9	2.3	0.6	0.2	0.5	0.6	0.5	0.0	2.8	4.7
Theft of bicycle	9.6	8.5	3.9	3.1	4.0	24.8	12.4	12.8	9.8	6.6	3.3	12.5	14.1	9.4	12.4	5.8	4.6	11.0	7.4
Burglary with entry	7.8	7.3	9.4	9.0	4.7	8.9	4.7	4.0	7.7	10.4	5.6	3.2	2.0	13.7	10.2	16.6	9.0	11.5	10.6
Attempted burglary	6.6	6.6	6.0	5.8	2.9	9.3	5.6	2.1	8.2	8.9	6.9	2.3	2.2	13.5	7.9	11.6	10.8	5.2	7.8
Robbery	3.1	3.6	1.9	1.8	1.5	2.0	3.0	2.2	4.0	2.9	9.1	1.5	2.7	5.5	2.6	2.3	4.6	2.8	5.9
Personal theft	11.9	12.0	8.3	6.7	6.1	14.3	13.3	15.9	14.9	12.8	13.4	8.3	10.3	14.2	13.2	14.6	27.0	16.0	12.9
Sexual incidents ⁵	6.3	5.6	3.4	2.9	3.3	6.4	7.9	5.5	4.9	4.3	6.8	4.7	4.3	10.4	10.0	13.5	7.2	14.3	5.4
Assault/threat	7.8	7.4	5.3	5.3	4.3	9.3	9.3	3.9	6.4	7.1	7.5	8.2	9.7	12.7	8.8	11.6	7.4	4.2	6.3
All crimes ⁶	48.4	49.9	46.0	41.4	33.4	60.4	51.3	47.1	48.3	52.0	51.6	38.9	40.1	57.6	53.0	57.2	59.4	44.5	60.8

1. Total figure treat each country as of equal statistical importance, with an assumed sample of 2000

2. European totals have been calculated by weighting individual country results by population size

3. Data collected through CATI in February/March 1991, N=255, well-spread sample according to age, sex, regions and towns size

4. 'Motorcycles' include mopeds and scooters

5. Asked of women only

6. Percentage of sample victimized by at least one crime of any type

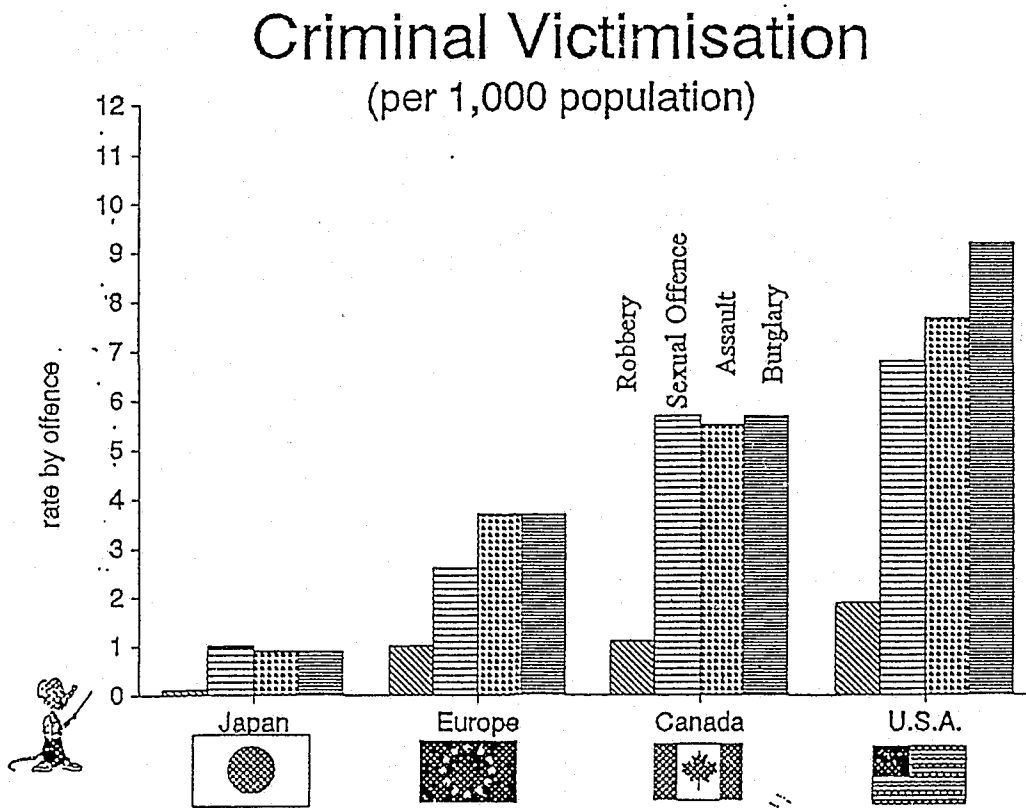
Source: Van Dijk, Mayhew, Killias, Experiences of Crime across the World, Kluwer, Deyenter, 1990, 1991.

Figure 2: Percentages of the population victimized by any crime last year in Warsaw (Poland), Surabaja (Indonesia) and greater Athens (Greece) compared to rates in other larger cities (> 100.00 inhabitants). Percentage victimized in 1988; 1990 in Athens

	Warsaw Poland	Surabaja Indonesia	Athens Greece	USA	Canada	Australia	W.Europe
Theft of car	2.2	0.2	1.2	3.6	1.0	2.4	1.6
Theft from car	10.2	4.7	5.5	12.2	8.9	8.1	8.4
Car vandalism	7.6	2.7	7.0	13.0	12.2	9.4	8.0
Motorcycle theft	0.0	0.8	0.3	0.3	0.5	0.4	0.3
Bicycle theft	1.0	2.7	-	3.1	3.6	1.4	2.6
Owners							
Theft of car	3.5	0.4	1.9	3.8	1.1	2.7	2.3
Theft from car	16.5	10.8	8.8	13.0	10.4	9.2	11.8
Car vandalism	12.3	6.2	11.2	13.9	14.3	10.7	11.3
Motorcycle theft	0.0	1.0	2.1	2.9	6.5	5.7	3.3
Bicycle theft	2.2	4.1	-	4.5	5.4	3.1	5.5
Burglary/entry	2.6	3.8	1.5	4.1	3.9	4.7	2.9
Attempted burglary	2.8	1.7	1.5	8.4	4.1	5.6	2.3
Robbery	1.2	0.5	0.6	2.6	1.8	0.9	2.0
Personal thefts	13.4	5.2	4.9	5.9	6.5	4.7	5.8
Pickpocketing	13.0	3.3	-	1.5	1.8	0.9	3.3
Sexual incidents ¹	1.8	3.2	7.8	4.1	2.3	4.0	1.5
Sexual assaults	1.0	0.8	-	1.5	0.7	1.3	0.5
Assaults/threats	3.0	0.8	3.5	6.6	4.0	6.3	3.3
Assaults with force	1.4	0.3	-	2.0	1.6	4.0	1.1
All crimes	34.4	20.0	28.3	38.3	32.9	30.8	26.4
N Total respondents	500	600	345	392	942	700	5484
N Car owners	310	260	206	368	804	619	3907
N Motorcycle owners	21	515		35	77	53	486
N Bicycle owners	228	389		266	633	326	2553

1) Percentage based on all respondents, not women only

Figure 3: Criminal Victimization per 1,000 population



The percentage of persons 16 years and over who had been victimized in 1988 at least once by one of the eleven types of crime covered by the study was the highest in the USA, Canada and Australia (app. 30%).

Countries with overall victimization rates of about 25% were The Netherlands, Spain and the FRG. A victimization rate of about 20% was found in Scotland, England and Wales, France and Belgium. Rates around 15% were found amongst the public of Northern Ireland, Switzerland, Norway and Finland. Japan has a rate below ten percent. Offense rates in Warsaw (Poland) resemble West-European city rates, although thefts of personal property - in particular pickpocketing - seem more common.

4. Survey estimates and police figures

We have compared the present estimates of national victimization risks with the conventional measure of offences recorded by the police per 100.000 inhabitants ("police figures") as compiled by Interpol. The amount of crime as indicated by the survey will of course be higher than the official police figure, since in all countries less than half of victimizations were reported to the police (e.g. in Japan the overall reporting rate was

46.5% in 1988/89). Our comparisons focused on how far the survey and police measures show similar *relative rankings* of countries with regard to crime levels.

For car theft the ranking of countries on the basis of victimization rates is quite similar to the picture shown by police figures (rank order correlation was 0.83). For instance Australia, England and Wales and France feature at the top and Japan, Finland and the Netherlands at the bottom in both rankings. For burglary there is a moderately strong positive correlation between the two sources of information (0.53). The relationship between survey and police figures is also moderately strong for robbery (0.49). Japan, for example, is at the bottom of both the survey and Interpol list. The rankings for assault and sexual incidents, however, are dissimilar (0.22 and 0.29). The reporting rates for these two categories of crime vary greatly across countries. When the Interpol ranking is compared with the ranking of reported offenses, there were much stronger relationships between survey and police figures for robbery (0.73), assault (0.72) and sexual incidents (0.81).

The most important result of the analysis is that there is a much closer correspondence between survey and police figures when account is taken of differences in reporting to the police. After adjusting for national reporting rates, the associations between survey measures and police figures were statistically robust for all five crime types. This result confirms our belief that for many types of crime, police figures as compiled by Interpol cannot be used for comparative purposes, simply on account of different reporting rates in various countries.

In the Netherlands, where victimization surveys have been carried out regularly since the early seventies, reporting rates have been found to be unstable over time as well. For this reason trend analyses of police figures within countries must also be interpreted with caution. Changes in police figures over time may reflect actual changes in crime levels but may also be due to trends in reporting rates. In several countries, for instance, the readiness to report minor sexual incidents may go up as a result of a greater awareness among women of their rights to privacy. At the local scale, the readiness to report crimes may also increase in response to special crime prevention programs (Van Dijk et al, 1984). As a consequence crime prevention programs may lead to higher rates of registered crime although actual victimization rates have fallen. Programs which have been successful in preventing crime and increasing public trust will be evaluated quite wrongly on the basis of police figures.

In our opinion, victimization surveys are an indispensable tool for both the planning of national crime policies, comparative criminological studies and local crime prevention evaluation studies.

5. Evaluating the 1989 International Crime Survey

The International Crime Survey 1989 was discussed and reviewed in numerous newspaper articles across the world as well as in several scientific journals (e.g. Skogan, 1991; Bruinsma e.a., 1990; Dijksterhuis e.a., 1990). In the national daily press of Australia and the Netherlands much coverage was given to the relatively high rates of these countries. In the United Kingdom the emphasis was put on the relatively low rates of violent crime. In 1991 the publication of some preliminary results of a replication of the survey in Seoul (South Korea) led to unfounded media stories about Seoul as crime capital of the world. In Canada and Spain government officials were appalled by the high crime rates of their countries. In the USA, contrariwise, the American rates were seen as unbelievably low. In all these cases, attempts were made to find arguments to refute the results. Although much of the methodological criticism levelled against the study was well founded, no critic has in our judgment put seriously into doubt the ratings of his country for major crime types¹. In most instances the rating became much less surprising if obvious factors like the differential level of urbanization were taken into account (e.g. in Australia and Canada the proportion of urban dwellers is relatively high, whereas in the USA it is relatively low). In the case of the Netherlands the high overall crime rate is partly - but not wholly - accounted for by an exceptionally high rate of bicycle theft. By and large the experiences of the 1989 International Crime Survey have taught us first of all how ill-informed many journalists and policy-makers are about the crime rating of their country. This experience underlines the importance of continued efforts to collect comparable crime data. If the media will become used to comparable crime statistics - and their correct interpretation in terms of urbanization - they will gradually lose their emotive news value. In the present situation comparable crime statistics are widely viewed as barometers of morality. This is a naive point of view. As criminological expertise tells us, national crime rates are largely determined by macro-factors such as degree of urbanization, age composition and the availability of suitable targets for property crime (e.g. car ownership). Cultural inhibitions to offend, may be responsible for the low crime rates of Japan. In general, however, crime statistics do not seem to reflect differences in the level of morality at all.

¹ Comparisons with the results of independent victimization surveys have generally confirmed the rates on the basis of the International Crime Survey.

As mentioned above, we do not dispute that the first International Crime Survey contained some methodological flaws. Some reviewers have criticized in particular the use of telephone interviews. Methodological work has shown that in general victimizations counts from telephone interviews are similar to those obtained in face-to-face ones (Killias, 1990). In a test study by prof. W.E. Saris of the University of Amsterdam some core questions of the International Crime Survey-questionnaire were used in two parallel studies, one using telephone-interviewing and the other interviewing with the use of personal computers plus modems given to a panel. The results of both studies were identical (Saris, Scherpenzeel, 1992).

A sample drawn from the population of telephone owners inevitably misses the important category of (socially vulnerable) households, which cannot afford a telephone connection. Telephone interviews were used in countries with telephone penetration rates of 75 or over. In the majority of countries the coverage rate was as high as 90 or 95. In this situation the crime rates will differ from the rate of telephone owners only if the rates of non-telephone owners are vastly different. In our own survey income is not strongly related to victimizations by crime. In most countries the well to do tend to have somewhat higher risks. On balance the non-coverage bias will probably be small².

In our own view, by far the most important shortcoming was the disappointingly high attrition rates in some countries, notably West-Germany (70%), Spain (67%), the USA (63%) and Belgium (63%). In our book we have discussed why the high attrition rate may or may not have biased the results. No definitive conclusions could be drawn. In the 1990 survey in Germany respondents in West-Germany were sent an advance notice about the telephone interview. This technique produced much lower attrition rates (Kury, 1991). This technique, however, renders it impossible to apply random digit dialling. The necessary sampling designs may in some countries be biased with respect to unlisted numbers. The actual reading of the advance notice may be differential across groups of the population. Family discussion about the coming interview may also affect the answers given. Since sending out letters would also increase the costings, we have a preference for the original approach of random digit dialing without advance notices. In 1991 pilot studies were carried out in the USA, Belgium and Italy with a slightly modified procedure for contacting respondents. All (primary) respondents who refused to cooperate with the interview, were recontacted three weeks later by teams of highly skilled interviewers. By recontacting initial refusers the attrition rates in all three countries were kept below 50%. The percentages of

² It is far from certain that alternative techniques of sampling will yield a more representative sample since socially marginal groups are in most countries hard to contact by any means. In fact the technique of rephoning at different hours facilitated by the CATI may produce a better representation than any other technique.

actual refusals were within the range of 30 to 35. In the 1992 International Crime Survey recontacting refusers will be part of the procedures where possible.

The questionnaire

Almost all questions used in the questionnaire of the International Crime Survey 1989 were taken from previous survey studies. For reasons of economy and international comparability we used a short list of questions, covering altogether fourteen different types of crime. These fourteen crime types seem to be a fair representation of the criminal victimizations suffered by individual citizens across the world. They cover, as it were, the common ground of the public's experience with ordinary crime in different countries. We have not come across examples of much occurring types of crime afflicting the individual citizens which are not covered by our questionnaire. In some countries such as Spain and Italy main crime types, such as robbery (defined as theft with force or threatening) had to be subcategorized in special ways. This did not affect the main results, however. Also the relevance of questions about vehicle related crimes proved to be dependent upon differential national ownership rates for cars, bicycles and mopeds. For this reason we presented both the population victimization rates and the owners victimization rates for vehicle related crimes. The finding that rates of car thefts or bicycle theft are related to national ownership rates does not, in our view, affect the validity of the population rates. The higher rates of car-related crimes in affluent societies are a social reality which should be reflected in comparative crime statistics.

The most contentious items of the questionnaire are those asking about experiences with sexual incidents and minor instances of violence (threats/assaults). As we have pointed out in our book informal definitions of what makes a frightening threat, or minor assault or an offensive sexual incident will be culture bound both within and between countries³. In this domain the survey results will reflect the actual level of incidents as defined and perceived

³ Risks of assaults are not universally higher for the higher income groups. In England/Wales, the Netherlands, Finland, Norway, the USA, Canada and Australia risks of assault are relatively high for both the lowest and the highest income groups. With the exception of England/Wales these countries possess the highest assault rates. The higher risks for the lower SES groups probably reflect experiences with more serious forms of violence. The relatively high risks of the high SES groups in all countries probably reflect a relatively high sensitivity for threats and acts of minor physical violence. We assume, then, that class-related differences in risks for assault are partly determined by different thresholds in the labeling of acts as violent behaviour. Finally in most countries - though surprisingly not in England and Wales and Scotland - risks of sexual incidents are the highest for girls with a low social economic status. This result confirms the feminist notion that socially and economically vulnerable girls are less capable to defend themselves against sexual harassment than women with a higher status. The victimization rates for sexual incidents in England/Wales and Scotland were much lower than in most other participating countries. The findings about sexual incidents must be interpreted with care, since both the readiness to answer such rather intimate questions and the definitions of offensive acts may differ between countries. One possible explanation of the British findings is that British working class and middle class girls are more reluctant to discuss such matters than their counterparts abroad.

by the public at large. Countries where the public is highly sensitive to violence may show higher rates even if the actual number of incidents is relatively low. We fully agree that for this reason the rates of victimization by sexual incidents and assaults/threats need to be interpreted with extra care. Interestingly our secondary survey data do not in any way confirm the hypothesis that high levels of sexual incidents or threats/assaults are due to a higher sensitivity to violence. If this was the case, countries with high overall rates would show smaller proportions of serious violence (sexual assaults or violence causing injury). Our data do not confirm this at all. Clearly more research needs to be done into the measurement of the level of sexual violence and violence⁴. In the questionnaire of the International Crime Survey 1992 we have added some follow-up questions in order to differentiate more clearly between incidents deemed serious and criminal by the respondents themselves and other incidents.

Overall prevalence rates

In the media coverage of our book most attention was unfortunately given to the overall prevalence rates, as presented in the figures 1 and 2 of this paper. In the calculation of overall prevalence rates minor thefts are counted equally to robberies or burglaries. For this reason national prevalence rates are a very crude indicator of crime. In some instance, they can even be misleading. As mentioned before, the high overall prevalence rate of the Netherlands is partly due to the exceptionally high rates of bicycle theft. Comparisons between countries should primarily be made for specific types of crime. At one stage the authors decided against the publication of overall prevalence rates in their book. The argument that journalists and other readers would start calculating their own overall measures of crime anyway - often erroneously by adding up the rates of the 14 crime types - finally persuaded us to include overall prevalence rates. This can be justified by pointing out that overall incidence rates of police registered crimes are routinely quoted in the criminological literature. Such overall police figures do not take into account the seriousness of the various offenders either. In the International Crime Survey 1992 victims are asked to rate the seriousness of their victimizations. This additional information will allow us to calculate **weighted overall prevalence rates**.

⁴ An alternative source of information about the levels of violence are **survey studies of the case load of first aid units of hospitals** (Kosec, Kapteijn, 1991).

Miscellaneous

In the analyses of our data we have come across several minor shortcomings of the questionnaire. Secondary data about threats suggest that these victimizations have often been quite serious. The questionnaire did not provide information about whether a weapon was used in these cases.

Some commentators have expressed the opinion that crime surveys should be carried out with much larger samples. For a crude rating of countries according to the major crime types, samples of 1,000, 1,500 or 2,000 suffice. For this purpose the trade off of larger samples is quite limited, since sample sizes of 3, 4 or 5 thousand do not reduce the margins of error much. In terms of costings and logistics, a global survey using such sample sizes is not a viable option for an ad hoc research team. Sample sizes of 2,000 are preferable if desaggregations are to be made.

The 1992 International Crime Survey

In 1991 preparations were started for a second round of comparable crime surveys in 1992. As said, pilot studies were carried out in Belgium, the USA and Italy. The main purpose of these pilots was to test the new technique of recontacting initial refusers, and some new questions about interalia the use of crime prevention, opinions about the police and the perceived seriousness of crimes. In Italy two different introductory sentences were tested as well.

Later in the year the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute in Rome contracted researchers in Costa Rica, Brasil, Egypt, Philippines, India, Uganda and Tanzania to carry out pilots with a version of the questionnaire adapted for face-to-face interviewing in a developing society.

The experiences of the seven pilots were discussed at a conference of the newly formed working group, consisting of J.J.M. van Dijk, P. Mayhew, U. Zvekic (UNICRI), D.W. Steenhuis (Ministry of Justice, the Netherlands), the seven experts of developing countries and A. de Frate (UNICRI). The experiences of the three pilots in western countries were processed in the new questionnaire as well. Suggestions for modifications were also received from W. Skogan (USA) and, at a later stage, from experts from several participating countries. One final version of the questionnaire was designed for face-to-face interviewing. Since time limits are less important for face-to-face interviews some extra questions were included in this version. Since this version will mainly be used for interviewing samples of city populations it is called the city survey questionnaire. The other version - covering 80% of the city survey questionnaire - was designed for computer assisted telephone interviewing. Also prepared was a face-to-face version of this abridged

version. Formal invitations to join the study were sent to agencies in some 25 countries, besides the seven developing countries mentioned. Some countries, who participated in the 1989 survey declined the invitation, in most instances because the interval since the previous one was deemed to short to justify a replication. Eventually agreements were reached to carry out the 1992 International Crime Survey in the following countries: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Czechoslovakia, Finland, Federal Republic of Germany, Hungary, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, England/Wales, Sweden, Slovenia, the USA and the USSR (Russia and the Republic of Georgia), as well as in Costa Rica, Brasil, Egypt, Philippines, India, Uganda and Tanzania. In most countries the fieldwork was carried out in February/March 1992. Comparable indicators of the national crime problems in 1991 will shortly be available for altogether 26 different countries. In addition, we will possess victimization rates about 1988, 1989 or 1990 from ten other countries.

Some preliminary results of the 1992 study will be presented for the first time at the international conference "Understanding Crime: Experiences of Crime and Crime Control" in Rome in September 1992 under the auspices of the UNICRI. It is our sincere hope that the discussions about the results of the International Crime Survey 1992 will persuade governmental and intergovernmental agencies across the world of the necessity to set aside permanent funds for the collection of comparable crime figures.

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