



# THE NZCASS IN AN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT: Comparing the New Zealand Crime and Safety Survey with other international victim surveys

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## Summary

A number of consistent findings have emerged from the NZCASS, national-level victimisation surveys in other countries and the International Crime Victims Survey in relation to the uneven distribution of crime, victims' reporting behaviours, the fear of crime, and confidence in different criminal justice groups.

Such consistent findings potentially offer opportunities for the international exchange of criminal justice policies and crime prevention initiatives.

However, different factors may give rise to similar findings in different countries, and for this reason local specificities should be kept in mind when developing policy initiatives.

The ability to reliably compare precise results from the NZCASS with those of other international victimisation surveys is restricted by the myriad of methodological and design differences that exist between the different surveys.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the inception of the first large-scale victimisation survey in the United States in the 1960s, countries across the world have implemented national-level surveys of crime victims. In addition, the International Crime Victims Survey has been operating since 1989 and by its fifth sweep in 2004/05 had been conducted in 78 countries. The proliferation of national-level and international victimisation survey results, together with the growing tendency to export and import criminal justice policies on a global scale, has made the international comparison of crime and victimisation levels both expected and inevitable. It is therefore appropriate to reflect on how the results from the 2009 New Zealand Crime and Safety Survey (NZCASS) compare with those from other countries.

The purpose of this paper is two-fold: first, to highlight some common high-level findings across the different surveys and reflect on the implications of these findings for crime prevention in New Zealand; second, to broadly compare the method and design of the NZCASS with other international surveys, highlighting key differences and the impact these have for comparing precise results across different countries.

In addition to the NZCASS, this paper has considered the following national-level surveys: the British Crime Survey in England and Wales (Walker et al 2009); the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey (Page et al 2010a,b; MacLeod et al 2009); the Northern Ireland Crime Survey (Toner and Freel, 2009); the National Crime Victims Survey (NCVS) in the United States (Rand, 2009), the General Social Survey in Canada (Gannon and Mihorean, 2005); the Crime Victimization Survey in Australia (ABS, 2010). The International Crime Victims Survey has also been taken into account (van Dijk, van Kesteren and Smit, 2007).

### 2. Common findings across victimisation surveys

Although methodological and design differences between national-level victimisation surveys prevent precise comparisons, reading across the results from different surveys nonetheless reveals some common findings worthy of note. In particular, the following themes have consistently emerged:

- Victimization is not randomly distributed across the population, with most people experiencing no crime and a small proportion of the population experiencing a disproportionate amount of crime.
- Not everyone is at the same risk of crime: younger people, those living in more deprived urban areas, residing in households that are rented and/or not managing well financially are generally at greater risk of most types of crime.
- Those least at risk of crime are typically older, financially better off, and living in less urbanised or rural areas.
- High levels of fear of crime and concern about personal safety are relatively uncommon, although some groups (eg, women, people from minority ethnic groups) express higher levels of fear and concern than others.
- Those who worry most about crime share many socio-economic characteristics in common with those most likely to experience crime.
- Victimization surveys measure much more crime compared to official crime statistics, although for the most part the additional crime measured is relatively trivial in nature.
- A substantial proportion of crime mentioned in victimisation surveys is not reported to the Police. This is because victims consider the matter too trivial, not something the Police either could or would help with, or the matter was considered private.
- Confidence in different criminal justice groups tends to decline alongside public visibility, with groups with high visibility at the front end of the system (ie, Police) being perceived more favourably than less visible groups (ie, probation and prison services).

These common themes are useful for policy development insofar as New Zealand may look to those countries that are facing similar challenges surrounding crime and victimisation for possible solutions. However, it is important to keep in mind that while these findings appear 'the same', there may be different forces driving these commonalities, which may require different policy responses to address (see Nelken, 2010; O'Malley, 2002; Jones and Newburn, 2002). Consequently, both when comparing victimisation survey results and when importing crime prevention and criminal justice policies, it is always important to take into account local conditions (see Newburn, 2010; Walklate, 2008).

### 3. The International Crime Victims Survey: findings and limitations

Findings from the International Crime Victims Survey (ICVS) reinforce many of the common themes outlined above, although New Zealand has only participated twice in the ICVS (in 1992 and 2004). This means that the results for New Zealand are now dated and cannot be used to discern trends.

The ICVS has routinely found that a substantial proportion of crime is not made known to the Police, and that the main factor which affects reporting levels is the seriousness of the offence (Van Dijk, van Kesteren, and Smit, 2007). Like the national-level surveys, it suggests that

vehicle-related thefts have the highest level of reporting and sexual offences the lowest. Comparing survey results with officially-recorded crime rates in respective countries, the ICVS also demonstrates that national crime trends as determined in victimisation surveys bear little resemblance to the trends shown by officially-recorded crime data in each country. The ICVS therefore shows that officially-recorded crime rates do not represent a reliable means of comparing actual crime levels in different countries or determining trends in international crime over time.

In terms of crime trends, findings from the ICVS reveal that crime levels in most countries have declined since the mid 1990s, with notable drops in the level of volume crimes, such as vehicle-related thefts (see Van Dijk, van Kesteren, and Smit, 2007). In line with national-level surveys, the ICVS also finds that about half of victims who reported their crime to the Police were satisfied with the response they received, and that most people feel safe when walking in their local area after dark.

On the face of it, the ICVS indicates that New Zealand has above average levels of crime. It also shows that New Zealanders are more likely to report crime to the Police, feel satisfied with the Police response, and feel unsafe than their international counterparts (Van Dijk, van Kesteren, and Smit, 2007). However, as is the case for national surveys (see Section 4 below), attempting to make precise comparisons between New Zealand's results and those from other countries is not advisable for a number of reasons.

Owing to local conditions and needs it has not been possible to standardise fully either the ICVS questionnaire or mode of delivery in different countries. Unlike national-level surveys, the ICVS questionnaire does not collect detailed accounts of particular incidents. It is therefore based upon the assumption that people in different countries interpret crime-related screener questions in the same way; however, evidence suggests that this is unlikely to be the case (see Walklate, 2008; Travis et al 1995; Zvekic, 1996). Furthermore, the ICVS utilises relatively small national sample sizes. Given the rarity of victimisation for most people this means that a high level of sampling error is a particular concern. Compared to national-level surveys, the ICVS also has a relatively low response rate (ie, 52% in the 2004/05 survey), which is continuing to decline over time. In addition, the overall prevalence calculations presented in the report do not take into account different levels of ownership between countries (eg, in terms of cars, motorcycles, bicycles, garages, sheds) (Harland, 1995).

#### **4. Comparing NZCASS with international surveys: key methodological and design differences**

Despite the movement in criminal justice policy and victimisation research towards global convergence (Karstedt, 2002; Garland, 2002), national-level surveys have developed and evolved in different countries at different points in time to meet extant local needs (Spalek, 2006). Consequently, despite sharing many methodological similarities, there are important differences between national-level crime surveys that restrict the ability to reliably compare results. Some of the main differences between the NZCASS and the national-level victimisation surveys in other countries are outlined below and the implications for comparing results noted.

##### **Mode of survey**

One of the main design differences between national-level surveys is the mode of delivery. For example, while a number of surveys are conducted face-to-face (including the NZCASS), some

## THE NZCASS IN AN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

### Comparing the New Zealand Crime and Safety Survey with other international victim surveys

use telephone interviewing only, while others have historically used mail-out questionnaires alongside telephone interviews. In addition, some surveys, such as the National Crime Victims Survey (US) and the International Crime Victims Survey (ICVS), are conducted using a mixture of telephone and face-to-face interviewing. The mode of delivery is typically dictated by practical, rather than methodological, considerations (eg, cost). However, different delivery modes are likely to give rise to slightly different results.

It is commonly thought that face-to-face surveys permit the development of better rapport between the respondent and the interviewer and allow more prompting of respondents. This, in turn, improves their ability to recall victimisation events and provides a context in which they feel comfortable disclosing more serious offences (Mayhew, 2008; Sparks, 1981). It is argued that the same level of rapport and prompting is not possible either over the phone or through self-administered mail-out surveys, meaning that these modes of delivery may lead to less disclosure of both trivial events that can be easily forgotten without prompting and serious offences that a respondent may not wish to disclose over the phone or on paper (UNODC and UNECE, 2010).

Evidence on the impact of the delivery mode on the disclosure of more serious incidents is mixed. While some studies have suggested the use of phone or paper-based surveys encourage under-disclosure, others have argued that events considered embarrassing or shameful by the respondent (for example, offences involving people known to the victim, particularly those committed by a partner, or those involving a sexual element) may be more likely to be disclosed in the more anonymous setting of telephone and mail-based surveys (UNODC and UNECE, 2010; see also Wetzels et al 1994).

Regardless of whether different modes of survey delivery result in more or less victimisation being recorded, however, it is safe to conclude that different delivery modes can impact on the amount of crime measured, and thereby affect the ability to make safe comparisons of results.

### Sample frames

There are important differences between the sample frame used for the NZCASS and other national-level surveys that reduce the ability to compare results internationally. One of the main examples is age coverage. While both the NZCASS and Canadian victimisation surveys are limited to adults aged 15 or more, other surveys tend to have either higher or lower age limits. For example, the British surveys tend to be restricted to those aged 16 years old or more, although since January 2009, the British Crime Survey has included children aged from 10 to 15 years. The NCVS in the United States also includes children aged 12 years or more in its sample frame. The Australian victimisation survey has a split age limit, with 15 years or more for most offences, but 18 years or more for sexual offences. The difference in age coverage is important because research has consistently shown that younger people are at greater risk of crime (Mayhew, 2008; Sparks, 1981).<sup>1</sup>

### Recall periods

Another methodological feature that distinguishes the NZCASS from other national-level victimisation surveys is the period of time over which respondents are asked to recall victimisation (ie, the recall period). In the NZCASS, respondents are asked to recall events that happened from the start of the preceding calendar year up until the time of the interview. This

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<sup>1</sup> While it is in theory possible to remove younger age groups from the survey results from different countries and recalculate equivalent results, owing to weighting procedures this process is complex and would require access to the individual survey databases from different countries.

## THE NZCASS IN AN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

### Comparing the New Zealand Crime and Safety Survey with other international victim surveys

means that the recall period spans between 13 and 18 months, although when calculating offence estimates only events occurring in the preceding calendar year are included (see Morrison, Smith and Gregg, 2010; Mayhew and Reilly, 2007). Other surveys, however, employ different recall periods. For example, the British, Australian and Canadian surveys all employ a continuous or rolling recall period, whereby people are asked to remember events that happened in the preceding 12 months. In contrast, the NCVS uses a six-month continuous recall period.

The variation in recall periods between the different surveys is important, because research has shown that people's ability to recall events alters over time. In particular, there is evidence suggesting that the longer the recall period, the more difficult it is to accurately recall specific victimisation events (Skogan, 1986; Block and Block, 1984; Sparks, 1981). Longer recall periods have been found to impact on respondents' recollection of crime events in two distinct ways: first, they are less likely to remember more trivial events; and second, they are more likely to include more serious crimes which occurred outside the reference period (Mayhew, 2008; Skogan, 1986). On this basis it is possible that the NZCASS, by virtue of imposing a longer recall period on respondents, may net less trivial crime and more serious crime than other national-level surveys. However, the use of a longer recall period is more practical for New Zealand given the cost implications associated with utilising a shorter recall period.

#### Offence coverage

The types of offence covered in national-level surveys vary across different countries. For example, the NZCASS includes sexual offences and threats when producing overall crime estimates. The Scottish Crime and Justice Survey and the British Crime Survey, however, exclude these offences (Page et al 2010b). Given that threats and sexual assaults collectively comprise 26 percent of all NZCASS crime (Morrison, Smith and Gregg, 2010), the exclusion of these crime categories means that results on the total amount of crime and overall victimisation risk are not compatible across these surveys. This also has implications for comparing overall Police reporting rates of crime across different surveys. For example, the 2009 NZCASS found that 32 percent of crime overall was reported to the Police, but that threats and sexual offences were less likely to be reported to the Police, with 22 percent and seven percent of these crimes brought to Police attention respectively (see Morrison, Smith and Gregg, 2010). The inclusion of threats and assaults in the NZCASS will therefore lower the overall reporting rate. Consequently, the variation in offence composition across surveys means that overall reporting rates between different countries are incompatible.

Definitions of offences also differ across the different surveys. This is not entirely surprising as the scope of criminal offences varies across different jurisdictions, and it is sensible that the definitions used in national-level surveys correspond to local legal definitions. A useful example of differing definitions is burglary. In the NZCASS a burglary includes theft from within an enclosed space such as a front or back yard in addition to theft from within a house where a person has entered the premises without permission. This definition is in line with legislative changes to the definition of burglary occurring in 2003 (see Mayhew and Reilly, 2007). However, definitions in other surveys tend to be much narrower. For example, the British Crime Survey does not include thefts from enclosed spaces in the category of burglary, while the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey only counts a burglary if there is evidence that there was forced entry into the premises (see Page et al 2010a).

## THE NZCASS IN AN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

### Comparing the New Zealand Crime and Safety Survey with other international victim surveys

Another notable difference is the treatment of attempted offences. While the NZCASS does not distinguish between actual and attempted offences in the counts for particular crime categories, this is not the case in other surveys where attempts are analysed separately (see, for example, the Australian Victimisation Survey, ABS, 2010). This has particular implications when analyses are conducted about the seriousness of different types of offence, whether victims perceived events as crimes or something else, the impact of crime, and victims' reporting activities. Looking at the proportion of crime reported to the Police, for example, research has consistently shown that people are more likely to report more serious crimes (Sparks, 1981; Mayhew, 2008; Morrison, Smith and Gregg, 2010), and it is likely that an attempted burglary is considered less serious than an actual burglary. Consequently, analysing attempts and actual offences separately will mean that Police reporting rates for different offence categories will be much higher than they would be if attempted offences were also included.

### Offence categorisation

In addition to having slightly different offence coverage, national-level surveys also group offences in different ways. This, in turn, limits the opportunity to make meaningful comparisons between grouped crime categories. This is particularly true in relation to violent crime, which is categorised differently in most surveys. For example, "confrontational crime" in the NZCASS includes assaults, threats to the person and personal property, and personal property damage.<sup>2</sup> In the British Crime Survey "violent crime" includes assaults and robberies, but excludes threats (Smith and Hoare, 2009). This is the same as the Northern Ireland and Scottish surveys (see Toner and Freil, 2009; Page et al 2010b). In the US National Crime Victim Survey, "violent crime" incorporates rape and sexual assaults in addition to assaults and robbery (Rand 2009). With threats comprising a substantial proportion of NZCASS crime, their inclusion in the category of confrontational crime means that the NZCASS equivalent of "violent crime" covers a much greater proportion of offences than other surveys.

### Offence truncation

Another area of difference between the NZCASS and other international surveys is the differing levels of offences that can be counted per person. It is standard practice in victimisation surveys to impose artificial limits on the number of crimes that can be counted per person to improve the overall reliability of estimates, minimise the burden on respondents, and reduce survey length and cost (Planty, 2007). In the NZCASS, up to 60 offences can be counted per respondent; in other international surveys the limit is set much lower.

This difference is particularly salient in relation to the treatment of series events, where a person has experienced a number of similar offences over time, such as domestic violence and/or sexual assaults. The British Crime Survey and Scottish Crime and Justice Survey impose a limit of five "series" assaults per person. The National Crime Victims Survey (US) imposes a cut off point at six incidents per series. In contrast, the NZCASS records up to ten offences. Given that research shows that assaults (especially by people well known to the victim) have higher rates of repeat victimisation relative to other types of offence, differences in offence truncation in relation to assaults alone can have a significant impact on the total amount of crime measured by different surveys (see Morrison, Smith and Gregg, 2010; Mayhew and Reilly, 2007). Differences in offence truncation, therefore, could go some way to explaining why violent crime comprises a

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<sup>2</sup> For the incident-based analysis in the NZCASS, "confrontational crime" also includes robbery and sexual offences (see Morrison et al (2010) Chapter 8).

## THE NZCASS IN AN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Comparing the New Zealand Crime and Safety Survey with other international victim surveys

much greater proportion of all crime in the NZCASS compared to the British and US surveys (Walker et al 2009; Rand, 2009).

The truncation issue raises a broader question about whether measuring more crime makes a survey like the NZCASS ‘better’ or ‘worse’ compared to other surveys. In the end, this is a matter of local preference. In relation to the NZCASS, it was agreed that knowing about more crime was preferable as it is often more difficult to try and address crime issues that remain hidden.

### Questionnaire design differences

As noted above, national-level surveys are developed with specific local needs and resourcing issues in mind. In addition to affecting the mode of the survey and the sample frame, this also impacts on the questionnaire design. Most victimisation surveys include screener questions and victim forms, but there are many differences between surveys that can have a marked impact on the results obtained (see Mayhew, 2008; Skogan, 1986; Lynch, 2006).

Research has demonstrated that the order in which questions are posed can affect results, particularly in relation to opinion-based questions about the fear of crime and people’s confidence in the criminal justice system. It has been found that placing such questions at the beginning of a questionnaire measures more worry and less confidence than placing such questions further into the survey after the victimisation screener questions have been asked (see, for example, MacLeod et al 2009; Mayhew, 2008).

The exact wording of questions also varies between victimisation surveys. Key examples of wording differences occur in questions about the fear of crime and perceptions of the criminal justice system. In regards to the fear of crime, many international surveys, such as the Australian and Canadian surveys, ask respondents how *likely* they think it is that they will experience specific crimes in the next 12 months. In contrast, the NZCASS asks victims more broadly, *how worried* they are about being a victim of certain offences. Research has shown that the latter style of question tends to illicit greater levels of worry than the former (Farrall, Jackson and Gray, 2009). In relation to public perceptions of the criminal justice system, most surveys pose questions on this subject in slightly different ways, contextualising the performance of different agencies in relation to specific tasks. The NZCASS, in contrast, simply asks respondents whether they think different criminal justice groups are doing a good or poor job.

Research has shown that the greater the amount of prompts, the more crime will be recalled by respondents (see Mayhew, 2008; Lynch, 2006). Because more prompts are possible in face-to-face surveys compared to phone or mail-based surveys, it is likely that face-to-face surveys will encourage the better recall of victimisation events and therefore measure more crime.

### Interpreting difference and similarity

Regardless of the methodological and design variations outlined above, even if the methods were identical interpretational issues would still remain. As Sztompka (1990: 47) notes, it is important to consider ‘what makes a difference a difference? When is the same the same, and when is the same really different?’ This interpretational dilemma is crucial when comparing victimisation survey results internationally. For example, a higher incidence of victimisation may suggest that:

- a country has more crime;
- crime is more salient in the minds of residents in that country;

## THE NZCASS IN AN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Comparing the New Zealand Crime and Safety Survey with other international victim surveys

- residents in that country have more inclination to disclose their victimisation experiences to government-funded researchers;
- or, a combination of these explanations (see Nelken, 2010; Harland, 1995; Sparks 1981).

In short, comparisons of quantitative results are of limited value in the absence of understanding the broader context from which they emerge (UNODC and UNECE, 2010).

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