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Public surveys of crime

REPORT OF A WORKSHOP HELD AT SIDNEY SUSSEX COLLEGE CAMBRIDGE 6–8 APRIL 1981

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Introduction

This paper represents the formal record of the proceedings. However, it does not attempt to follow discussion point by point. Rather, it groups points together largely on a thematic basis.

2. The possibility of mounting a national crime survey in England and Wales has been discussed within the Home Office on a number of occasions. The workshop was convened to enable the Department to canvass a wide range of informed opinion before reaching a final decision. A full list of participants is given at Annex A and the programme is reproduced at B. Annexes C and D reproduce two preliminary papers respectively by the Crime Policy Planning Unit, dealing with the case for surveys, and by the Research Unit, outlining draft proposals. These papers, not formally tabled for discussion at the workshop, were intended to set out the background to the issues which would be raised and to provide a common starting point for a discussion of crime surveys in general. In what follows a distinction is made between crime surveys and the particular components of which they are formed.

The purpose of Crime Surveys

3. The case for a victimisation component was perhaps most concisely put by Dr Scarr of the US Department of Justice: victimisation surveys provided the best available data for assessing the incidence of crime, and governments therefore had some responsibility to use them. The contrast most usually made was with official statistics of offences recorded by the police of the kind published in England and Wales in the Criminal Statistics. It was accepted that the Criminal Statistics were fuller and more carefully prepared than comparable data available in many other countries; for example, the US Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) were said to be less reliable guides to police activity than their British counterparts. The drawbacks of all such statistics of recorded crime were well-known and were outlined in the paper at Annex C: they were able to record only a small proportion of the crimes committed in society, and gave a distorted picture of the real nature of crime both because certain categories of crime tended not to be reported and by appearing to present as trends in criminal activity what might be to a greater or a lesser extent trends in public reporting or recording practice. For example, the introduction of community policing methods might be accompanied by an apparent rise in petty crime, and it was not possible to tell from the statistics alone whether in fact more offences were being committed. Dr van Dijk gave an instance of this from Dutch experience. Statistics of recorded crime had shown a decrease in cycle thefts;

a victimisation survey had shown an increase during the same period and also a fall in the proportion of incidents reported to the police. Dr Biderman made the more subtle point that the Criminal Statistics were not able to distinguish between serious and trivial crimes. The bulk of crimes reported to the police were not, in fact, serious to victims, but incidents which might be much more serious in their personal or for example financial consequences to the victim went unrecorded. Similarly, although individually much non-reported crime was trivial, cumulatively it could be more important than that presented in UCR data, and indeed reflective of serious social dislocation otherwise overlooked by UCR data.

4. Discussion pointed out, however, that the arguments for collecting data on the incidence of victimisation did not all run in one direction. The deficiencies in official statistics were already well known from a theoretical point of view and scarcely justified the expense of a victim survey to give them a sharp empirical edge. Victimisation surveys themselves had drawbacks. They too might provide a distorted picture of crime, implicitly, by concerning themselves only with offences which had identifiable individual victims, and consequently under-representing crimes, for example of fraud against corporate bodies, the incidence of which was much harder to measure. In the discussion which sought to weigh these conflicting viewpoints, some divergence between criminologists and administrators emerged. The criminologists seemed much readier to conclude that the advantages outweighed the drawbacks and that, bearing in mind how distortions could be remedied by a self-report component, the information a victimisation survey could provide would justify itself in the long term. Administrators on the other hand were more exacting in their search for immediate and tangible benefits, or at least benefits with some more direct policy relevance.

5. As to surveying phenomena beyond victimisation, the Research Unit's draft proposal (Annex D) had added to a victimisation "core" a series of components which could be linked to it, dealing with risk; fear of crime; use of police services; and self-reported offending. The argument for introducing such components was that they could provide at a comparatively low marginal cost a source of information about crime and public reactions to it not easily available from other sources. Dr Skogan gave a list of examples: knowledge about the costs and impact of crime on victims; support networks; the seriousness of offences or incidents; use of police and other services; citizen behaviour; attitudes to and assessments of crime; and the geography

of crime.

6. The US Federal Government's survey, the National Crime Survey (NCS) dealt only with victimisation and was preoccupied with the enumeration of incidents. It was published annually to promote comparison with the UCR. Other surveys tended to be broader in scope if more limited in population coverage. In the US, local surveys had looked at fear of crime, crime prevention behaviour and other issues. The Dutch national survey contained a victimisation component which was fixed and repeated, and a variable component dealing with attitudes or other subjects which need not be repeated. In Canada, a survey had been undertaken but the results were not yet available (and might be threatened by resource restrictions). Like the Dutch survey, the Canadians had added components to a victimisation survey which drew heavily on the NCS questionnaire; but in this case information on victimisation was considered the least important objective of the survey and was subordinated (because of its relevance to crime prevention) to components dealing with risk, the impact of incidents on the victim in terms of fear, loss of money and his work and 'indicators of the criminal justice system's functioning' - public attitudes, etc. One feature of the Canadian survey was that it was local, being based on 10,000 telephone interviews in Vancouver: this reflected the particular circumstances of the Canadian criminal justice system in which there were considerable regional variations.

7. Dr Skogan distinguished four 'levels' of information about crime which might be needed. The first level was operational intelligence: factual information about when and where crimes took place, of the kind which might be useful to the police or the judiciary. A second level, administration, was to do with short-term forecasts of the management needs for example of the police. Dr Skogan did not consider that crime surveys could usefully provide information on either of these levels. But surveys were useful on the third level, policy understanding - that is, more general questions about trends and forecasts - for the executive and the legislature, and on the fourth, which he called 'enlightenment', raising the level of public consciousness and political debate. These were all aspects of the utility of crime surveys which were discussed further in the syndicate groups and are reported on variously below.

Police Uses

8. On Dr Skogan's analysis the police stood to gain least from a national

crime survey. The syndicate whose remit was to examine this question tended to confirm this, and so did, in plenary session, the police representatives. One criticism that had been made of the American recorded crime statistics was that they failed to include all the crimes which the public had reported. It was maintained on behalf of the British police that they put great emphasis on the accuracy of crime recording, and that the resulting data provided an entirely adequate basis for operations against crime. Although prepared to acknowledge the shortcomings of the Criminal Statistics as a reflection of the 'dark figure of crime', the police representatives nonetheless remained sceptical about the ability of the victimisation core to supplement what they already knew in any useful way. Any information on the first two of Dr Skogan's levels would come too slowly to affect tactical management which had to be assessed locally almost on a day to day basis.

9. Discussion of these views identified a feeling that there was some danger of this position being overstated. Dr Teske, who had had some experience working on the results of crime surveys with police in Texas, emphasised that the police there had in fact gained considerably from the insights afforded by crime surveys, and there was confirmation of this view from West Germany. Dr Vader and Dr Steinhilper drew attention to ways in which survey findings had led police to attach greater priority to crime prevention in their countries. Dr van Dijk said that in the Netherlands crime surveys had exposed dissatisfaction with police services, reflected in declining reporting rates; the surveys had induced the police to give priority to the small crimes which had escaped the official statistics. It seemed that the image of the police was improving as a result. The problem of trying to improve police effectiveness at a time when police resources seemed unlikely to continue growing at former rates could also benefit from the use of data gained from crime surveys. Overall, however, it had to be agreed that although there might be advantages in a national crime survey from a police standpoint they were not enough to justify conducting one on those grounds alone.

Criminological Uses

10. The criminological community had a major interest in fresh information about crime and the criminal justice system. Professor Cherns argued that as in any social science it was desirable to get as close as possible to the phenomena under consideration in order to measure them. At present crime had to be measured through official statistics, which the phenomena reached only if successfully reported and recorded. Victimisation surveys gave an

opportunity of measuring crime from closer quarters and, it followed, with greater accuracy. Others stressed that criminological theory often lacked a firm empirical base: crime surveys would therefore fulfil a real need for information and could be used to test theoretical arguments which had been put forward in the absence of hard data. They could provide a more detailed explanation of why official statistics fell short of providing a complete picture. But there were methodological problems which should not be ignored. The self-report component seemed to raise difficulties of interpretation, although it would be helpful if it could be brought to illuminate the extent to which victims of crimes were also offenders. One of the more intriguing methodological questions was the extent to which the process of questioning in a survey contributed to a victim's identification of himself as a victim; the question was raised of whether it might not be possible to include in a survey a component on the way surveys themselves operated on the mind of the respondent.

Crime surveys and criminal policy

11. Dr Scarr said at one point that the results of a survey would be of use to anyone who had the job of apportioning resources to different agencies, and this, of course, included those responsible for criminal policy. Professor Bottoms, rapporteur for the relevant syndicate, took this further. He divided the components described in the Research Unit proposal into three groups: first, components on victimisation and risks; second, fear of crime and use of police services; and third, the self-report component. The syndicate agreed that victimisation surveys provided useful material for resource planning, but this utility depended largely on the repetition of the survey at intervals to identify trends. An analysis at one particular instant of the incidence of crime would have comparatively little to offer to criminal policy. Information on risks and on correlates of victimisation would be of more immediate value and would not need to be collected more than once. But it was only when it became possible to track the variations of incidence over time that surveys would be really useful in this area.

12. Professor Bottoms' second group of components offered a consumer perspective on crime and the criminal justice system. It was suggested that this information was also important to the formulation of criminal policy, but it did not need to be repeated, as for example the Dutch had found by altering the questions they asked in this general area. As to the third element, the self-report component

study, Dr Bottoms expressed scepticism, primarily on the methodological grounds. (See also paragraph 20 below.)

13. Further discussion identified no instant consensus. On the one hand, there were those who thought that, although crime surveys would have no direct or dramatic effect on criminal policy, they would provide data which could be fed into policy discussions at many points where policy-makers had currently to rely on data from the Criminal Statistics; and it seemed possible that, if victimisation data were not available, arguments based on the Criminal Statistics might be used to support increased expenditure, for example on police manpower, which would not otherwise be justifiable. (In addition, there had been important direct effects on policy formulation, eg US Congressional abandonment of a proposed elderly victim support programme following demonstration that it was in fact the young who were at greater risk.) On the other hand, the impact of survey data would be limited since strictly they were relevant only to that proportion of police resources (less than 20%) devoted to investigating recorded crime. In addition, at least in England and Wales, it seemed that financial cutbacks were likely to be more important determinants of resource allocation in the near future than statistical data from either victimisation surveys or police records. Furthermore, there was a possibility that information on consumer demand might raise expectations of services which governments could not hope to fulfil. Finally, there was again the question of whether the results of a survey would make contributions to criminal policy which could not be made already either through the results of existing statistics or surveys or on a theoretical basis.

Crime surveys and public opinion

14. Here some strong claims had been made for crime surveys, but here too their practical impact seemed difficult to gauge. It was agreed that popular conceptions of crime, particularly as reflected in the media, bore little resemblance to the picture uncovered by crime surveys. By concentrating on the statistics of recorded crime and on its most violent manifestations, the media depicted a society growing steadily more lawless and unpleasant; but crime surveys showed that most crimes were trivial and suggested that increases in recorded crime often exaggerated and sometimes falsified the real trends. It had been argued that, successfully presented, crime surveys could serve to improve attitudes to crime and promote more realistic debate. There was plenty of anecdotal evidence that this had happened in other countries. Dr Skogan claimed that no US politician speaking of crime would any longer dare to rely on UCR data. Dr van Dijk said that it was as a result of the national crime survey that the Dutch had come to realise that most crimes were trivial and amenable to simple preventive measures although it could be doubted whether a crime survey was necessary to bring such a change about. Dr Abrams drew an analogy with debates on poverty

early in the century; when the issue had had to be discussed in terms of the relatively small number of people registered as paupers. The real nature of the problem had not been recognised until other measures of poverty had been developed; but it had been a slow process. If a comparable change were to take place in discussions of crime, it might not therefore be expected immediately.

15. Telling as these points were, they did not amount to conclusive evidence that a survey or surveys would have the desired effect on public opinion. It was also difficult to show that it had been crime surveys that had brought about undisputed changes in public opinion for example in America. The public opinion syndicate came to the conclusion that too little was known about the formation of public opinion to give an accurate prediction of the effect a crime survey might have. There was not one homogeneous public but several, and information had to pass through various channels before it reached the public domain. It would be less important to reach the public at large than the groups which influenced public debate and mediated opinions into society, eg lobbies, pressure groups, even policy-makers and administrators. It seemed likely that a crime survey would do this at least to some extent though the processes whereby such groups formed views were again little understood. In so far as effects might conceivably be traumatic - not apparently the usual experience - they would be confined to the first survey which would expose the prevalence of victimisation: they would be lessened on repeats, which might show that rises in crime had not been as bad as everyone had supposed. But in each case, it was clear there would need to be careful presentation and commentary.

16. In this and other contexts several speakers suggested that it was important to present the results of a survey to promote comparison with recorded crime statistics. An important aspect of current work on the NCS was the improvement of comparability with the UCR, and in the Netherlands victimisation rates were available six months after the end of the relevant year, several months before recorded crime statistics were published.

Repeats

17. The Research Unit's proposal, whilst mentioning the possibility of repeating the initial survey, possibly every three or five years, did not discuss the issue of repeats at any great length. In discussion, however, one view expressed repeatedly was that some of the effects of the victimisation

core of surveys would be lost without repetition, and repetition was certainly regarded as an important feature of both the US and Dutch surveys. There were two principal arguments. First, certain data - trends - could only be derived after repeats. In discussing the effects of a survey on criminal policy and on public opinion, it was agreed that data on trends were potentially more valuable than simple incidence data. A single survey might have only the negative effect of exaggerating fears of the prevalence of crime. Repeats would indicate whether, for example, crime was increasing as quickly as supposed. Secondly, it was argued that if surveys were to have an impact as a serious data source they needed to be published as a series on the same basis as statistics of recorded crime. In the US, for example, the UCR continued but regularly accompanied by the NCS data so that the two pictures of crime, each throwing light on the other, could be seen side by side. Similar arrangements were in hand in Holland.

National versus local surveys

18. A further question not fully explored in the background papers was whether the objectives of a national crime survey might not be equally well served by local projects. Previous crime surveys in this country had been undertaken on a local basis, and it might be argued that, apart from victimisation, further local projects might examine the issues listed in the Research Unit paper. The Canadian survey was based as already mentioned on 10,000 households in Vancouver; in describing this survey, Mr Evans drew attention to some of the advantages of local surveys, which could provide information on the first two levels which Dr Skogan had said a national survey could not influence. Besides, a local survey could locate crime phenomena in the community much more accurately than a national survey which would of necessity deal with many different kinds of social organisation. The police representatives agreed that they might find local surveys a useful source of tactical intelligence provided the material was up to date and in sufficient detail. An example of a survey with clear implications for policing had been carried out in Sheffield - implications which the police had taken up.

19. It was difficult to dispute that local projects might not in some respects do as well as or better than some of the proposed components of the crime survey. But victimisation data had to be provided nationally if they were to be put to the uses which had been identified; in particular, local data suffered from the important defect that it was impossible to generalise

credibly from them. If it were decided that a national victimisation survey was worthwhile for its own sake, additional components potentially of more direct interest to the police could be included, as already stated, at low extra cost.

Self-reported offending

20. The most controversial element of the survey was the proposal to ask respondents about offences which they themselves had committed. A self-report study would be the only way of tracing certain crimes such as shoplifting and employee theft which would not be picked up by a victimisation survey. But doubts were expressed about the reliability of the data produced. It was suggested that the presence of a self-report component might deter respondents who would otherwise have co-operated with the victimisation component, or at least, that the presence of a self-report component and its possible effect on respondent behaviour might be held to invalidate the victimisation component. Problems of confidentiality were also seen as matters for concern.

21. Dr Clarke said that there had been some experience eg in the Sparks survey of combining self-reported offending with other questions, and that there seemed to be no inseparable methodological or other obstacles. It was in fact a potentially fruitful area, providing information both on the prevalence of offending and on the relationship between offending and victimisation. A pilot study on self-report was already under way and Social and Community Planning Research, who were conducting it, had overcome the problem of confidentiality by tearing off the respondent's identification from the form in his presence at the end of the interview. A better informed judgement could perhaps wait on experience with the pilot. Preliminary results suggested, however, that objections to the relatively novel employment of the technique with adults in Britain were somewhat exaggerated.

Conclusion

22. Summing up at the concluding session, Mr Brennan said that several points had emerged very strongly from the discussion. If there were to be a survey, it should be national; it should contain a core section including the victimisation component, which should be repeated at intervals yet to be decided, and a variable section; and the variable section might or might not include a self-report component, the importance of which lay in its capacity to redress distortions inherent in surveying victims alone. The sense of the workshop

seemed to be that a survey should go ahead, but that was a decision which would have to be taken elsewhere. In the meantime, the workshop had served to raise discussion to a more informed level and he therefore cordially thanked the participants, especially those who had come from abroad, for their contributions.

Crime Policy Planning Unit
Home Office
June 1981

WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS

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Dr A K Bottomley	University of Hull
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Mr A J E Brennan	Home Office
Professor A Cherns	Loughborough University
Dr R V G Clarke	Home Office Research Unit
Mr I J Croft	Home Office Research Unit
Mr J Evans	Research Division, Canadian Solicitor General's Department
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Mr J Hall	Survey Research Unit, North London Polytechnic
Mr R Harvey	Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary
Mr J E Hayzelden	Home Office Police Department
Mr J M Hough	Home Office Research Unit
Mr I Jones	Treasury
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Dr H Scarr	US Department of Justice
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Dr W G Skogan	Northwestern University, Illinois
Dr C Smith	Social Science Research Council
Mr D Smith	Policy Studies Institute
Dr G Steinhilper	Research and Planning, Lower Saxony Ministry of Justice
Dr R Teske	Austin University, Texas/Max Planck Institute
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PROGRAMME

Monday 6 April

1.00	LUNCH	
2.15	Introduction (Mr Morris) Mr Skogan (introduced by Dr Clarke)	Session Chairman: Mr Croft
3.45	TEA	
4.15	Professor Cherns Open discussion	
5.30	Close	
7.00	DINNER	

Tuesday 7 April

8.15 - 8.45	BREAKFAST	
10.00	Outline of day's programme (Mr Morris) Mr Biderman Dr Scarr	Session Chairman: Mr Bantock
11.00	COFFEE	
11.30	Group discussions	
1.00	LUNCH	
2.15	Dr van Dijk Mr Evans	Session Chairman: Mr Bohan
3.15	TEA	
3.45 5.30	Group discussions Close	

Wednesday 8 April

8.15 - 8.45	Breakfast	
10.00	Report-back on group discussions	Session Chairman: Miss Maurice
11.00	COFFEE	
11.30	Final Session	Session Chairman: Mr Brennan
1.00	LUNCH	