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CRIME VICTIMIZATION IN AUSTRALIA: A COMPARISON WITH THE U.S.

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Compared with the United States, victimization survey research in Australia is in its infancy. Two early surveys of limited geographical coverage (Wilson and Brown, 1973; Congalton and Najman, 1974) have recently been followed by the publication of the first national victimization survey. The full results of this survey are contained in the report General Social Survey Crime Victims (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1979). These data have been the subject of a number of papers dealing with specific aspects of the findings (Biles and Braithwaite, 1979; Biles, Braithwaite and Braithwaite, 1979; Braithwaite and Biles, 1979; Braithwaite and Biles, 1980). The purpose of the present paper is to compare the results of the Australian and U.S. National Crime Surveys.

The Law Enforcement Assistance Administration's survey is based on interviews conducted in 60,000 households with 135,000 persons while the Australian victims survey included only 8,414 households and 18,694 persons. Because the Australian population is comparatively small, the sampling fraction is larger in the Australian survey. The household response rate for the Australian survey was 91.5 per cent, a rate only possible with a survey conducted by a body with the experience and authority of the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

The Crimes

The Australian study gathered interview data during February-May 1975 on all victimizations during the twelve months prior to the date of interview for seven serious crime categories.² While the definitions were drawn with an eye to international comparability, we will see later that there are some definitional differences from the American survey. The seven crime categories were:

- Break and enter: breaking into and entering a dwelling and then committing or intending to commit a crime in that dwelling.
- Motor vehicle theft: stealing or illegally using a motor vehicle or using a motor vehicle without authorization.
- Theft: stealing without threatening or using violence or force to any person or property.
- Fraud, forgery, false pretences: all types of fraud, forgery, uttering (circulating any fraudulent document or money), falsification of records, false pretences and all offences involving false claims, deception, trickery, cheating or breaches of trust.
- Rape and attempted rape: all rape, attempted rape and assault with intent to rape. Only females were asked about rape victimization.
- Robbery: stealing which involves the threat or use of actual violence or force to a person or property.
- Assault: unlawful attack by one person upon another for the purpose of inflicting bodily injury.

For all offences except motor vehicle theft an attempt counts equally with an actual offence. Thefts in connection with breaking and entering are only included in "break and enter."

TABLE 1

Crime Rates per 100,000 Estimated from the Australian Crime Victims Survey Compared with Rates from Police Records of Reported Crime for 1974-75*

	Victim Survey Rate per 100,000	Crimes Reported to Police Rate per 100,000
Break and Enter	1,768.8	925.8
Motor Vehicle Theft	757.0	372.1
Robbery with Violence	170.9	25.1
Theft	7,361.6	-
Fraud, Forgery and False Pretences	2,584.2	256.5
Rape, Attempted Rape	94.5	5.9
Assault	2,305.0	-

* Police reported crime rate is based on data for July 1974 to June 1975 reported in *Year Book Australia, 1976-77*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.

Comparing Victim-Reported with Police Recorded
Crime Rates

Table 1 shows that the Australian crime rate estimated from the National Crime Victims Survey varies from just under twice as high as the rate based on police records of reported crime in the case of break and enter, up to sixteen times as high in the case of rape. The break and enter rate should have been considerably lower than the police recorded rate since business and public building victimizations are excluded from the study.

Police reported crime rates also differ from victim survey rates since they include victims under 15 years of age, whereas the victimization survey only covers persons 15 years of age and older. The police rates are therefore per 100,000 of the total population, while the survey rates are per 100,000 of the population 15 years and over living in localities with a population of at least 500. Both the fact that rural areas and children under 15 are excluded from the victim survey should serve to inflate the victim survey rates when compared to the police recorded rates. It should also be noted that the Northern Territory, a sparsely populated jurisdiction with high official crime rates, was excluded from the survey.

Even though it is likely that the victimization survey will give us an estimate which is closer to the true figure, it would be foolish to assume that the total explanation for the discrepancy between the two sets of estimates lies with the error in police statistics. One way of further exploring the discrepancies is to compare the number of crimes of each type reported to the police during the period covered by the survey with the survey estimate of the number of people who were victimized and who said that they

reported this victimization to the police. Table 2 provides such a comparison.

As one would expect, given that only household victimizations are included in the survey, the survey estimate of the number of break and enters which were reported to the police throughout the country during the year was lower than the figure recorded by the police. The most encouraging comparison is that the survey estimate of the number of motor vehicle thefts reported to the police is nearly identical to the police statistic. The most meaningful comparison which can be made is with respect to motor vehicle theft because whereas people under 15 years of age can be raped, robbed, and so on, they cannot normally have their car stolen.

The most disturbing discrepancies between police and victimization data were with respect to robbery and rape. Feminists would of course be inclined to blame the police for failing even to record many genuine rape cases which are reported to them. It might be suggested that policemen often refuse to accept an allegation of rape without corroborative evidence or that they discourage rape victims from making reports. It would be unwise to use the present data to bolster such a position, however, since while the standard error on the survey estimate for the total rape rate is acceptable, it is very high for police reported rapes. A theory of selective police neglect of reported crimes is less plausible in the case of robbery than with rape.

It seems likely that the survey estimate for robbery could be an overestimate. Most laypersons have a commonsense understanding of robbery as being the same as theft. The pertinent question in the interview was worded as follows: "Within the last 12 months have you been robbed? That is, did anyone use violence or threaten violence to take anything from you?" Even though the question

clearly connoted stealing with violence against the person, and even though well trained interviewers were on hand to clear up misconceptions, one is still led to expect that many respondents may have reacted to the first part of the question which simply mentions the word "robbed", and immediately volunteered instances which were in fact cases of common theft.

Comparability Between the U.S. and Australian Surveys

While the Australian survey covers basically the 1974-75 fiscal year the American survey covers the 1975 calendar year. The Australian research is clearly inferior in the way it deals with the "telescoping" problem. A number of call-back studies (Biderman et al, 1967; Ennis, 1967; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1970a, 1970b; LEAA, 1972) have shown that faulty memory is a problem with victim surveys, even though Gottfredson and Hindelang (1977) found that memory error tended to be random rather than systematically related to characteristics of the victim (such as age, race, education) (cf. Skogan, 1975). Victims surveys have been criticized both for undercounting (Maltz, 1975) and for overcounting (Levine, 1976). There is evidence that accuracy of recall of known victimizations declines as the gap between interview and incident decreases (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1970a). Hence, the U.S. survey, based as it is upon two six month recall periods, employs a methodology superior to the single 12 month recall of the Australian survey. Moreover, since this first Australian survey is unbounded, the problem of forward telescoping is greater than in a bounded survey which questions respondents on whether they have been a victim "since the last interview." LEAA has found that unbounded surveys produce higher victimization rates than bounded

TABLE 2
Police Records of Number of Crimes Reported to Police
Compared with Victim Survey Estimate of Crimes
Reported to Police in Australia for 1974-75
(excluding Northern Territory)

	Police Records of Crimes Reported	Survey Estimate of Crimes Reported	Approximate Standard Error of Survey Estimate
Break and Enter	126,258	88,500*	9,300
Motor Vehicle Theft	50,743	54,700	5,400
Robbery with Violence	3,428	7,700	1,900
Fraud, Forgery and False Pretences	34,982	48,400	7,800
Rape, Attempted Rape	803	2,200	1,000

* Includes household victimizations only. Does not include business or public victimizations.

surveys presumably because of forward telescoping (OECD, 1976, p. 26.)

Both surveys were based on a stratified multi-stage area sample of households. In both surveys interviews were solicited from all occupants of the selected households who could be found at home, and where occupants could not be found at home after call-back interviewers were permitted to obtain information about the missing members from others in the household. This is an important deficiency of both surveys, since the San Jose Methods Test (LEAA, 1972) showed that individual reports of victimization resulted in almost twice as many incidents as indirect household reporting.

Comparison of U.S. and Australian Victimization Rates

The surprising finding in Table 3 is that Australia is shown by the comparison of the two surveys to have a significantly higher rate for motor vehicle theft than the United States. This is a notable finding because we have seen from the discussion of Table 1 that there is good reason for confidence in the data for car theft. Even if we were to attempt to enter a correction for the fact that the American rates are for the population 12 and over, while the Australian rate is for the population 15 and over (12-14 year olds don't own cars), we could still not explain away the fact that the Australian rate is 39 percent higher. Moreover, the percent standard error on the Australian estimate is 9.5 percent, and on the American estimate 6.1 percent. So even if the American estimate were two standard errors below the true figure, an event with a joint probability through sampling error of one chance in 2,000, the Australian rate would still be slightly higher than the American rate.

TABLE 3
Comparison of Victimization Rates and Percentage of Victimization Reported for U.S. and Australian National Crime Surveys

	U.S. Victim Survey Rate per 100,000 [†]	Australian Victim Survey Rate per 100,000	U.S. Victimizations Reported %	Australian Victimizations Reported %
Break and Enter (Households only)	4,012*	1,769	49	60
Motor Vehicle Theft	546*	757	91	87
Robbery with Violence	673	171	53	54
Theft	15,070**	7,362	27	34
Rape, Attempted Rape	86***	95	56	28
Assault	2,505	2,305	45	43

[†] From Gottfredson, Michael R., Hindelang, Michael J., and Parisi, Nicolette (eds.) *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics - 1977*, U.S. Department of Justice, L.E.A.A., Washington D.C., 1978.

* Break and enter is called burglary in the U.S. survey. In the U.S. survey break and enter rates and motor vehicle theft rates are calculated per 100,000 households. These rates have been recalculated to per 100,000 persons 12 and over for the purposes of the comparison in this table.

** The U.S. Survey separates personal larcenies from household larcenies. For the purpose of this comparison these have been aggregated and recalculated at a total theft rate per 100,000 persons 12 and over.

*** Excludes male rapes, which are normally included in American figures.

An alternative way of comparing vehicle theft victimization is to calculate rates per 1,000 registered motor vehicles in each respective country. Vehicle theft victimization rates calculated per 1,000 motor vehicles yields a rate of 13.2 for Australia and 11.5 for the United States. This finding is consistent with the results of an earlier intra-national study (Biles, 1977, pp. 101-115) which demonstrated a negative correlation between vehicle theft and ownership rates, as vehicle ownership is somewhat higher in the United States than it is in Australia.

On all other property crime categories--break and enter, robbery with violence, and theft--the American rate is at least twice as high as the Australian rate. In spite of our earlier argument that the Australian robbery rate was inflated by the victim survey methodology, the American rate is still four times as high as the Australian figure.

The other interesting result from Table 3 is that the non-property violent crimes, rape and assault, have nearly identical rates for the two countries. One must be careful with an offence like assault, which has a vaguely specified meaning, even so far as the courts are concerned, that there may be considerable cultural differences in interviewers' and respondents' interpretations of what constitutes an assault.

Comparison of U.S. and Australian Reportability Rates

Percentages of victimizations reported to the police are compared in the last two columns of Table 3. For all offences the number of "no answers" and "don't knows" was higher in the Australian survey, so that the Australian percentages are artifactually slightly lower than they should be in comparison to the U.S.

percentages. Differences between the two countries are generally unremarkable with the exception of rape. The United States survey reveals a rape reportability rate exactly twice as high as in Australia.

Conclusion

Australia has long been assumed to be a more crime free society than the United States. Homicide rates, for example, have always been at least twice as high in the United States. The findings of the Australian Crime Victims Survey casts little doubt on the general proposition that Australia has less crime than the United States.

The surprising findings were, however, that in spite of the general tendency towards greater criminality in America, the victim-reported rates for rape and assault in Australia were approximately equal to those of the United States, and the vehicle theft rates markedly higher. To be more precise, the rape rate in Australia was slightly higher and the assault rate slightly lower but the difference for car theft was substantial. One can only speculate as to the reasons for these findings, but it is suggested that attention should be paid to the culture of the group of Australians who perpetrate the great majority of rapes, assaults and motor vehicle thefts--males between the ages of 15 and 25 years.⁴

Before any such speculation is pushed too far more reliable data are needed. Criminologists should support efforts to generate greater international comparability in statistics such as the OECD Social Indicator Development Programme (OECD, 1976). There is no excuse for social scientists repeating the failures of police agencies throughout the world in ignoring issues of international comparability of statistics. Cross-national comparability of victimization data

is a more achievable objective than the harmonization of police reporting procedures. Yet the tentativeness of the comparisons in this paper is testimony to how far short of achieving this goal we are.

As has become clear at several points above, the most knotty problem is that of differential perceptions on the part of both interviewers and respondents as to what constitutes an act of sufficient seriousness to warrant reporting as a crime incident. Not matter how carefully rape is defined in a research methodology, culture-bound typifications of the difference between rape and seduction will continue to pose a problem. These problems can be somewhat attenuated by focusing on rates for objective types of harm, such as the rate per 100,000 of assaults resulting in medical treatment or hospitalization. Yet can we assume that medical treatment is as serious a matter in a country where everyone can afford a doctor as in a poor country, or that theft of something worth US \$100 is of equal seriousness in nations of variable affluence? Perfect international comparability of crime data is unattainable. Nevertheless, there is a commitment on the part of those responsible for the design of the next Australian National Crime Victims Survey that issues of international comparability will be given greater attention than in the past.

FOOTNOTES

1. For more complete details on the sampling methodology and the estimation of standard error in the Australian Crime Victims Survey see (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1979).

2. For the comparative purposes of the present paper only seven crime types are included. However, there were in the survey three additional crime categories--nuisance calls, peeping, and indecent exposure.
3. For the sake of maximizing the comparability of the denominators in calculating these rates numbers of registered passenger cars (excluding trucks, motor cycles, etc.) has been used. Source is United Nations Statistical Yearbook, 1975, table 157, p. 9492.
4. It has been suggested, for example, that the culture of the young male in Australia is emphatically "macho" with sexual conquests being regarded as a guarantee of peer group status. The ownership or use of automobiles provides status to the young as well as a means of attracting the attention and companionship of females. One survey of the leisure behaviour of 15-20 year old Australians found that car ownership was a better predictor of patterns of leisure activity than any other variable (Wilson et al, 1972, pp. 57-63). If it is the case that the devaluing of women as no more than objects of sexual gratification and the placing of supreme value on the automobile are more central concerns in Australian youth culture than in other countries, then perhaps we should not be surprised at the comparative level of rape and car theft in Australia.

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VICARIOUS VICTIMIZATION: AN EXPLORATION OF THE FEAR OF CRIME

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In recent years we have witnessed a growing concern over the perception of citizen safety. Political campaigns have been waged on politics of the fear of crime. Bills have been passed, funds allocated, and war declared in order to reduce crime and presumably simultaneously increase the perception of public safety. Although over a decade has elapsed since the passage of the "safe streets" act our understanding of the relationship between the rate of crime and feeling of safety has only recently received significant research attention.

Criminal justice programs emphasizing crime reduction and prevention have traditionally been established upon the assumption that the fear of crime is positively related to the crime rate. However, the fear of crime may be independent of the probability of being victimized. Several important situational and environmental characteristics may create a perception of safety apart from empirical reality. Media dramatization of crime and the identification of one's immediate environment as either safe or dangerous, regardless of the probability of victimization, may contribute to one's feeling of personal vulnerability. The present analysis explores the influence of the probability of victimization, media and perception of environment on the fear of crime.

Public opinion surveys have consistently reported that the fear of crime is a major concern among a significant number of citizens and crime