

Crime Victims and the Police

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ABSTRACT

Over half of all the crimes which occur in Australia are not reported to the police. For various reasons the victims do not make any official complaint, and it is of considerable interest to psychologists as well as to criminal justice personnel to examine these reasons in detail. A recent survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics makes it possible to do this. This survey established that the most common reason for non-reporting was that the victims considered that the offence was 'too trivial', but a large number of victims expressed the view that 'the police could not do anything about it'. Marked differences in the reasons for non-reporting were found for different types of crime, and some differences were also found according to the sex, age, educational attainment and marital status of the victims. A comparison with American reasons for non-reporting showed considerable similarity, but American victims are more inclined than Australians to say that the 'police could not do anything about it' and are less inclined to say that the offence was 'too trivial'. American victims are more likely to report offences to persons other than police.

This paper reports some data from the national crime victimisation survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 1975. Earlier surveys of crime victimisation in Australia by Wilson and Brown (1973) and Congalton and Najman (1974) were restricted to specific regions and to relatively small samples, but both revealed substantial under-reporting of crime. This survey covered 18,694 persons throughout the whole of the country.

The specific concern of this paper is with the reasons victims give for not reporting to the police the fact that they have been victimised. Most crimes are not reported to the police. If citizens invariably reported all serious victimisations, the costs of maintaining police forces would be noticeably higher than at present; whether or not victims should be encouraged to make greater use of their police in this way can only be answered on the basis of an analysis of the reasons why they refrain from doing so.

THE SAMPLE

Dwellings for inclusion in the area probability sample were selected from all parts of Australia excluding the Northern Territory, rural regions and locations with populations of fewer than 500 people. Of the 10,500 dwelling sites originally selected, 9,200 contained effective households of which 8,414 provided data for the survey. These households contained 18,694 persons aged 15 years and over, each of whom supplied some data. The household response rate was 91.5 per cent.

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THE CRIMES

Interview data were gathered on all the victimisations during the previous 12 months for eight types of crime:

- *Assault*: unlawful attack by one person on another for the purpose of inflicting bodily injury.
- *Robbery with violence*: stealing which involves the threat or use of actual violence or force to a person or property.
- *Rape and attempted rape*: all rape, attempted rape and assault with intent to rape. Only females were asked about rape victimisation.
- *Break and enter*: breaking 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 authorisation.
- *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.
- *Theft*: stealing without threatening or using violence or force to any person or property.
- *Nuisance calls*: threats, abuses, indecent calls and other nuisance calls by telephone.

For all offences except motor vehicle theft an attempt has been counted equally with a completed offence. Thefts in connection with breaking and entering were only included in 'Break and enter'.

PROCEDURE

The survey was conducted by experienced census interviewers who received special training for the task. Data on crime victimisations were collected as an adjunct to a larger social survey. Only heads of households were questioned about 'Break and enter' but for all other offences every person over 15 years of age was questioned. The interviews generally took place in a group family situation and, at times, information was provided in relation to family members who were absent and who could not readily be contacted during the survey period. It was left to the discretion of the interviewer to determine whether group or one-to-one interviews were more appropriate. Interviewers were supplied with a manual incorporating instructions defining the meaning of the terms used in individual questions. This guaranteed a degree of reliability and correspondence with legal definitions in the coding of crime categories.

STANDARD ERROR

With a sample of such magnitude, problems of statistical inference loom less large than with most social science data. Nevertheless, with

less common types of crime marginals become quite small. As a matter of policy the Bureau of Statistics does not make available raw data on the number of actual victimisations of each type within the sample. Instead, weighted estimates for the number of victimisations were provided. The weighting procedure is such that the raw figures from different geographical areas are multiplied by different factors according to the proportion of the national population living in that area, and the response rate. While the weighting procedure provides an adequate statistic, it does create some complexity for the social scientist who might be interested in calculating conventional tests of statistical significance. Such tests of significance have not been calculated for the data included in this paper, but Table 1 provides the standard errors for survey estimates of the number of victimisations of each type and the number of non-reported victimisations of each type.

Table 1. Approximate standard error percent for survey estimates of numbers of victimisations Australia for 1975 and numbers of non-reported victimisations in Australia for 1975 by type crime.

	Estimated Number of Victimisations	Standard Error Percent	Estimated Number of Non-Reported Victimisations	Standard Error Percent
Assault	191,500	13.6	131,200	16.3
Robbery with violence	14,200	18.6	5,100	27.9
Rape, attempted rape	7,800	26.5	4,500	33.3
Break and enter	146,500	8.5	42,400	19.3
Motor vehicle theft	62,700	9.8	10,700	20.6
Fraud, forgery, false pretences	214,100	8.6	163,000	9.9
Theft	609,900	3.4	382,600	4.2
Nuisance calls	1,612,594	11.3	232,500*	23.6

* The estimated number of non-reported victimisations relates only to the *most recent* instance of nuisance call.

It can be seen from Table 1 that the survey estimate of the number of break and enter victimisations occurring in Australia during 1975 was 146,500. The approximate percentage standard error on this estimate is 8.5. This means that the standard error is 8.5 per cent of 146,500, i.e. 12,500. Discounting non-sampling errors, there are therefore about two chances in three that the number of break and enters in Australia during 1975 fell between 134,000 and 159,000; and about 19 chances in 20 that it fell between 121,500 and 171,500.

PERCENTAGE OF CRIME REPORTED

Table 2 shows the percentage of offences reported or becoming known to the police. Motor vehicle theft had by far the highest reportability

rate (90.1 per cent) and nuisance telephone calls the lowest (14.0 per cent). The total reportability rate for all offences in the survey, excluding nuisance calls, has been calculated at 42.1 per cent, with 43.7 per cent for male victims and 38.7 per cent for females.

Table 2. Percent of offences reported or becoming known to police by sex of victim*.

	Male %	Female %	Total %
Assault	52.9	19.9	46.4
Robbery with violence	53.5	68.4	60.4
Rape, attempted rape	0.0	32.7	32.7
Break and enter	69.5	64.6	68.4
Motor vehicle theft	90.1	90.4	90.1
Fraud, forgery, false pretences	20.4	40.0	24.5
Theft	36.3	35.1	35.8
Nuisance calls	15.9	13.5	14.0

* "Don't Knows" and "Not Stateds" are excluded from these percentages.

One of the most striking findings shown in Table 2 is the difference between male and female reportability rates for assault. It is possible that many of the assaults against females occurred within families, and this possibility gains some support from the analysis shown later in Table 5. It is also of interest to note that females are almost twice as likely as males to report fraud, forgery, false pretences to the police, and they are also slightly more likely to report robberies.

REASONS FOR NON-REPORTING BY TYPE OF CRIME

From the total column of the detailed analysis shown in Table 3, it can be seen that the most frequently mentioned reasons for not reporting offences to the police were either that the offence was 'Too trivial' or that the 'Police could not do anything about it'. While for 15.2 per cent of all reasons given the victim felt that the 'Police *could not* do anything about it', for only 6.5 per cent did the victim feel that the 'Police *would not bother* to do anything about it'. Other reasons for non-reporting which were moderately well supported were 'Somebody else was notified instead' (7.7 per cent), 'The victim would handle the situation himself' (6.3 per cent) and 'Thought it was a private, not a criminal matter' (5.2 per cent). The 'Too trivial' reason, at 29.8 per cent of all reasons, however, overshadows all of the others.

The reasons for non-reporting are reviewed for each offence in sequence:

- *Assault.* More than for any other offence the victims of assault indicated that they would handle the situation themselves, and there is also

Table 3. Reasons given for not reporting victimisation⁵ to the police by type of crime.

	Assault %	Robbery with Violence %	Rape, Attempted Rape %	Break Enter and %	Motor Vehicle Theft %	Fraud, forgery and false Pretences %	Theft %	Nuisance Calls %	Total %
Police discovered the incident	4.1	0.0	0.0	0.8	21.5	0.9	0.1	0.0	0.9
Somebody else was notified instead	2.1	0.0	0.0	3.1	4.2	17.1	4.8	9.9	7.7
Did not want to take the time (in court, from work, etc.)	0.7	0.0	0.0	1.5	1.1	6.0	1.0	0.4	1.7
Did not want harm or punishment to come to the offender	4.1	4.7	0.0	0.8	10.7	2.7	3.1	0.9	2.6
Afraid of reprisal	6.6	0.0	8.4	1.9	0.0	0.3	0.8	0.6	1.3
Thought it was a private, not a criminal matter	8.1	4.2	8.2	2.2	3.7	16.7	1.5	2.8	5.2
Police could not do anything about it	5.7	4.1	0.0	11.0	3.7	10.6	18.2	19.5	15.2
Police would not bother to do anything about it	7.3	10.7	11.9	8.3	1.2	3.9	8.0	5.0	6.5
Too confused or upset to notify the police	3.2	0.0	30.2	1.2	0.0	0.3	0.2	1.2	0.9
Not sure the true offenders would be caught	1.4	0.0	0.0	2.0	0.0	0.0	2.0	1.0	1.3
Would not bother since offenders thought to be children	1.3	0.0	0.0	3.8	0.0	0.1	3.0	8.5	3.6
Victim would handle situation himself	13.9	4.2	6.8	2.3	8.4	13.3	2.4	5.8	6.3
Fear of insurance problems	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Too trivial	18.1	55.4	0.0	30.5	12.9	11.6	39.5	31.8	29.8
Other reason	23.5	16.8	34.4	30.6	32.7	16.6	15.4	12.6	16.9
Total	100.1	100.1	99.9	100.0	100.1	100.1	100.0	100.0	99.9

a high probability that victims would say that they 'Thought it was a private, not a criminal matter'.

- *Robbery with violence.* The numbers of non-reported robberies are too small to be able to make any unequivocal statement about which reasons for non-reporting are relatively more common for this type of crime.

- *Rape and attempted rape.* As with robbery with violence, the numbers are too small to draw any conclusions about the non-reporting of rape. Even though the percentage who give 'Too confused or upset to notify the police' as their reasons is dramatically high for rape (30.2 per cent for rape compared with 0.9 per cent for all offences combined) the standard error here is unacceptably high.

- *Break and enter.* Possibly the only notable trend in the range of reasons for non-reporting this offence is the fact that 'Victim would handle situation himself' is relatively infrequently given.

- *Motor vehicle theft.* More than with any other type of crime, motor vehicle theft was said not to have been reported because it was the police who discovered the incident. Not wanting harm or punishment to come to the offender was also an unusually common reason for the non-reporting of motor vehicle theft. Reasons for non-reporting which were relatively less common for this offence compared with others were 'Police could not do anything about it', 'Police would not bother to do anything about it', and that the offence was 'Too trivial'.

- *Fraud, forgery, false pretences.* Three kinds of reasons were more commonly given for these offences than for others. These were 'Somebody else notified', 'Thought it was a private, not a criminal matter', and 'Did not want to take the time'.

- *Theft.* As with breaking and entering, the reason 'Victim would handle situation himself' was relatively less frequently used than for other offences. The parallel between theft and break and enter in the reasons given for failure to report the offence to the police probably reflects the fact that in many cases the victim would have no clue as to the identity of the offender.

- *Nuisance calls.* With this relatively minor offence, the most common reason for non-reporting, apart from 'Too trivial', was 'Police could not do anything about it'. Also frequently cited was the reason 'Would not bother since offenders thought to be children'.

REASONS FOR NON-REPORTING, BY SEX

From Table 4 it is clear the sex differences in the reasons given for non-reporting criminal victimisations are generally unremarkable. Females are more likely than males to say that the 'Police could not do anything about it', and that they 'Would not bother since offenders thought to be children'. On the other hand, males are somewhat more likely to fail to report the victimisation because the 'Police would not

bother to do anything about it' and because the 'Victim would handle situation himself'.

Table 4. Reasons for non-reporting all types of crime by sex.

Reasons	Male %	Female %
Police discovered incident	1.4	0.3
Somebody else notified	7.8	7.4
Did not want to take time	2.7	0.3
Did not want to harm/punish offender	2.8	2.3
Afraid of reprisal	1.2	1.6
Thought it was private not criminal	5.6	4.7
Police could not do anything	12.9	18.2
Police would not bother	7.8	4.7
Too confused or upset to notify police	0.3	1.8
Not sure offenders would be caught	1.1	1.6
Offenders thought to be children	1.8	6.1
Would handle situation himself	8.1	4.0
Too trivial	28.5	31.5
Other reason	0.3	1.8
Total	100.0	99.9

Comparisons of sex differences across the types of crime show little variation from the overall pattern shown in Table 3. A notable exception to this trend is provided by assault, the results of which are presented in Table 5. Sex differences in reasons for not reporting assault to the police are quite marked, and it should be borne in mind that female reportability of this offence is considerably lower than it is for males. Feminist scholars who have attached special importance to the offence of wife beating might take particular interest in the pattern of these differences.

Women were far more likely than men to fail to report assault because they 'Thought it was private not criminal' (22.4 per cent versus 4.3 per cent of the reasons given). Women were also more likely than men to fail to report assault because they 'Did not want harm or punishment to come to the offender' (6.0 per cent versus 3.6 per cent). Women were more likely to say that they were 'Too confused or upset to notify the police' (9.2 per cent versus 1.6 per cent), that they 'Would not bother since offenders thought to be children' (6.4 per cent versus 0.0 per cent), and that 'Somebody else was notified instead' (4.9 per cent versus 1.3 per cent). The latter reason possibly reflects the fact that some women were reporting assaults to women's refuges. In contrast, men were markedly more likely than women to fail to report assault because 'The victim would handle the situation himself' (17.1 per cent versus 1.9 per cent) or because the offence was 'Too trivial' (21.0 per cent versus 7.1 per cent).

Table 5. Reasons for non-reporting assault by sex.

Reasons	Male %	Female %
Police discovered incident	5.2	0.0
Somebody else notified	1.3	4.9
Did not want to take time	0.9	0.0
Did not want to harm/punish offender	3.6	6.0
Afraid of reprisal	6.3	7.6
Thought it was private not criminal	4.3	22.4
Police could not do anything	6.3	3.4
Police would not bother	7.2	7.8
Too confused or upset to notify police	1.6	9.2
Not sure offenders would be caught	0.7	3.9
Offenders thought to be children	0.0	6.4
Would handle situation himself	17.1	1.9
Too trivial	21.0	7.1
Other reason	24.7	19.2
Total	100.2	99.8

In general, it can be said that the reasons that women give for failing to report assaults to the police reflect a greater concern for protecting the offender, while reasons given by men reflect a greater self-assurance and a belief that the problem could be worked out without official intervention. It may be that unusual sex differences appear for assault because this offence, like rape, is very much a manifestation of traditional patterns of male/female domination/subordination.

REASONS FOR NON-REPORTING AND AGE OF VICTIM

The detailed results of the survey reveal no consistent relationship between age and the reasons for non-reporting victimisations to the police. This detail is not reproduced here, but the notable trends are summarised.

Young victims in the age range 15 to 19 years are rather more likely than other age groups to say that they were 'Too confused or upset to notify the police' and they were also highly likely to say that 'Somebody else was notified' perhaps because teachers or parents were informed. Victims in the 20 to 24 years age group were more likely than other age groups to say that 'The police would not bother to do anything about it', reflecting perhaps a cynical attitude to police. At the other end of the spectrum, victims aged 60 years or more were more likely to say that 'The police could not do anything about it'. For all age groups, however, the reason 'Too trivial' was the most common one and this shows no relationship with age.

REASONS FOR NON-REPORTING AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

There is again no clear relationship between the reasons for non-reporting and the educational attainment of victims, but those still at school were more likely than others to say 'Somebody else was notified'. School students were also more likely to say that the offence was 'Too trivial'. Those with the lowest educational attainment (either never attended school or left school before 15 years) were those most likely to feel that the offence was a 'Private not a criminal matter', while tertiary educated respondents gave the following reasons more often than other groups: 'Did not want to take the time', 'Did not want harm or punishment to come to the offender', and 'Not sure the offenders would be caught'.

REASONS FOR NON-REPORTING AND MARITAL STATUS

The classification of reasons for not reporting offences to the police showed little variation according to whether the victim was married, never married, widowed, separated, or divorced. The only trend of note in this aspect of the results was a slight tendency for married victims to be less inclined to mention 'Afraid of reprisal' and 'Too confused or upset to notify the police' as reasons for non-reporting. Also, widowed victims were more likely than others to say 'The police could not do anything about it', but only very rarely said that they would handle the matter themselves.

COMPARISON WITH UNITED STATES FINDINGS

Comparisons with findings from the United States national crime surveys (Gottfredson, Hindelang and Parisi, 1978) are hazardous because, while the majority of response categories on the questions eliciting reasons for non-reporting were common to both surveys, each has response categories which are not represented in the other survey. Consequently, the most meaningful comparison which can be made is between the number of times that a particular reason for non-reporting was given in the American survey as a percentage of all reasons given which fall in the response categories common to both surveys and the number of times that this reason was given in the Australian survey as a percentage of all common reasons given. These comparisons are made in Table 6 for the four offence types on which clear comparability exists: Assault, Break and Enter, Motor Vehicle Theft and Theft. While these are the most meaningful comparisons that can be made, they must be treated with caution since the two surveys were not designed with compatibility in mind.

The most notable of the differences between the American and Australian findings was a much greater propensity among the Ameri-

Table 6. A comparison between the U.S. and Australian national crime surveys for 1975 on reasons given for not reporting assault, break and enter, motor vehicle theft and theft victimisations to the police.

(Percentages are of reasons given which are in common to the two surveys)

Reasons		Asault %	Break and Enter %	Motor Vehicle Theft %	Theft* %
Did not want to take time	U.S.	3.0	2.5	4.2	3.2
	Aust.	1.4	2.6	4.0	1.4
Afraid of reprisal	U.S.	4.7	0.7	1.3	0.4
	Aust.	13.6	3.3	0.0	1.1
Thought it was private not criminal	U.S.	23.4	6.6	6.0	2.8
	Aust.	16.7	3.7	13.7	2.0
Police could not do anything**	U.S.	21.0	45.0	43.5	35.9
	Aust.	11.7	18.8	13.9	24.6
Police would not bother	U.S.	6.3	10.6	13.8	6.7
	Aust.	15.0	14.2	4.4	10.9
Somebody else notified	U.S.	15.7	7.9	6.2	21.0
	Aust.	4.3	5.3	15.6	6.5
Too trivial***	U.S.	26.0	26.8	25.1	30.1
	Aust.	37.3	52.1	48.4	53.6
Total	U.S.	100.1	100.1	100.1	100.1
	Aust.	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.1

* The U.S. data are on the offence category "Personal larceny without contact"

** In the U.S. survey this response category was "Nothing could be done"

*** In the U.S. survey this response category was "Not important enough"

cans to express cynicism about the chances of the police being able to do anything about the offence. While the Americans were more inclined to feel that the police *could not* do anything about victimisation, the cross-national differences were inconsistent on the belief that the police *would not bother* to do anything about it. For assault, break and enter and theft, but not for motor vehicle theft, Americans were more likely to say that they did not report victimisations to the police because somebody else was notified instead. Possibly this reflects the wider recourse to private police and security agencies in the United States. Australians, for all four crime types, were more likely than Americans to discount a victimisation because it was 'Too trivial'.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented data on the major reasons why Australian victims of crime do not report to the police, and it has compared these data with the reasons given by American victims. The findings could be interpreted in many different ways. To the criminologist this evidence could be used to establish an estimate of the public view of 'crime', while to the sociologist many of the findings are relevant to the ongoing task of assessing public attitudes to the police. To the psychologist possibly the most striking findings stem from the fact that well over half of all criminal events are 'absorbed' by the victims. Presumably, some degree of trauma is associated with criminal victimisations, yet in the majority of cases no official expression of this trauma is sought. Certainly, in many cases the victims thought the offences were 'Too trivial', but there still remains a vast number of serious crimes in which the victim obviously suffered injury and/or affront and took no action. One can only speculate on the short and long term consequences of this 'absorption' on the individual's personality and interpersonal functioning. In some cases no action may well be preferable to police questioning and a possible court appearance, but one wonders how much frustration, embitterment and perhaps distortion of reality has been engendered by not reporting crimes to the police.

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