



No. 68

Reporting Crime to the Police

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*The task of portraying accurate crime statistics is made difficult by the discrepancy between numbers of incidents reported to police, and numbers of people who respond positively to victim surveys. Many people respond to surveys stating that they have been victims of crime, but that they did not report the crimes to the police. Approximately one quarter of burglaries are **not** reported to police. About one half of robberies, and about two-thirds of assaults are **not** reported.*

Knowledge of reporting patterns and the factors affecting reporting behaviour is instrumental for crime prevention and control. By using unit record data from the latest National Crime and Safety Survey, this paper identifies the factors affecting Australians' willingness to report crime, analyses the impact they have on this decision, and raises a number of important questions for future work in this complex and important area.

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Director

The crime surveys conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in six jurisdictions found 606 800 victims of robbery, assault or sexual assault for the year from May 1994 to April 1995. The surveys found that only 227 000 of these victimisations became known to the police.¹ Regarding break and enter, the surveys found 335 900 self-reported victims, with 244 300 reporting to the police. The level of reporting is a measure of community participation in crime prevention and control; and of public confidence in the criminal justice system.

Crime survey data are used to examine unreported offences and in this way to reveal the so-called "dark figures" of crime. Crime surveys show that unreported offences account for a substantial amount of some categories of crime. However, data from crime surveys can also assist in the analysis of reporting behaviour. Who are more willing to report a crime and why; and conversely, who are less willing to do it and why, are important public policy issues. What factors increase willingness to report crimes? In what way do these factors affect operational and strategic processes associated with the response to crime? These are among the many questions that can be examined by analysing

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¹ Crime and safety surveys were conducted during April, 1995 in New South Wales, Australian Capital Territory, Victoria, Queensland and South Australia. For Western Australia, the survey was conducted in October, 1995 (see ABS catalogue numbers 4509.1 to 4509.5).

the processes that influence reporting decisions by citizens.

This paper presents the results from an analysis of reporting behaviour using unit record data from the 1993 National Crime and Safety Survey (ABS 1994). Its main objectives are to identify the factors leading victims to report incidents to the police, and to determine the impact that these factors have on reporting decisions. The study considered three offences: robbery, assault, and break and enter.²

The Significance of Reporting Behaviour

The decision to report crimes to the police can have profound consequences for victims and the criminal justice system.

- Compensation to victims of crime and insurance payments are precluded unless the incidents are reported to the police.
- Non-reporting causes official statistics to underestimate apprehension rates as these exclude from the denominator those offenders going undetected. It also determines which offenders are vulnerable to arrest and which are not. Furthermore, non-reporting limits our knowledge of offenders, much of which is derived from profiles of apprehended criminals.
- Knowing which crimes are most frequently reported helps in defining the tasks of the police. Strategic planning, operational planning, budgeting, and proper resource allocation by police forces are dependent upon figures of reported crime.
- Different groups in the population may differ in their willingness to report crimes to the police. If crime experiences of people in disadvan-

tagged or more vulnerable groups tend to go unreported, the negative consequences of non-reporting will add to their disadvantage.

Factors Affecting Reporting Behaviour

Skogan (1984) identified inter alia the following major determinants of reporting:

- seriousness of the victimisation experience;
- possibility of claiming compensation or private insurance payments;
- attitudes toward police;
- past behaviour of victims; and
- victim-offender relationship.

Whether these factors apply in Australia is the topic of this paper. Research is consistent in showing that seriousness of crimes has the greatest influence on reporting (Skogan 1994). Harlow (1985) found that violent crimes were more likely to be reported to the police if: they were completed crimes, the victim was injured, or the victim was female. In addition, for the case of assaults, victims were more likely to report the incident if the offender had a weapon. Reporting decisions have also been found to be affected by such other factors as victims blaming themselves, and the quality of service they expect to receive from the police. In addition, the US experience with 20 years of crime survey data reveals that property crimes involving large losses are more often reported (Zawitz et al. 1993).

Multiple or repeat victimisation can affect reporting behaviour in many ways. Repeat victims may decide not to report crimes to the

police due to any of the following reasons:

- repeat victims might have learnt how to cope with the consequences of crime either by using neutralisation techniques such as fatalistic acceptance or trivialisation (Agnew 1985), or by taking the issue into their own hands (Black 1984);
- repeat victims may have had unsatisfactory responses from the police when they reported previous incidents (Zieghenhausen 1976);
- repeat victims may fear or dislike the police more than single incident victims do (Skogan 1994).

Crime Reporting in the 1993 National Crime and Safety Survey

The National Crime and Safety Survey (NCSS) was conducted throughout Australia in April 1993 as a supplement to the ABS Australia-wide Monthly Population Survey (MPS). The survey collected information from individuals and households about their experience of selected crimes, reporting behaviour and risk factors, as well as households' membership of Neighbourhood or Rural Watch programs. The survey included usual residents of private dwellings, aged 15 years and over who were in scope of the MPS.

Crime and its Reporting

About 8 in 10 incidents of (completed) break and enter were reported to the police. Reporting rates for personal crimes were lower than for break and enter. A little over 1 in 2 last incidents of robbery; and about 1 out of 3 assaults were reported to the police (see Table 1).

Table 1: Victims of Break & Enter, Robbery and Assault, Numbers, Rate per 1000 and Percentage of Last Incidents Reported to the Police

	Number (000's)	Rate per 1000	% Reported to the Police
Break and Enter	277.0	44	78.5
Robbery	160.1	12	52.1
Assault	334.2	25	32.1

Source: ABS 1994.

² Victims of motor vehicle theft were not included in the study given the high reporting rate for this offence, nor were victims of attempted break and enter or sexual assault.

Table 2: *Break & Enter, Robbery and Assault, Percentage of Last Incidents not Reported to the Police, Reason Given for Non-reporting*

Reason	% of all Offences not Reported to the Police		
	Break&Enter	Robbery	Assault
Trivial/Unimportant	17.5	38.0	34.6
Police could not do anything	15.3	8.8	6.8
Police would not do anything	10.2	8.3	7.2
Private matter	*2.9	6.2	11.5
Afraid of reprisal/revenge	n.a.	*4.8	5.5
Nothing was stolen	17.0	n.a.	n.a.
Other ⁽¹⁾	37.1	33.9	34.4
No. of victims where police not told about last incident (000s)	50.6	76.7	226.9

n.a. Not Applicable

(1) Someone else told the police, did not want offender punished, too confused/upset, told someone else, not covered by insurance, no actual break-in, other reasons.

*The relative standard error of this estimate was between 25% and 50%.

Source: ABS 1994, p.12.

It has been suggested that the reporting rate is an indicator of the level of public responsiveness and to a lesser degree of how well the criminal justice system meets public expectations (Waller 1984). The national crime survey conducted by the ABS in 1983 found reporting rates of 68.6 per cent for break and enter, 42.6 per cent for robbery, and 33.6 per cent for assault (ABS 1986). (Note that direct comparisons of the results from the 1993 and 1983 surveys cannot be made due to differences in methodologies and definitions. The 1983 survey used face-to-face interviews by trained interviewers; while the 1993 survey used mail-back drop-off questionnaires. In addition, the definition of break and enter in 1983 included attempts.)

Reasons for Not Reporting Crimes

Table 2 summarises the survey findings about the reasons given by victims for not reporting their incidents to the police. The form of question used by the NCSS to collect the data yielding these figures is worth commenting on. The survey asked an open question worded as follows: "What is the main reason you did not tell the police about the last ... ?". Respondents' written answers were further coded by ABS staff to fit into the rather broad and quite ambiguous categories shown in the Table.

If coders' interpretations were correct, the issue of the meaning of these categories arises. For example, "nothing could be done" has several possible interpretations, depending on the type of incident and the persons involved. In an assault, for instance, it may reflect the victim's belief that the physical harm done cannot be rectified, or alternatively, his/her belief that an unknown offender could not be apprehended. The response "the police would not do anything" may mean that the incident was so minor; on the other hand, it could mean that the victim thought that the police would not be interested in the incident, even if it was relatively serious.

In about 1 out of 6 unreported break-ins the reason was that they were too trivial or unimportant; in 1 out of 4, the victim felt that the police either could not or would not do anything. Finally, in 1 out of 6 unreported burglaries nothing was stolen.

For robbery, a little below 2 out of 5 unreported incidents were considered trivial or unimportant; for about 1 in 6 unreported robberies the reason was that the police either could not or would not do anything. The incident being a private matter was given for only 1 in 15 of the reported robberies.

Regarding unreported assaults, over 1 out of 3 were qualified as trivial or unimportant;

in 1 out of 7 the victim thought the police could not or would not do anything; and in over 1 out of 10 the incident was considered a private matter. In 1 out of 20 unreported assaults the victim was afraid of reprisal or revenge.

The Decision to Report Crimes

The decision to report crimes to the police is affected by interrelated complex factors such as personal characteristics of the victim, perceptions about the seriousness of crime incident, previous crime experiences, victim-offender relationship, the likelihood of compensation for personal harm or property damage/loss, and attitudes toward the police and the justice system in general. Findings from US national victimisation surveys indicate that violent crimes are reported to the police to prevent further crimes by the offender, to stop or prevent incidents, and because they are crimes. With household crimes, an additional reason is to recover property (Zawitz et al. 1993).

The 1993 National Crime and Safety Survey did not ask a question about reasons to report victimisations to the police; a factor that limits our ability to identify the motives behind reporting decisions. All we can do is to analyse the outcome of the decision process; that is whether to report an incident to the police; or not.

Preliminary analysis of the survey data highlighted the complexity of forces operating on the reporting behaviour of personal and household crimes. Reporting crimes to the police is affected by a variety of factors which can be linked to each other.

The aim was to isolate the most important factors having an impact on the decision to report crimes to the police, while accounting for the complexities involved. One way to gain an insight into the behaviour of such complex systems is through simultaneous analysis of the effect

that several factors have on the decision to report crimes to the police. For each offence, statistical modelling was used to estimate the probability that a victim would report the last incident to the police; and to further assess the marginal effect of each variable in the model on this probability.

The results from the more complicated modelling exercise enabled identification of the following characteristics as the *most influential in increasing the probability of reporting the last victimisation to the police*:

Robbery

- The victim is a female *and* the offender was known to her;
- the victim's age is 50 years and over;
- the person has experienced only one robbery during the previous year; and
- the offender uses a weapon.

Assault

All victims:

- The person has experienced only one assault during the previous year;
- the incident occurs at the victim's home; and
- the offender uses a weapon.

Male victims:

- The victim is either working, or not in the labour force;
- the incident occurs at the place of work or study; and
- the victim is physically injured.

Female victims:

- The offender is unknown to the victim.

Break and Enter

- The household is member of Neighbourhood/Rural Watch;
- the household has been a victim of only one break-in during the previous year; and
- the household is not in rented accommodation.

Implications for Public Policy and for Future Crime Surveys

Willingness to Report Crimes

The results from the analysis showed that:

- incidents causing physical harm to the victim or with a greater potential for threatening the victim's safety are reported at higher rates than less serious ones;
- persons/households suffering several incidents of a same offence are less likely to report the last incident to the police;
- where the victim knows the offender, the likelihood of the incident being reported depends on the victim's attitude to the particular person involved; the seriousness of the incident; and the victim's gender. In the case of robbery (generally a more serious offence than assault), females are more willing to report incidents to the police when they know the offender. On the other hand, males tend not to report them when they know the offender. For assault, females tend not to report it when they know the offender; while this factor does not have any effect at all for males;
- being in a situation of disadvantage (for example unemployed) reduces the willingness to report crimes to the police; and
- community participation in crime prevention initiatives such as Neighbourhood or Rural Watch programs enhances willingness to report incidents of break and enter to the police.

Hidden Markets of the Criminal Justice System

These findings have profound implications for the development of public policy in the field of crime prevention and control. The analysis showed that almost 50 per cent of the incidents of personal violence (that is robbery and assault) go unreported

which suggests either unacceptably high levels of community unresponsiveness, or that surveys such as the NCSS tend to detect a large number of minor matters, unworthy of being reported to the police.

Research indicates that most police time is spent in dealing with matters other than crime.³ This suggests that many matters could be relatively minor conflicts suitable of being settled through informal mechanisms.

Increases in reporting might result in an equally increased police workload, and possibly in pressures for expansion of police services in Australia. Note, however, that the survey results on reasons for not reporting, combined with the low proportion of incidents reported to the police that are classified as crimes, are suggestive of the need for changes in the nature of policing activities; and especially in the way of dealing with social conflict and its consequences. In particular, if citizens were more willing to report what they perceive as crime experiences (though not necessarily to the police) — most of which would be of a minor nature — there would be more demand for conflict management services. The important issue is who would be better positioned to act as a provider of such services: the police, community organisations, or specialised agencies?

Different Reporting Patterns for Female and Male Victims of Violence

The differential behaviour of females and males in reporting incidents where the offender was known to the victim suggests the need for more structured approaches to foster community involvement with crime prevention initiatives.

That females tend to report robberies but not to report assaults

³ A recent study for Queensland found that 71 per cent of the time of uniformed police was taken up with handling incidents, responding to reports of offences and other related activities (CJC 1996). The same report shows that a criminal offence report was completed for around one-third of the calls attended by the police.

when they know the offender, indicates that it is the loss of property that leads them to report an incident to the police. Many incidents of assault involving women who know the offender go unreported. Domestic violence is certainly included within this category, therefore remaining beyond the reach of police.

Among males, incidents of violence with loss of property where the offender is known to the victim tend to go unreported, which suggests that many of these incidents may involve close friends or relatives, possibly young people; or that property losses are not significant.

A national survey on women's safety (ABS 1996) found that women who were married or in a defacto relationship were more likely to have experienced violence by their partner than by another man known to them or by a stranger. Among women who were not married, those most at risk of violence were women who had a previous partner.

How to induce changes in women's attitudes toward reporting incidents of violence at the hands of someone they know is the first relevant policy question that emerges from this analysis. Community-based initiatives aimed at providing support to victims and more importantly at the resolution of conflicts look promising. The Women's Safety Survey (ABS 1996) shows that women victims of assault were more willing to talk to others (that is family, friends/neighbours, work colleagues) about their last incident than to seek professional help or to use services (crisis, legal or financial).

Young Victims

Younger persons are less willing to report crime to the police; yet they show the largest probability of violent victimisation, as well as the highest risk of being engaged in unlawful activities. In a little over 6 out of 10 robberies and assaults involving young people that were not reported to the police, the victim felt that the incident was trivial, or that the police

could not/would not do anything, or that it was a private matter.

Whether the offender was known to the victim emerged as one factor associated with low willingness to report violent crimes to the police. Young non-reporting victims of robbery or assault who knew the offender(s) were less likely to consider the incidents trivial, but more likely to be afraid of reprisal than those who knew the offender(s).

These results suggest that young people tend to perceive their violent victimisations as relatively serious, yet they are more reluctant to report these incidents to the police. What to do to increase reporting by young people is an issue requiring further research.

Multiple Victims

The most striking finding from this paper is the reporting behaviour of multiple victims. For crime prevention policy, if repeat or multiple victimisation can be prevented, a large proportion of all crime might be prevented.

That multiple victims are less willing to report crime to the police indicates that no proper responses to victimisation have yet been developed. Our findings suggest that multiple victims tend to consider that the police cannot or would not do anything in response to their experiences of crime; and that they tend to be more afraid of reprisal or revenge than single incident victims.

Do these findings imply that multiple victims are less satisfied with the police or that they tend to dislike the police more than single incident victims? Are multiple victims located in high-crime areas so they are in permanent contact with offenders? Do multiple victims expect to be treated worse by the police? Whatever the reasons behind the low propensity of multiple victims to report crimes to the police, there is a need for policing to respond to repeat victimisation, especially for violent crimes.

Victims as Victimisers and Victimisers as Victims

Criminological research shows the close link between victimisation and offending, and the overlapping between the victim and offender populations (*see* for instance, Fattah 1994). Victims may themselves be active or former offenders; or they may have provoked the perpetrator in some way; which would reduce their willingness to report their victimisations to the police. However, this is an area where more research is needed.

The Need for Improvement of Data

Identifying the right policy answers requires access to adequate data. The 1993 National Crime and Safety Survey collected some of this data; however, in some instances the information collected was too general and in others it was not enough to enable a deeper analysis of reporting behaviour. For instance, there was no question relating to injuries sustained by victims of robbery. As another example, it is not enough to ask whether the victim knew the (or some) offender(s). More information is required on the relationship between them. Concerning incidents occurring at the victim's home or at another person's home, a question on whether the offender had the right to be there was needed in order to better understand the victim-offender relationship. In the case of multiple victims, a question about their satisfaction with past reporting experiences would be helpful.

Crime Reporting

The previous findings are enough to convince readers of the relevance that reporting behaviour has for the criminal justice system and the community. Citizens, through the reporting of their crime experiences, start the criminal justice machinery which in turn enables investigation of crimes by police, the prosecution and trial of offenders, and their punishment. The deterrent effect of criminal justice is

potentiated as well. On the other hand, non-reporting precludes access to compensation schemes, offenders not being arrested, and the goal of a more equitable criminal justice system being achieved.

However, not all the victimisation incidents are crimes in a technical sense, and of those which are, some are very minor indeed. The police will complete criminal offence reports in only a small number of these incidents. Increased willingness to report what people perceive as crimes would result in increased police efforts in dealing with minor incidents, not all of which may result in satisfactory outcomes to the victims; an issue with potentially negative consequences for the reporting of perhaps more serious future incidents.

Crime victimisation is an expression of social conflict. Reporting of perceived victimisation experiences to the police depends upon a complex set of factors ranging from seriousness of incidents to confidence in the criminal justice system. A more complete understanding of non-reporting, its distribution and its correlates will help us assess the performance of our criminal justice agencies.

NOTE: An expanded version of this paper is available from the author on request.

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