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**Sexual violence and crime in Italy: the experience  
of the italian multipurpose survey on citizen's safety**

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**Summary**

1. This paper has outlined the methodology developed for Italy's national survey on sexual violence and crime and some results of one innovative approach to measuring violence and crime in Italy.
2. This survey is part of the Household Multipurpose Survey System. It carried out in 1997 and it will be repeated at regular intervals (each five years).
3. This is the first attempt for the Multipurpose Survey Unit to use the telephone interview. We have thought that the telephone could be the right tool to investigate about sensitive questions, such as sexual crime or safety systems against thieves.
4. As work on the design of the survey proceeded, it became clear that the success of the project would depend on the ability of the survey planners to sensitize to the many constraints of interviewees, especially women talking about their experiences of violence.
5. The solutions found during an extensive consultation process during the design and development phases of the project produced unique methodological challenges that, in many respects, changed the traditional way of conducting telephone surveys.
6. The survey permit to gather reliable estimates of the size, nature and consequences of crime victimisation. It is designed to complement police statistics and to capture those incidents that are never reported to the police. Representative sample survey can help us understand crime characteristics, which groups in the population are at greatest risk of violence.
7. The need to collect data on crime and safety arise from the recommendation of International Conference of Pechino in 1995 that Istat has received about adopting gender statistics.

**Introduction**

8. Very poor informations on crime and security are today available for researchers. In Italy only judicial statistics, collected by ISTAT yearly, have represented for a long time the unique data sources in order to get informations on the diffusion and typology of criminal phenomena. Moreover, it is well known that a correct interpretation of such official data results to be very hard.

This is due to the fact that statistics on criminality consider only a particular and reduced fragment of the whole phenomenon; in fact, they are exclusively based on data collected from the crimes which are denounced, directly or indirectly, to the Police or other Public Security Offices. The remaining crimes, which have been really committed but undenounced, constitute the so-called "obscure crime portion".

9. On these bases, in 1987-88 and 1989-90, ISTAT carried out the first experimental attempts to study criminality by means of a research which could survey the phenomenon collecting data directly from respondents who had been victims of criminal actions.

10. In 1997 the Institute has perfected and carried out a sample survey (the so-called "victimization survey" which is able to reconstruct a general frame of criminality in our Country. In this way, this survey can be definitely considered a part of the more general integrated system of Social Multipurpose Surveys; it will be repeated every 5 years.

11. This new survey enables us to make a quantitative evaluation of crimes which are committed every year in Italy. In choosing crimes typology to be surveyed the criterion of an objective determination of the crime has been privileged; consequently, some crimes as, for example, cheats have not been considered, while other crimes which are commonly also in other Countries have been surveyed.

12. The informations collected allow us to understand the peculiar features of the several crimes, on the criminals and of the victims as well.

13. In this way, a quantitative evaluation of microcriminality will be allowed; at the same time, we will be able to analyze the dynamic interchange relationships between offenders and victims.

14. Moreover, also the perception of criminality by individuals can be surveyed and determined, since the respondents have been interviewed not only on their own experiences as victims, but also on other topics: their degree of self-confidence, some behaviours in order to avoid violence or crime, for example staying at home at night or not going out alone, avoiding particularly dangerous places at specific times, the self-defence techniques they adopt against crimes.

15. On these bases, it is evident that the purposes of the survey are not merely quantitative but also qualitative and interpretative. We are interested in understanding how a passive victim is able to turn his condition into an active one or can perform a series of self-defence strategies which enable him to exert actively a social control.

16. Furthermore, by this survey we can analyze and determine for the first time, since they have been up to now excluded from official statistics, another set of crimes, peculiarly related to women: sexual molestations and rapes; we can study their characteristics, the peculiar traits of the individuals involved and the way in which crimes have been committed.

17. As a matter of fact, both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of rapes and violence against women have been substantially underestimated, since in such cases the gap between the crimes which are officially denounced and treated in judicial proceedings and the crimes which remain obcure and undenounced is very large.

18. A survey on victimization aspects seems to represent the most suitable mean in order to evaluate both quantitative and qualitative aspects of sexual crimes, together with their consequences on the persons involved.

19. It allows us to individuate some population fragments which are exposed to higher risks and shows some circumstances, places and social environments which, notwithstanding all appearance, are exposed to relevant risks: households, work places, social relationship environments, partnership).

20. The peculiarity of the crime in itself justifies the difficulties met in surveying the phenomena of rape and sexual violence against women, since a correct determination of their nature is very complex and, on the other hand, they cause a deep psychological involvement and consequences to the victims.

21. ISTAT, with the explicit intention of developing gender statistics on the bases of the recommendations coming from 1995 International Meeting in Peking, has projected this kind of survey. As a matter of fact, the Istitute is currently carrying out a specific strategy on social statistics in order to develop the project of new gender-oriented surveys which could allow us to collect crucial informations from a gender point of view.

22. The assumption of such point of view as to victimization involves a particular attention to some aspects which have never been taken into consideration before, that is the perception of individuals' degree of self-confidence and the several crimes and violent sexual molestations against women.

23. Obviously, in order to get this goal it has been necessary not only to define adequate questions, but also to make a suitable set of methodologic tools available; furthermore, the interviewers (women exclusively) have had to undergo a hard training which has enabled them to collect information from other women on particularly intimate experiences.

24. A more exhaustive description of this complex but extremely satisfying work will be reported in the following sections.

### **The development of the Survey**

25. The surveys and researches on these peculiar and complex topics (victimization and social behaviours connected with rape and sexual molestations) are generally affected by a series of limits and difficulties which we have tried to overcome by means of an accurate study of other experiences carried out in several Countries of the World.

26. This analysis has evidenced some limitations of the traditional patterns which the surveys on this topics have for a long time based on.

27. A relevant number of women are not inclined to report their personal experience to an interviewer, in particular to a male interviewer, due to a complex of factors, among which a certain lack of delicacy in asking the questions or an inadequate training of the interviewer who is unable to let women feel at their ease.

28. Furthermore, the difficulty in making the victims recall their own dramatic experiences constitutes one of the most relevant impediment to the comprehension of the phenomenon since most victims prefer to remove the reminiscence of all the events that, though extremely relevant in one's emotional and everyday-life course, result to be particularly unpleasant.

29. Another relevant factor to be taken into consideration is the fear many women who have been abused constantly feel when they, for several reasons, are forced to share home and their everyday-life with the author himself of the sexual abuse. In such cases victims are expected to establish extremely controlled social relationships, so that no satisfactory atmosphere of confidence and trust or ease can be created between interviewer and respondent.

30. Furthermore, the victim can experience a sense of guilt, or can perceive the interview as a violation of her privacy, a risk for her psychological balance or for her survival itself.

31. However, we should take into consideration the differences determined by the educational and cultural degrees of the several respondents; in fact, this factor is able to strongly condition the perception women have of the sexual abuses they are victims of. Most of them, when they are abused by

person with whom they entertain very close relationships (husbands, partners, friends) cannot decide whether they have been victims of a real crime or not.

32. Every survey aimed to study private and/or very intimate behaviours involves a set of complex problems; consequently, such surveys require not only technological or informatic innovations, but also a comprehensive change in the whole production process, in order to maintain both the scientific correctness and the freedom of choice or the right to the privacy women respondents should have.

33. Since these aspects have constantly been taken into consideration during the whole phase of projecting, the survey methodology has undergone a series of changes. In dealing with topics related to self-confidence, "sex" cannot be considered the unique variable able to show gender disparities, but it is necessary to provide a social visibility to gender differences and to the consequences of victimization experiences on women's life-qualitatively.

### **Collecting data techniques: telephone interviews, the letter from the President and free telephone number**

34. The positive evaluation of the pros provided by telephone interviews has induced the researchers to choose this technique since, considering the utmost delicacy of the topic (rapes and sexual molestations), it should have been impossible to employ the traditional interviewers, people who work for the Municipalities where the survey is carried out, therefore generally well known by the respondents and by the members of their households.

35. On the contrary, a telephone interview is able to ensure a high degree of flexibility and familiarity; the respondents have the opportunity of being more confident since they cannot be seen by the interviewers and can overcome a series of difficulties due to the fact that they talk about embarrassing and painful events.

36. Furthermore, respondents are more easily induced to answer when the interviewers are well trained, sensitive and skilled.

37. The employ of this technique has allowed respondents to avoid the difficulty of answering when other persons, sometimes the same who had the conversation; in this way nobody could condition the report of the criminal event or create situations which could have been difficult to control.

38. The sample was constituted by 50.000 households, but only one of the members over 14 has been drawn by lot to be interviewed.

39. After a short introduction of the survey on the occasion of the first approach to the respondents, the interviewers, who were the unique persons to be acquainted with all the contents of the research, voluntarily omitted to talk about the most delicate and private aspects of the survey. The respondents had the opportunity to stop the phone conversation whenever he/she liked, asking to be called again later during the same day or on another day. The C.A.T.I. system permitted to provide a summary of the previous conversation and to restart the interview from the point it had been interrupted.

40. In this way many women have been enabled to avoid the presence of persons who could have represented a heavy conditioning factor.

41. In order to favour co-operation and increase the rate of responses, the President of ISTAT had sent all the samples a letter which had been conceived with the utmost accuracy. The President invited the addressee (the person registered on the telephone book) to inform all the members of the household that an ISTAT interviewer was going to call. The President explained the topic and aim of the survey, the methodology of the interviewer, the opportunity of remaining anonymous and invited the addressee to call the Institute at a free telephone number in order to get more detailed informations.

42. The use of a free telephone number can be regarded as a precious device and it has immediately shown its efficacy in view of the success of the survey. The privacy of the respondents, the correctness of the relationship between them and the Institute and the secretness of the data collected have been secured through all the phases of the survey.

43. Especially for women respondents this was crucial and provided very good results. In fact, according to the results of those telephone conversations, respondents could decide whether to accept to be interviewed or not. In view of the success of the survey it is necessary to establish a co-operative and dispassionate attitude of the interviewed.

44. In some cases the employ of the telephonic device has strengthened a positive and trustworthy image of ISTAT.

### **The pilot survey: the questionnaire**

45. In July 1996 ISTAT carried out a pilot survey on victimization; it was aimed to verify the performance and the efficacy of the questionnaire and its suitability in case of telephone interviews. 962 individuals living all over Italy, both males and females, have been interviewed.

46. In particular, we had to decide whether a survey on victimization could comprehend a section relating to rapes and molestations or not; furthermore, we had to verify the general comprehensibility of the questions, the correctness of their sequence and their adequate duration.

47. In particular, we took into great consideration the questionnaire building technique; consequently we privileged the fluency and the functionality of the interview, trying to avoid the risk that some topics or some responses could condition the remaining answers. So, the sequence of the questions did not obey to a criterion of topical consistency, rather to a principle of functional congruity.

48. The questionnaire design has been based on the graduality of the sequence both of the several sections (placing the sections able to produce a high degree of emotional reactions, such as the one relating to rapes and sexual violence, in the terminal part) and of the contents of the questions proposed. First, we have administered a series of less embarrassing questions, while the questions which could recall traumatic events have been postponed.

49. "Wording" has been taken into particular consideration: each crime has been accurately described, their dynamics have been reconstructed recalling them to the respondent's mind by means of images, their peculiar features have been exactly connotated in order that the respondent could unequivocally individuate each of them.

50. This is particularly relevant in case of sexual violence characterized by a low number of reports; as for these crimes, in fact, some differences both in social and individual disposability to consider such events as crimes depends on the degree of sensitiveness of each individual involved.

51. The survey has provided the researchers with an extremely relevant experience, since we have been allowed to approach every aspect of a daily data collection; many positive results have been obtained, consequently no basic change in the questionnaire structure has been required.

52. Very few interviews have been interrupted (2.6%) almost no partial mis-answers have been provided about:

the author of the last rape	7.1%
the threatener	3.2%
income	13.7%

53. The section relating to molestations has been affected by very few problems. The majority of respondents answer “not at all” (63.4%) or “a little” (30.2%)

Very much	2.4%
Rather	3.9%
A little	30.2%
Not at all	63.4%

54. Anyway, some adjustments have shown to be necessary, since the scientific Committee, formed by experienced researchers and university teachers, on the occasion of the preliminary design of the questionnaire had established rigorous restrictions as to the age of the respondents to the sections dedicated to rapes and sexual molestations (they should have been younger than 50) and had established rigid temporal ranges which the events referred should have been circumscribed within (the last three years and the last year; the latter is generally taken into consideration when carrying out a survey on crime victims in order to estimate criminality rate).

55. The above reported criteria, in particular the one relating to the temporal ranges, have been widely discussed among the researchers involved in our survey and the experiences collected by the women interviewers have shown to be extremely useful. As a result, we came to a conclusion: the questionnaire design proposed by the Committee seemed to impose an artificial border to a full comprehension of the real quantitative aspects of female victimization phenomenon.

56. The parameters proposed by the Committee were certainly satisfactory in view of a correct analysis of the results, but they showed to be unsatisfactory when considering the discussion on violence and perception of self-confidence.

57. Consequently, we decided to establish a higher age boundary (59) and to survey and register the totality of the events relating to sexual violence against women during the total course of their lives since we believe that any violence a victim has suffered, no matter when it has taken place, is undoubtedly able to affect both her degree of vulnerability and perception of her unprotectedness.

### **Women interviewers selection and training**

58. If a great number of women had refused to answer totally or partly the question proposed, the results of the survey would have been heavily influenced. Consequently, the training of the women interviewers has represented one of the most relevant aspects to be taken into account. Our basic aim was to make the approach between interviewer and respondent as close, confidential and productive as possible, establishing a quiet and serene atmosphere which would undoubtedly favour a fruitful discussion.

59. On these bases, the interview guideline particularly focuses on the so-called “wording” in order to draw the interviewers’ attention and induce them to structure adequate explanatory behaviours and attitudes in view of a firm conduction of the interview and of a secure management of the relationships with the respondents.

60. Since a relevant percentage of a sample would not have felt at ease in they had had to report their experiences to a man, the interviewers team was formed exclusively of women.

61. The first training session involved 120 women interviewers; afterwards, due to a series of circumstances, their number increased.

62. They have been selected, particularly on the bases of their abilities in managing difficult or embarrassing communicative situations, by the same Organization who had been commissioned to data collection.

63. The training session was performed by ISTAT which organized a series of briefings (5 days each) on the several aspects of the survey, such as the purposes, the structure of the questionnaire, specific exercises on each crime to be surveyed and training aimed to instruct the interviewers on the strategies they should adopt in order to induce even the most reluctant respondents to co-operate.

64. The researchers who directed the survey, together with their assistants, have constantly and daily provided a steady psychological support to the interviewers not only during the training sessions but also along the whole phase of data collection; they succeeded in managing at best a series of problems relating to stress or to a sense of inadequacy the interviewers felt when they believed not to have been able to manage a certain situation or to support at best the respondents who had met problems or difficulties.

65. Such circumstances occurred with a certain frequency and only frank conversations with the operators could help the interviewers to solve the problems and gain a full control of the single situations.

#### **Womes-aid centers against sexual violence**

66. On the occasion of such a survey, which involved a series of questions related to extremely delicate and private events, it has been necessary, from an ethic point of view, to avoid further emotional shocks to female respondents.

67. Consequently, we examined the possibility that a high number of respondents, who had been victims of rapes or molestations or who feared the reiteration of such crimes against them, would ask the interviewers for help. Obviously, when interviewing a respondent, the interviewer is not authorized to provide any form of help or support which should be supplied by specialized local women-aid centers. So, we compiled a list of all these Centers in order to be able to communicate their addresses to any respondent who needed this kind of help.

68. The centers have been selected according to a set of basic criteria, such as the quality of legal, psychologic, social and sanitary support they were able to provide to the victims of rapes, molestations or any other sort of violence.

#### **Conclusions**

69. The phase of data collecting was concluded on Jan. 31 1998. Though the topics and problems involved evidenced a high degree of complexity, the survey on "citizens' security" showed to be a suitable device in order to study and understand some problems relating to security in general and to security for women in particular. The insertion of the questions on rapes and sexual molestations into a wider context has revealed to be a very useful mean to reduce emotional shocks that talking about those topics could provoke.

70. The innovative technique and problem solving methodologies here employed have led to the accomplishment of all goals we had fixed; in particular we could achieve a good knowledge of the conditions of women as victims of violence of their feelings and of the circumstances under which the victimization accidents had taken place.

71. The laborious communicative effect to inform the individuals involved, the organization of training session to instruct all operators (assistant charged with the task of conducting free calls stage, interviewers' supervisors and interviewers), the assistance provide by experienced psychologist and trainers, have shown to be crucial in view of a successful outcome of the survey.

72. From the survey resulted that women are disposable to talk about the above reported topics, but their disposability should be stimulated and they should be helped to overcome some psychological blocks and obstacles and to win distrust.

73. All survey performance indicators demonstrate this assumption, since the refusal rate (33,5% in the pilot survey) has registered an absolute minimum of 22% in the final survey on citizens' security. Furthermore, the percentage of interruptions has revealed to be extremely low. The same can be said as to the so-called mis-answers (less than 2%).

<b>Willingness throughout the interview</b>		<b>Difficult in sexual violence section</b>	
Feeble always	2,4	Very much	2,6
Feeble at beginning	2,9	Rather	3,2
Sufficient	9,6	A little	10,7
Good	31,2	Not at all	83,4
Very good	53,9	<b>Total</b>	20064
<b>Total</b>	50001		

74. We have succeeded in making hidden events and experiences come out. Obviously we are not sure whether we have been able to discover the totality of this hidden reality or not, but one of the most relevant results according to a preliminary data evaluation, is that a great number of cases of sexual violence which have remained undernounced (80%) have been discovered. Most of them have been committed by individuals who entertained very close relationships with the victims: household members, relatives and friends.

75. The final data will be soon published and they will be placed at disposal of any person interested; both a preliminary general outline of the occurrence of crimes in our Country and an analysis of the relationships between the individuals' perception of security and the real diffusion of criminal events will be available as soon as data processing is completed.

76. Our experience of survey management and the results obtained encourage us to carry on the work and to analyze more closely the several aspects it involves; we believe that gender - oriented statistics are able to provide useful hints in view of the promotion of adequate interventions and specific crime prevention-oriented policies.

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