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Session 4 – Supporting paper

**DEVELOPMENTS IN AUSTRALIAN
CRIME VICTIMISATION SURVEYS**

Submitted by Australian Bureau of Statistics *

1 Introduction

1. Consultations for the National Information Development Plan (NIDP) for Crime and Justice Statistics (ABS cat. no. 4520.0) identified a need for the field of crime and justice to consider options to improve survey methods and adopt a more integrated approach to crime and safety surveys (proposed activity 2.2a). Subsequently a Review of Australian National Crime Surveys was established with guidance and direction provided by experts from the field.

2. The broad objectives of the review are to:

- where possible, consolidate national needs for crime survey data in Australia;
- identify deficiencies and overlaps in current data collections with reference to national data requirements; and
- develop strategies to improve integration and co-ordination in national crime survey data.

3. The purpose of this paper (stage 1) is to outline a consolidated view of user requirements for crime and safety surveys, within the context of the current survey program. This paper does

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not discuss possible vehicles, methods or costs as these will be considered within a broader *Review of ABS Household Surveys*, to be conducted in early 2006.

4. Previous papers about crime victim surveys in Australia have reviewed their purposes and limitations, as well as suggested improvements. This paper builds on the previous work taking contemporary user requirements into account.

5. A key learning from previous research is that the low frequency of crime (and the very large sample size required to generate reliable estimates) has restricted the utility of crime victim surveys to those who want to study the relationship between victimisation and other factors. Users requiring basic incidence and prevalence data to monitor change in selected crimes over time and those who use survey output to validate police statistics, have had their needs partially met, although not with the desired frequency.

6. In 2005 the demand for an annual Australian crime and safety survey is greater than it has been in the past. The emergence of "evidence based policy" and "whole of government" performance measures in many states and territories has highlighted a greater emphasis on the use of data by Justice and police agencies. Policy makers and those who use research to guide policy, continue to have unmet data needs. These unmet needs are explored in this paper.

7. Whilst demand for crime and safety data is strong there are a number of issues with the current set of Australian surveys including: an overlap of concepts in some areas; the need for clarity around the frequency with which different items should be measured; the need for clarity around the geography for different items, and the use of different methods for each of the Australian surveys, leading to different estimates of the prevalence and incidence of crime. The aim of the current review as mentioned above is to overcome some of these difficulties.

2 Crime victimisation surveys in Australia - the current situation

8. User requirements for crime and safety are met through the following Australian surveys:

- *National Crime and Safety Survey (NCSS)*. The 3 yearly NCSS, conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, aims to inform the development of crime prevention and community education strategies by providing a snapshot of the prevalence of more serious crime that affect the largest number of people (household break-in, motor vehicle theft, assault including sexual assault and robbery) and changes in crime rate over time as well as information about criminal incidents, offenders and victims and their reporting to police behaviour;
- *Personal Safety Survey (PSS)*. The PSS, conducted irregularly by the ABS, aims to inform the development and evaluation of programs and policies to prevent and respond to violence by providing detailed information about the nature and extent of violence against women and men in Australia and safety at home and in the community.
- *General Social Survey (GSS)* The GSS, conducted by the ABS, provides selected headline indicators of crime and safety issues. Its use lies mainly in the ability to cross-reference a limited range of victimisation experiences and perceptions of safety with other social, economic and demographic indicators.
- *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey*. The NATSIS, conducted by the ABS, is designed to be the Indigenous counterpart to the GSS in that it covers a range

of areas in respondents' lives such as health, education and crime and justice. Its stated purpose is to enable analysis of the interrelationship of social circumstances and outcomes, including the exploration of multiple disadvantages that may be experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Remote areas are also included in the sample. It aims to do this by: providing broad information across key areas of social concern; exploring interrelationships among these areas; providing comparisons with results for the non-Indigenous population from the 2002 GSS; and measuring change since the 1994 NATSISS.

- *National Survey of Community Satisfaction of Policing (NSCSP)*. The annual NSCSP, conducted by the Australasian, Centre for Policing Research (ACPR), is conducted on behalf of all Australian police jurisdictions to provide detailed information for performance reporting, at state and within state level, of public perceptions of police services, experiences of contact with police and feelings of personal safety and problems in the neighbourhood and community.
- *International Crime Victims Survey (ICVS)*. The 4 yearly ICVS, conducted by the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC), provides an international benchmark against which to compare perceptions of safety, attitudes towards crime, satisfaction with police and experiences with household and personal crimes in Australia against those of other countries.
- *International Violence Against Women Survey (IVAWS)*. The IVAWS, conducted by the AIC, was designed to promote and implement international research on violence against women and complement existing national data sources on violence against women. It provides detailed information on Australian women's experiences of physical and sexual violence, reported experiences of childhood violence, and perceptions and reactions to the violence experienced, to assist in development of policy and programs to combat violence against women.

9. Crime victimisation survey data provides an important evidence base for monitoring trends in actual and perceived crime victimisation, especially measuring the extent of crime victimisation not reported to the police. Crime surveys also provide useful data for identifying levels of crime and understanding the characteristics of victims, offenders and offending behaviour as risk factors for victimisation. Interjurisdictional comparisons are also useful for identifying best practice policies and programs.

10. Crime victimisation surveys in Australia have utilised a range of collection modes. NSCSP, ICVS and IVAWS are telephone interviews, the NCSS is a mail out mail back mode and the PSS is personal interview, usually face to face. An ABS publication, *Measuring Crime Victimization, Australia: The Impact of Different Collection Methodology's* considered some possible impacts of the methodological differences between the various surveys on estimates of the incidence and prevalence of crimes. The paper identified a number of methodological factors expected to contribute to the differences between the survey results (sample design and selection, scope and coverage, questionnaire format and content, survey procedure, response rate) and concluded that a number of these factors have not been quantifiable, including the impact of the mode of the survey and the context of the survey and its questions.

11. Crime victimisations surveys have also differed considerably in the response rates obtained and sample size and scope.

3 User requirements

12. Under the guidance of the steering committee for the survey review, a concept paper was prepared and circulated in June 2005. The paper described existing national surveys and highlighted differences that may affect comparability between the surveys and the interpretation of results. The paper invited user feedback about:

- the purposes of crime and safety surveys in Australia;
- information that is needed from crime and safety surveys; and
- the policy drivers behind these information needs.

13. Information was sought from a variety of internal and external stakeholders. Broadly, users of crime survey data can be grouped as:

- policy makers within the Australian and state and territory governments;
- policing agencies;
- academic researchers;
- the Australian public; and
- international users.

3.1 General comments

14. In their feedback, few users made direct comments about retention of the existing content, but user comments implied that the continuation of the current NCSS content was, as a minimum, their expectation. Frequency was a major issue for the majority of users, particularly key policy agencies.

15. Sexual Assault and Family Violence were flagged by key policy agencies as priority policy areas of interest. The appropriate survey vehicle for these sensitive and complex topics will need to be addressed as part of the review. One key stakeholder commented that crime prevalence rates and rates of reporting to police are important outcome indicators for reporting to Government on Police Services

16. Stakeholders noted that any change to survey vehicles and methodologies should be sustainable over a long period of time. Some users, while not satisfied with the frequency, flexibility or the detail currently produced, did not want a change that compromised their ability to monitor crimes over time, particularly the loss of current time series data. Some users expressed strong views that changes to collections should be stabilised so that trends could be monitored. Any changes that stem from the review should also be pilot tested prior to implementation.

17. The need for data at State/territory level was identified by most users as data at this level provides an important tool for monitoring and assessing justice agencies against their performance indicators, benchmarking to compare results across jurisdictions and against the national average and developing and evaluating crime reduction and victim support policies and programs, most of which are implemented within States/Territories.

18. Users from small states/territories in particular were concerned about the lack of meaningful data for these regions due to the small sample sizes of current surveys. A lack of meaningful information minimised an agencies ability to assess the impact of targeted policies and strategies in crime prevention.

19. Key agencies expressed a need for regional or small area data such as postcode to analyse regional variations in crime trends and assist in the development of local law enforcement responses.

3.2 Monitoring trends in crime victimisation

20. The ability to estimate the 'true' level of crime over time, by comparing trends from survey data with reported crime trends, was seen by many stakeholders as the most important aspect of a national crime and safety survey. The ability to monitor community perceptions of crime and safety and the relationship between reported victimisation and community perceptions were also viewed as high priority. Trend information can assist policy makers to identify crime control priorities.

3.2.1 Existing content

21. The existing content of Australian crime surveys enables trends in real and perceived crime rates to be monitored for a range of household and personal crimes. Items currently collected include:

Perceptions and attitudes

- individual perceptions of problems from crime or public nuisance in a neighbourhood;
- individual feelings of safety in the home by day and by night; and
- individual perceptions of attitudes to and the effectiveness of policing;

Household crime

- household data for victims of the property crimes of break and enter, attempted break and enter and theft of motor vehicle; and
- victim reporting behaviours.

Personal crime

- individual data about victims of the personal crimes of robbery, assault and sexual assault; and
- victim reporting behaviours.

3.2.2 New unmet content

22. Users provided a diverse range of new unmet needs and these needs were often unique to individual agencies, however, not all stakeholders requested new content.

23. One agency requested relationship to offender information for assault questions to obtain better measures of domestic violence.

24. Many agencies requested more information on perceptions and attitudes, such as reasons for feeling unsafe, safety on public transport and perceived effectiveness of the criminal justice system. This information was deemed important as it could assist in monitoring the relationship between victimisation and feelings of safety and assist police to direct resources for crime prevention programs.

25. Several users were interested in data that assisted in estimating the social and economic costs of crime. The cost of crime is viewed as complementing prevalence based measures of crime trends and assisting policy makers in determining allocation of resources across areas of governmental intervention to prevent and minimise the impact of crimes.

3.2.3 Geography

26. The level of geography varied; however, as a minimum state/territory level data is expected.

3.3 Identifying levels of new and emerging crimes

27. The ability to add topics of interest to a survey vehicle was identified by stakeholders as an important objective of crime surveys as they could assist users to ascertain the size of crime problems as they emerge, however, this needed to be balanced between the regular collection of data for crimes where levels are considered to be particularly high, or the issue is on-going or of particular policy relevance; enabling monitoring of trends for these crimes.

3.3.1 New unmet content

28. Business victimisation (including e-crime), Internet scams, Fraud (including consumer fraud, identity fraud, superannuation fraud) and other deception offences, vandalism, theft from motor vehicles and theft of mobile phones, juvenile crime and racially based assault, are new topics raised by users.

3.3.2 Geography

29. Geographical requirements will depend to some extent on the nature of the emerging crimes themselves but generally, national or state level data is expected.

3.4 Risk factors to victimisation

30. Stakeholders are particularly interested in understanding risk factors for victimisation such as the demographic characteristics of victims and offenders, the relationship of victim to offender and situational characteristics (e.g. location). Understanding risks of victimisation highlights groups that are at higher risk of victimisation and assists policy makers to focus crime prevention efforts.

31. Data currently collected in Australian crime victimisation surveys enables some understanding of risk factors associated with victimisation. These data items include:

Household crime

- circumstances surrounding incidents and for the property crimes of break and enter, attempted break and enter and theft of motor vehicle.

Personal crime

- circumstances surrounding incidents and victims for robbery, assault and sexual assault.

Demographic and lifestyle characteristics of victims

- Demographic and lifestyle variables commensurate with the existing NCSS (e.g. age, sex, household characteristics, labour force status, dwelling characteristics, country of birth).

3.4.1 New unmet content

32. Users requested a range of new content to assist them to understand risk factors of victimisation and develop targeted crime prevention strategies.

33. A wide range of users requested more information on demographic and lifestyle factors to enable a better understanding of high risk population groups (e.g. Indigenous, recent immigrants, and people with mental illnesses, prisoners, homeless, youth and people living in high crime rural areas, inner city areas or rooming houses).

34. Many users requested increased information about offenders from victims, especially Indigenous offenders. Generally, a limited range of offender information is collected from victims and users suggested that this could be expanded to cover property crime.

35. A few users expressed a need to be able to model crime and safety data against other administrative data sources to better understand risk factors.

36. Policy makers, justice agencies, researchers and academics require detailed data about the circumstances surrounding incidents and characteristics of victims at less frequent intervals to undertake analysis of the risk factors associated with particular patterns of crime victimisation. Low prevalence rates for some crimes have meant that in the past, complex analyses were not supported by the data available from single surveys. Users recognised the high costs associated with collecting data on low prevalence crimes and were supportive of a pooled approach to data collection.

3.4.2 Geography

37. Information down to postcode level is considered important for this issue.

3.5 Self reported crimes

38. Associated with information from victims about offenders was an interest in self reported crimes by offenders. A few users were interested in surveying offending behaviour and the risks of offending. Self reported offender information as collected in the NATSISS survey was suggested for the general population. Topics suggested included the influence of drugs and/or alcohol, arrests, incarceration, age at first formal charge, family violence and property offences as well as offender characteristics such as gambling habits.

3.5.1 Geography

39. Generally, national and state/territory level data is expected.

3.6 Indigenous data

40. A key theme raised by stakeholders is the requirement for data to enable better understanding of risk factors associated with Indigenous Australians, both as victims and offenders. Users need data which allows disaggregation by Indigenous status to support evidence-based policy development and to feed into long-term evaluations of responses to social issues. Key policy drivers requiring Indigenous crime and safety statistics include:

- the development of strategies and programs to reduce the level of participation of Indigenous people in the criminal justice system;
- the development of targeted crime prevention programs, including programs dealing with substance abuse;
- the development of diversionary and early intervention strategies for Indigenous offenders;
- community education; and
- measuring, understanding and ultimately reducing the risk of Indigenous people as offenders and victims.

41. Users with high indigenous populations strongly indicated that current collections are inadequate in addressing their requirements due to either the lack of or limited data available. Whilst the NATSISS survey provided some information, its infrequency was raised as an issue.

42. Several users indicated telephone surveys are not appropriate as a survey mode as access was an issue for persons in the most isolated communities.

43. One user requested information on socio-economic risk factors and police and community support for Indigenous victims.

3.6.1 Geography

44. Generally, national and state/territory level data is expected. Rural and remote was expected by a few users. The lack of information covering remote areas of Australia was a major issue, however the high costs involved in surveying remote communities were also acknowledged by users.

3.7 International requirements

45. Australia contributes to United Nations statistical activities in the field of crime and justice by conducting the four-yearly ICVS and was the first country to conduct the IVAWS, in 2002-03. Both these surveys were conducted by the AIC.

46. The United Nations is the primary user of the ICVS data, using it to benchmark against other countries, particularly in the European Union. Domestic user comments about the international surveys were limited. One user commented that efforts to improve comparability of jurisdictions within Australia should have priority over improvements to international

comparability. Integration of the ICVS with national Australian crime surveys was viewed favourably by Australian users particularly in areas of overlap for particular offence types.

47. The UNECE/UNODC is in the early stages of collating information about the range of international crime victimisation surveys with a long-term view to improving international comparability.

3.7.1 Content

48. The United Nations currently requires information on feelings of safety, perceived risk of victimisation and incidence, reporting to police behaviour and incident details for key offence types (e.g. burglary, vehicle theft, robbery, assault and attempted assault and sexual assault and attempted sexual assault).

49. In practice, not all countries report on the full range of topics on each ICVS. For example the 2004 Australian ICVS dropped modules relating to racial assault.

3.7.2 Frequency

50. Data for international comparisons is required 4-yearly, with reference to the last five years and a specified calendar year (typically the last complete calendar year prior to the conduct of the survey). Detailed data on violence against women is required irregularly.

51. A need for annual data has been identified by users (refer section 3.8 - Frequency) for more information. Some personal and household offence information of international interest may also be available on a more frequent basis if the demand for an Australian annual crime victimisation survey is met.

3.8 Frequency of crime victimisation surveys

52. Frequency of outputs had been identified as a major limitation of current surveys, with users commenting that they are not currently conducted often enough to use for trend analyses. Preferred frequency varied from quarterly to adhoc surveys, however by far the vast majority of users, particularly policy agencies, strongly indicated a need for annual data at a minimum.

3.8.1 Annual Headline Indicators

53. Policy makers and justice agencies identified a need for a set of annual headline indicators to effectively develop, implement and measure new policies and programs around fear of crime in the community and reduction of crime, and to assess and plan for the downstream effects on other parts of the criminal justice system, such as courts and corrective services. At a broad level, these indicators would comprise:

- perceptions and attitudes on crime and safety;
- a limited range of household crimes;
- a limited range of personal crimes;
- reporting to police behaviour; and
- basic demographic data (e.g. age, sex).

54. Other uses of headline indicators are to develop operational policing strategies, validate police statistics, inform police accountability and performance measures and provides information on victim reporting behaviour. Annual data to enable state benchmarking against national averages would assist in agency performance reporting.

55. Currently the NSCSP, undertaken by the ACPR, is the only national survey conducted annually. However, its outputs are limited to perceptions of personal safety, neighbourhood and community problems and perceptions of police in terms of services provided and personal experiences of contact with police. It is run as a telephone survey, collected on a continuous basis and annual data is made available to users quarterly.

3.8.1.1 Geography

56. As a minimum data at state/territory level is required. Annual data at state and sub-state levels would greatly assist policy makers to assess the impact of crime prevention/reduction programs and identify best practices. Headline data at police district/divisional level were required by agencies responsible for administering targeted crime reduction and community safety programs. More frequent small area data is required to assess the impacts of these campaigns and to aid resource allocation.

3.8.2 Quarterly data

57. A few agencies indicated a need for quarterly data on perceptions of crime and satisfaction with police to monitor targeted intervention campaigns and meet quarterly reporting requirements. Ideally these agencies would like the full range of headline data, including both perceptions and experiences of crimes on a quarterly basis.

3.8.3 Less frequent (irregular) data

58. Less frequent (irregular) data is also a key requirement of many users to answer more specific research and policy issues, to benchmark some crimes that are of interest but do not require regular monitoring. Detailed data on perceptions on crime and safety, a wide range of household and personal crimes, particularly topics of interest as identified as new and emerging areas, reporting to police behaviour and demographic data of victims and offenders are required by users on a more than annual basis. The issue of what constitutes 'less frequent' will need to be further explored with users.

59. The lack of finer level data to inform research on the risks of victimisation was expressed by users. Users acknowledged that the low prevalence rates of household and personal crimes create limitations for output from one-off surveys, which can only be circumvented by costly and burdensome increases in sample size and suggested the pooling of data. Richer data sets are required only periodically.

3.8.3.1 Geography

60. Geography is a key variable in the analysis of how crime is distributed (and how crime and justice resources are distributed) and assists in the identification of factors which influence victimisation risk. As a minimum data at state/territory level is required. A key user suggested that a geographic identifier, such as postcode be available with detailed data about the circumstances surrounding incidents and victims.

Summary

61. In the main, the current content of the Australian Crime and Safety Surveys largely meet most user needs. Users have requested however, that the content be more responsive by supplementing current content with new and emerging areas of crime. A range of new and emerging areas have been identified throughout this paper.

62. A degree of flexibility is needed in survey vehicles to accommodate core and optional modules to respond to new and emerging areas of crime. In some cases these emerging needs extend to the business sector rather than the household sector. Monitoring trends in crime and safety are a vital user requirement in this mix.

63. Frequency is the largest single criticism of the current state of play. The need for broad annual headline indicators on crime and safety has been identified as a strong user requirement from most users

64. Users have also indicated that more detailed data on crime and safety on a less frequent basis than annual are required for policy and research purposes. This includes detailed information on crime and safety, victim and offender characteristics, particularly indigenous data and risk factors for victimisation.

65. The level of geography is an issue for most users. As a minimum state/territory data is required for both the annual headline and 'irregular' content. In some cases users were requesting information below sub-state level (e.g. postcode). The ability to occasionally over sample a state, territory (or part of state or territory) or a population group was mentioned by a few users.

66. This paper provides an overview of the broad range of data requirements of a vast range of stakeholders in the Crime and Justice sector. Further consultation (stage 2) is needed with stakeholders to reaffirm content for both the annual headline indicators and core and optional 'irregular' needs. In particular, the issue of frequency and geography for the latter also needs to be further explored. This information would then feed into the *ABS Review of Household Surveys* to be conducted in 2006.
