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CANADA'S NATIONAL VICTIMIZATION SURVEY

Submitted by Statistics Canada*

1. The General Social Survey on Victimization is Canada's national victimization survey. It is conducted about every 5 years with the first having been conducted in 1988. The most recent national victimization survey was conducted in 2004. Since its inception the survey has undergone some significant modification in order to improve existing measures and to add others.
2. The survey forms part of the General Social Survey (GSS) program that is designed to provide policy makers and analysts with statistical information on the living conditions and well being of Canadians. The GSS program has two principal objectives: first, to gather data on trends in Canadian society over time, and second, to provide information on specific policy issues of current or emerging interest. To meet these objectives, the GSS was established as a continuing program with a single survey cycle each year of which one topic included accidents and personal safety. Since 1993, however, the cycle on safety underwent a major transformation to include only questions related to criminal victimization since other existing health surveys at Statistics Canada included measures related to non-intentional accidents.

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Structure of the GSS Content

3. The GSS gathers a wide variety of data to meet different kinds of needs involving a broad spectrum of users. To achieve the objectives outlined above, each cycle of the GSS has three components: Core, Focus and Classification.

4. Core content is directed primarily at monitoring long term social trends by measurement of temporal changes in living conditions and well-being. Main topics within Core content include education, social support, family, time use and social engagement and criminal victimization.

5. Focus content is aimed at meeting the second objective of the GSS, namely, to provide information touching directly on a specific policy issue or social problem. In comparison to Core content, Focus content is more specific to immediate policy issues. For example, Focus content for previous cycles on victimization included victim services, drugs and alcohol, spousal violence and senior abuse, public perception toward alternatives to imprisonment, and criminal harassment or stalking.

6. The final component of the GSS consists of classification which provides a means of delineating population groups and is used in the analysis of the core and focus data. Examples of classification variables are age, sex, education, race/ethnicity and income.

Developing Survey Content

7. With every new cycle of the GSS on Victimization, Statistics Canada undertakes extensive consultations with key stakeholders, including government, non-government organizations, police, other criminal justice personnel and academics, to ensure that the survey content remains relevant, and to identify new emerging justice issues that could be addressed in the survey.

8. Despite the need to remain relevant and to respond to new emerging justice priorities, several considerations must be taken into account prior to adding new survey content or adjusting survey questions, including historical continuity versus relevant content, response burden, and technical and cost implications.

9. First, in order to track trends over time, there is a need to maintain historical continuity, while at the same time providing data on new emerging issues. The GSS core content component of the survey is used to monitor change over time, while the focus content is used to monitor emerging issues, or to cover a specific policy concern. The focus areas are typically funded by outside clients who have specific data needs - this is considered to be a very efficient way of getting additional data on a particular policy issue, as opposed to funding a separate survey.

10. Second, when adding new content to the survey questionnaire care needs to be taken to ensure that the survey interview does not become too long, and that questions are not too intrusive or offensive to jeopardize a respondents continued participation in the survey.

11. Finally technical and cost implications need to be considered and Statistics Canada is conscious of the need to restrain expenditures. Questionnaire space is limited, which restricts the number and length of questions that can ultimately be asked. Beyond a given questionnaire length, telephone costs accelerate.

Survey Content

12. The following outlines the core survey content in the order that the questions are asked to the survey respondent. It does not include the household screening and composition questions. The 2004 survey did not include any focus content.

Section 1: Perceptions of crime and the criminal justice system

13. This section is designed to measure the extent to which people worry about their personal safety in everyday situations, the extent to which fear imposes limits on their opportunities and freedom of movement, and how they manage threats to their safety in their daily lives. Specifically, in this section, information is collected about people's perception of crime, their view of the police, courts, prison and parole systems and ways in which people protected themselves and their property from crime in the past 12 months.

14. This section of the survey content has undergone some significant transformations since the first cycle was conducted in 1988. First, improvements have been made to the measurement of fear to better understand people's level of fear and how it impacts their lives. For example, instead of asking a general question about "how fearful are you...", the survey asks "how safe you feel from crime...", followed by how often one partakes in the activity. For those who do the activity less than daily they are asked "if you felt safer from crime, would you...more often?" This helps us understand the degree to which people limit their activities because of fear of being the victim of a crime.

15. A second major change to this section of the core questionnaire is the addition of questions related to perceptions of the criminal justice system to include not only perceptions of the police and courts, but also the prison and parole systems. Now the survey allows comparisons of public perceptions among the various sectors of the justice system.

16. One open-ended question asks the respondent whether there is anything else they do to increase their personal safety that has not been mentioned. This question is the first opportunity for the respondents to speak in their own words and serves to build rapport with the interviewer.

Section 2: Criminal Victimization Screening Section

17. Section 2 consists of screening questions of property crimes, violent crimes and other types of criminal incidents. Specifically, the survey measures 8 types of criminal victimization including, sexual assault, robbery, physical assault, break and enter, motor vehicle/parts theft, theft of personal property, theft of household property, and vandalism. This section also asks respondents to specify the number of times each type of crime has happened to them over the past 12 months. Each time a crime is reported in this section a Crime Incident Report is completed and it is in this report that victimizations are classified. Respondents are asked to include incidents committed by family and non-family. However, due to the specific questions on spousal violence, respondents are asked to exclude physical and sexual assaults committed by current and previous spouses or common-law partners.

18. Since the inception of the GSS on Victimization there have been improvements to the both the physical assault and sexual assault measures. In order to be consistent with the definition of physical assault in the *Canadian Criminal Code* non face-to-face threats are now excluded from the measure of physical assault. Physical assaults now captured through the survey include attacks (victim hit, slapped, grabbed, knocked down, or beaten), a face-to-face

threat of physical harm, or an incident with a weapon present. Measures of sexual assault have been improved to include less serious levels of sexual assaults and attempts. Sexual assaults now include any forced sexual activity, an attempt at forced sexual activity, or unwanted sexual touching, grabbing kissing, or fondling.

Sections 3 to 6: Spousal Violence

19. Similar to the British Crime Survey, Statistics Canada took the spousal violence module that had been developed for the 1993 National Violence Against Women Survey and added it to the GSS on Victimization. Measures of violence by current or previous marital partners are obtained through a number of categories of violent acts. Research suggests that questions itemizing violent incidents into discrete categories of behavior are necessary in order to counteract denial and unwillingness to identify experiences as assault or violence. Violent acts that are included on the survey are face-to-face threats, being pushed, grabbed, shoved, slapped, kicked, bit, hit, beat, choked, threatened with or having a gun or knife used against you and forced into unwanted sexual activity.

20. In order to ensure that respondents clearly include only acts of violence, these questions are prefaced with the introduction 'it is important to hear from people themselves if we are to understand the serious problem of violence in the home.' A 5 year measure is used in order to increase the number of incidents to be analyzed. Respondents are also asked whether any of the violence occurred in the past twelve months in order to include these victimizations in the overall 12 month victimization rate.

21. Prior to being asked about specific acts of physical and sexual violence, respondents are asked questions related to controlling and emotionally abusive behavior on the part of a marital partner. These questions were taken from the 1993 Violence Against Women Survey. Questions include limiting contact with family or friends, being called names, not being allowed to talk to other men/women, harming, or threatening to harm someone close to you, demanding on know whereabouts all the time, damaging or destroying possessions or property, and preventing from knowing about or having access to the family income.

22. The intent of these questions is to test theories about links between spousal power and control and spousal violence. In addition, these measures help us better understand the dynamics of an abusive and violent relationship by providing context to reports of violence by spouses.

23. Respondent who says yes to any of the 10 acts of violence are asked more detailed questions about the violence. These questions include the impact of the experience for the victim (physical injury and emotional trauma); whether anyone else was threatened or harmed in the incident(s); whether their children ever witnessed the violence; if they ever feared that their life was in danger; use of criminal compensation; who they turned to for help; involvement and satisfaction with the police; actions taken by the police; reasons for contacting or not contacting the police; impact that police intervention has had on their partner's behavior; and, interest in participating in victim/offender mediation programs.

24. The section on ex-spousal abuse has five new questions on child custody, on the frequency of contacts between the children and both of their parents and on financial support of the child. These questions are used to examine the relationship between violence and child custody and support arrangements.

New questions pertaining to type of physical injury, to restraining orders or peace bonds against the actual or previous spouse, and to information on victim services have been added in 2004.

Section 7: Criminal Harassment or Stalking

25. A new section on stalking was included in the 2004 survey in order to fill a data gap on this subject. It consists of a series of questions on ten types of behaviour that determine whether, in the past five years, the respondent had been a victim of stalking from a stranger or from a person known to the respondent. Measures of stalking include, being phoned repeatedly or receiving silent or obscene phone calls, being followed or spied on, someone waiting outside your home, someone waiting outside your place of work or school or other places they had no business being, being sent unwanted e-mail messages, gifts, letters or cards, being persistently asked for a date and refusing to take no for an answer, someone trying to communicate with you against your will, someone attempting to intimidate or threaten you by threatening or intimidating someone else or by hurting pets or damaging property.

26. When the respondent says yes to any of the stalking behaviours an additional question is asked to confirm that the respondent feared for their safety or the safety of someone known to them. This component is essential for an incident to be considered criminal harassment under the *Canadian Criminal Code*.

27. Respondents who report stalking are asked questions related to the impact the stalking had on them. The following items are covered: duration of stalking; physical intimidation; stalker characteristics; change in behaviour of the respondent to cope with the stalking; to whom they talked about it; contact with the police and reasons for contacting or not contacting the police; if charges were laid against the person and if so, what type of charges; if there was a restraining or protective order against the stalker; and finally the respondent's general satisfaction with the way the case was handled through the justice system.

Section 8: Crime Incident Report

28. Anyone who reported an incident in the victim screening section is asked a series of questions about that incident. Since the inception of the survey, the incident report has undergone some modifications, including additions, deletions and improvements. One of the major additions to the crime incident report has been the addition of questions about whether the victim believed that the incident was hate-motivated. First respondents are read the definition of a hate-motivated crime and then are asked whether they believed the crime committed against them could be considered a hate crime. Those who say yes are then asked to specify the hate motivation. The possible categories of hate-motivation are consistent with the sentencing provisions outlined in the *Canadian Criminal Code* and include race/ethnicity, religion, sex, sexual orientation, age, disability, or language. The addition of these questions have allowed Canada to look at the nature and extent of hate-motivated crimes in Canada, including who is most likely to be targeted, the extent to which these offences are reported to the police and the impact of these offences on the victim.

29. Other recent additions to the crime incident report include questions on the use of criminal compensation, police-based and court-based victim services, interest in participation of victim-offender mediation programs, and the emotional impact of the incident on the victim.

Also in the most recent GSS on Victimization a new series of questions were added to enable data users to know if the incident happened at a person's place of work.

30. The victim incident report also collects information on characteristics of victimization incidents (e.g. month, place), physical and financial consequences of victimization, offender characteristics (e.g. age, gender), whether medical attention was sought, who the victim turned to for help including informal and formal service, whether the police were contacted, why they were contacted or not contacted, actions taken by the police and their satisfaction with police actions.

Section 9: Other crime events

31. Information is collected on any other crimes the respondent has experienced in his/her lifetime that may have been committed by family and non-family members. The main objective of this question is to examine past victimization experience in a lifetime perspective. It also offers the possibility to talk about past victimization incidents that would have occurred outside of the 12 months and 5 years time frame covered by the survey.

Sections 10 to 14: Classification

32. The GSS on Victimization includes a number of questions related to various socio-economic characteristics of the respondent. Through these questions analyses related to risk of victimization can be conducted and factors influencing fear of crime and perceptions of the criminal justice system can be assessed.

33. Questions regarding the respondent's main activity, current work experience, level of education of respondent, their parents and spouses are first attained. Given the relationship between alcohol use and crime, these questions are then followed by a series of questions related to the drinking patterns of the respondent and their spouse/partner.

34. While questions on the type of dwelling the respondent lives in have been part of the survey for several cycles, new to the 2004 survey were questions related to length of residency, familiarity of neighbors, and social disorder of the community in which the respondent resides. Combined these questions are used to measure the continuity and transience in the respondent's place of residence and the quality of life in the respondent's neighborhood which may affect a person's sense of belonging to the community and may be related to perceptions of crime and risk of victimization.

35. Most classification questions have evolved with each cycle of the GSS. For example, questions concerning mother and father's place of birth were not asked in Cycle 8, but are now asked in each GSS cycle. Other questions related to a person's health status, their use of medication, visible minority status, language, religion and income are also included in each cycle of the GSS.

36. This year, two new modules have been added: discrimination and sexual orientation of respondent. The Canadian Human Rights Act stipulates that the prohibited grounds of discrimination are "race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, disability or other reasons". This new information should allow a better understanding of the

context in which hate-motivated crime takes place or any other type of victimization that can be related to any form of discrimination.

Conclusion

37. The survey content of the GSS on Criminal Victimization has seen some major changes to its content. Improvements in the areas of spousal violence and criminal harassment are significant. The survey has also been able to provide estimates on hate-motivated crimes. These are offences for which police-reported statistics are lacking.

38. Response rates to the survey have always remained high at about 80%. However, increases in telemarketing combined with telephone technologies have presented recent challenges to Statistics Canada to maintain high levels of response rates. Fortunately the strong positive public reputation of Statistics Canada has allowed us to maintain good response rates to date.

39. Despite the improvements and additions to the survey content there still remain gaps. Perhaps one of the most significant gaps is the frequency with which the survey is conducted – every 5 years. Given the large spread between survey cycles it is difficult to attribute what impacts trends in criminal victimization. Conducting a survey on a three year basis would alleviate this challenge. However, resources are limited.

40. Finally, information on the nature and extent of fraud in Canada is not captured through the survey and given the changes in technology and the increased vulnerability of Canadians to being victims of fraud; these data are becoming increasingly needed. Due to the current length of the GSS with the addition of the questions on stalking, questions on fraud could not be accommodated on the most recent cycle of the GSS on Victimization. Statistics Canada is currently exploring the feasibility of undertaking a separate household survey on fraud and a business fraud survey. Combined these surveys will provide national data on the nature, extent and impact of fraud in Canada.
