

## CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

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In 2003, the Crime and Justice Programme of the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) undertook the second national victims of crime survey in South Africa. The study was prompted by the need for an accurate picture of crime levels in the country to complement that provided by the official crime statistics published annually by the South African Police Service (SAPS). While a similar need exists in countries throughout the world, the moratorium on the release of police crime statistics in South Africa intensified the requirement for an independent and reliable national study on crime levels (see text box below).

The onset of the moratorium coincided with claims by the SAPS and the Department of Safety and Security that crime levels were stabilising. However in the absence of any statistical information on the extent of crime nationally, South Africans became increasingly sceptical of the motives and pronouncements of the police on the matter. In a climate such as this, a national victim survey is the only reliable means available for providing an alternative picture of crime. Fortunately, a similar study was conducted in 1998 which allows for a comparison of crime levels over time, and thus provides a means of assessing police claims that crime has stabilised.

The 2003 survey was also motivated by other equally important, if less controversial, needs. No comprehensive national study has been carried out in this country on the risk factors that predispose certain people to becoming crime victims. This data is essential for shaping broad crime prevention policy, and the national victim survey provides an ideal opportunity for this endeavour.

The survey also sought to gather information on public perceptions about crime, the fear of crime, and attitudes towards the police and courts, as well as non-state forms of policing and protection. Perceptions about crime are as important as the reality, and—as the public reaction to the moratorium has all too clearly illustrated—need to be managed by the police and political leadership with as much dedication as the level of crime.

### The moratorium on police crime statistics

In July 2000 the then Minister of Safety and Security, Steve Tshwete, announced a moratorium on the release of police crime statistics to the public. Officially, the rationale was to allow time for the police to improve their data collection and processing procedures to ensure that accurate information was being supplied to the public. The moratorium was eventually lifted in 2001, although it remains impossible to access official crime statistics at police station level. The only data that is now provided to the public are the national, provincial and area level figures that are published in the SAPS' annual report. It remains unclear how the police statistics might have changed during the two year 'clean-up', and to what extent the accuracy of the data has improved. This makes comparing pre- and post-moratorium statistics problematic.

Large-scale quantitative surveys are not however sufficient tools for understanding public perceptions. As a result, the ISS will be following the victim survey with a series of country-wide focus groups aimed at exploring the survey results in depth, in order to make recommendations about how to manage perceptions.

### Why a victim survey?

Victim surveys have been developed and utilised over the last four decades to complement police statistics in formulating a holistic picture of crime. In countries like the United Kingdom, victim surveys are now conducted annually with state funding in order to supplement official crime records. Police statistics, while essential for tracking crime trends, cannot be regarded as an entirely adequate source, as they depend almost wholly on the public to report crimes to the police (see text box below). In many instances, especially in developing countries, the official data are often incomplete and unreliable. Many victims, for a variety of reasons, do not report crime. And when they do, often only the most basic information is recorded.

By asking victims directly about their experience of crime, victim surveys avoid many of the problems relating to non-reporting that affect police data. The surveys also substantially improve the ability to understand the impact of crime on society, by providing more accurate estimates of the volume of crime and how it changes over time, as well as the nature of crime.<sup>1</sup>

Victim surveys also present a good opportunity to collect data on perceptions and experiences of crime, as well as on police and court performance, and

### Advantages of official crime statistics

- Measure official response to crime, that is, all individuals that report crime
- Include crimes against business and industry
- Include crimes against children
- Offences are recorded immediately, or shortly after the incident, so recall is usually accurate
- Offences are ordered in time so that the number of crimes reported in different months or days is easily established
- Crimes are recorded throughout the entire country, providing some information about all urban and most rural areas

### Disadvantages of official crime statistics

- Non-reporting by victims for a variety of reasons, including thinking the crime is not serious enough, the inconvenience it causes especially when access to the police is a problem, intimidation by the offender or fear thereof, the belief that the police can't help or won't take the matter seriously, embarrassment, and pressure from family or community not to report
- Bias or error on the part of the person taking report
- Often little information about the victim is collected (e.g. age, sex, relationship with offender)
- Little information about the circumstances of the crime is captured for analysis (e.g. known characteristics of perpetrators, methods used in committing the crime, etc.)
- Not all crimes reported are recorded, as only charges in dockets are entered into the official statistics
- Political pressures to reduce crime levels may impact police recording practice

treatment of victims. Information on what the community is doing in response to crime, is also easily collected in this context. Understanding the community response to crime is important for developing crime prevention and community-police partnerships in general, as well as specific initiatives such as community police forums (CPFs). The role of partnerships in crime prevention has been explored intensively in international debate:

Crime is no longer solely the concern of the state, nor can an effective crime prevention strategy rest solely on state agencies and programmes. For citizens to participate in crime prevention, it is indispensable to provide them with reliable and timely information as well as give them the opportunity to have their say about their own crime concerns as well as about the working of the criminal justice system.<sup>2</sup>

Detailed information on who is most affected by crime is not usually available through police statistics, and victim surveys provide one tool for the collection of such data. The analysis of a range of indicators and descriptive information about crime allows high risk categories to be identified, including those most affected by crime, as well as the risk of different crimes for different categories of people (e.g. the elderly, women, or youth).<sup>3</sup> This information is essential in formulating area or locality specific crime reduction strategies. From this data, one can also develop an understanding of the nature of specific crimes, such as where and when they are most likely to occur, any relationships between victims and offenders, and the levels of violence used. Such information has had a major impact on changing the definitions of crime and the nature of information available on criminal events.

Finally, victim surveys can contribute to developing theories about crime and its causes, as well as challenging many long-standing assumptions. During the first two decades of victim surveys in the United States, for example, results challenged common assumptions regarding the relationship between victims and fear of crime.<sup>4</sup>

However, while offering a number of advantages, several limitations also apply to victim surveys:

- The surveys do not record data on ‘victimless crimes’—crimes where there is no differentiated victim and offender because the offender is normally the victim as well. Examples include speeding or traffic violations and drug-related crimes.<sup>5</sup>
- Victim surveys cannot record information about a crime unless the victim both recognises the incident as an offence, and is willing to discuss it with the interviewer. This is likely to affect information about domestic violence and sexual offences, particularly those occurring in a domestic context.
- The problem of non-reporting noted above also affects levels of petty or less serious crimes recorded in victim surveys. Victims may choose not to mention incidents that they deem trivial, like petty theft, minor vandalism and even less serious assaults.
- Victim surveys do not attempt to document crimes against children because interviewing minors requires the consent of a parent or guardian and special training before fieldworkers are qualified to address traumatic incidents with children. This presents logistical difficulties given the scope and cost of victim surveys.
- Victims may not always be able to accurately recall and articulate details of their victimisation, particularly with regard to time frames.

- Victimization surveys generally focus on crimes committed against individuals or households rather than those committed against businesses.<sup>6</sup>

Notwithstanding these limitations, victim surveys provide invaluable information on both the nature and extent of crime. As such they complement existing police statistics and provide a point of departure from which effective crime reduction strategies and other criminal justice system initiatives can be designed and initiated.

### The 1998 Victims of Crime survey

As mentioned above, this survey is the second national victim survey to be conducted in South Africa. In 1998, Statistics South Africa was commissioned by the Department of Safety and Security and the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) to carry out the first national survey. The 1998 survey was conducted between 16-27 March 1998 following an extensive consultation and design process. The instrument and methodology was built on that of the UNICRI international surveys (see text box), with some adaptations to the South African context. The findings were published in a report that was made available to all stakeholders and the general public.<sup>7</sup>

One of the aims of the 2003 National Victims of Crime survey was to ensure that the results would, as far as possible, be comparable to those of the 1998 survey. The results of the 1998 study are therefore referred to throughout the monograph, and where the phrasing of questions and definitions allow, direct comparisons are made between the 1998 and 2003 data.

### Aims of the 2003 National Victims of Crime survey

The study aimed to:

- present reliable data on the levels of crime throughout South Africa;
- compare current crime levels, as recorded by the victim survey, with those of the 1998 National Victims of Crime survey;
- establish the key risk factors that predispose certain people to becoming crime victims;
- assess public perceptions of crime, safety and the criminal justice system.

### Structure of the monograph

The introductory chapter is followed by a chapter detailing the survey methodology. Chapter 3 outlines the demographics of the survey sample. Chapter 4 explores public perceptions of crime and safety in South Africa,

### **The International Crime Victim Surveys (ICVS)**

The United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) has, over the past 15 years, conducted a series of surveys in large cities around the world known as the International Crime Victim Surveys (ICVS). Initially conducted in only a handful of countries, the ICVS has expanded to include 24 industrialised countries and 46 'countries in transition' (largely East and Central European countries), and developing countries.<sup>8</sup> The ICVS has three primary objectives: "to provide an alternative to police crime information, to use the standardised information for comparative purposes, and to extend the information on who is most affected by crime".<sup>9</sup> A standardised instrument has been developed for the ICVS, although various methodologies, including computer-aided telephone interviewing (CATI) and face-to-face interviewing, are used depending on the country in which the survey is run. Although comparisons can only strictly be made between the cities surveyed rather than the countries in which they lie, the ICVS provide the only standardised basis for comparing victim survey results internationally.

including the fear of crime, how crime impacts on people's lives, and perceptions about those who perpetrate crime. Chapter 5 covers public views about crime prevention and criminal justice initiatives. This chapter includes perceptions about individual, community and state responses to crime, such as vigilantism, as well as the performance of the police and courts. Chapter 6 details the crime victimisation levels in the country and compares these to the levels recorded in the 1998 victim survey. Also examined in this chapter are the rates of reporting crime to the police by victims. These results too are compared with those of the 1998 survey. Chapter 7 examines selected crime types in detail in order to better understand the nature of these crimes.

The body of the monograph is interspersed with a number of text boxes that provide comparative survey data and notes about topics relevant to the discussion. Where relevant each chapter starts with a summary of the key findings and ends with a section on the implications of the survey results.

A note must also be made on terminology. Given that the survey was conducted at a household level, both South Africans (those born here), and non-South Africans living in this country would have been included in the survey. For convenience, the discussions that follow refer to South Africans inclusively, that is, the term refers to all those included in the survey, both those born here and those born elsewhere but residing in the country.