

CRIMINAL VICTIMIZATION IN FOUR MAJOR CITIES IN SOUTHERN INDIA

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Abstract

Victimization surveys are an important source of reliable information as a basis for understanding and combatting national and local crime, in particular in developing countries such as India where the quality and reliability of official crime reports are questionable. This said, victims and their problems have been the subject of serious research for the past 20 years in India. The present paper analyses one of the first victim surveys carried out in the State of Tamil Nadu, in southern India. It focuses on three main areas: the extent of criminal victimization, the reporting behaviour of victims and victims' perceptions of police performance. A number of conclusions are drawn: firstly, that many crimes in India go unreported; secondly, that the crimes that are more likely to be reported are cases where there is material loss or damage; and finally, that victims are generally unsatisfied with police performance.

INTRODUCTION

To understand crime levels, three standard sources of crime data are generally used: official crime reports, self-reports and victim surveys. Crime reports generated by criminal justice agencies contain different information, depending on the requirements of the registering agency. Police reports cannot be considered an accurate account of the number of crimes perpetrated as not all crimes are reported by victims, not all police calls are determined to be crimes that should be registered and not all police departments underscore the importance of crime reports.

Because of the variety of recording practices, practical problems and political agendas, crime statistics just reflect the police performance in recording crimes [1]. The nature of reporting of crime varies from country to country, depending on the type of crime. According to some estimates, the general ratio between crimes actually committed and crimes made known to the police is quite high, crimes being made known to the police

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constituting between 30 and 40 per cent of all those committed. For some offences, such as assaults and sexual offences, the ratio is much lower, 1 to 10 or less. One general rule of thumb is that, the more serious the offence, the lower the “dark” figure of unreported crime, although even this is not always the case [2]. In many police forces there exists a rule of not recording crimes that do not meet a minimum standard of seriousness [3].

In India, the National Crime Records Bureau collects crime data from the police headquarters of all the states across the country and has a system to standardize the data it receives. It categorizes the reports mainly into offences against the person and offences against property. These constitute the official crime statistics published annually.

Another form of assessing the volume of crime in any society is by interviewing the victims of crime. Victimization surveys help to elicit a clearer picture of levels of criminal victimization as well as the opinion of a cross-section of society on matters relating to crime and punishment, their perception of the criminal justice agencies and the method of handling of offenders and victims. The information collected from victims also covers their experience before, during and after the offence has occurred.

International crime victim surveys

Over the past 20 years, a growing number of countries have initiated victimization surveys to assess national or local crime problems. Such surveys ask representative samples of the general public about selected offences they may have experienced over a given time. The resulting victimization rates constitute a better indicator of the level of crime than the number of crimes reported to and recorded by the police. If the research methodology used is standardized, surveys also offer a new opportunity for the collection of crime statistics that can be used for cross-country comparative purposes. The International Crime Victim Survey (ICVS) was initiated in 1987 with that in mind. The essence of these surveys is that crime is not studied from the perspective of state agencies but from that of the public at large. Respondents can inform the researchers about what they perceive to be criminal victimization, regardless of state policies. They can also provide information about their dealings with state agencies in relation to those experiences [4]. Apart from identifying crime trends, victim surveys indicate broad areas for further debate, investigation and intervention [5].

Victim surveys in India

In India, the study of victims and their problems has been taken up by researchers in a serious way only in the last 20 years [6]. Despite the fact that law enforcement officers and social scientists in India have been admitting in academic and other forums that the actual volume of crime is considerably greater than what is reported in the official crime statistics, no victimization survey has been conducted in that country with the exception of one in Mumbai in 1992. One of the recommendations of the victim survey conducted in Mumbai was that victimization surveys must be conducted on a regular basis in order to obtain a more precise index of crime [7]. The study on which the present article is based is therefore one of the first victim surveys in India, attempting to record not only a comprehensive pictures of crime but also citizens' perceptions of the agencies of criminal justice.

The locale of the study, the State of Tamil Nadu, is situated in the southern part of the Indian peninsula, with Chennai as its capital. The study forms part of a major project funded by the University Grants Commission, New Delhi [8].

The main objectives of the study were threefold: firstly, to understand the extent of criminal victimization in the State of Tamil Nadu; secondly, to study the reporting behaviour of victims of various crimes; and finally, to analyse the opinion of victims on the performance of the police.

Methodology

Research questions were framed to meet the objectives of the study. A pre-coded interview schedule, similar to the one used in the International Crime Victim Survey, supplemented by certain questions relevant to the Indian setting, was constructed by the researcher. The respondents were contacted by the investigators and asked to respond to the interview based on their victimization in the last five years.

Four major cities in Tamil Nadu—Madurai, Coimbatore, Trichy and Chennai—were chosen for the study. Using random sampling, administrative units in each city were chosen. The streets in each of those administrative units were then selected randomly and the household—the basic sampling unit for the study—was randomly selected from the list of door numbers.

Demographic data and sample characteristics

While the city of Chennai is populated mainly by upper and middle-class citizens, the other three cities consist mainly of people who belong to the middle and lower classes. Two factors that determine that composition are occupation and the cost of living. Some 73 per cent of the sample population in the study were middle class in terms of their residential status. A major part of the remaining sample was from the upper class (12 per cent). The majority of the respondents lived in houses (43 per cent) or flats (56 per cent). The household size was mainly within the range of 3-4 members (47 per cent) and 5-6 persons (36 per cent). Some 63 per cent of the families had 3-4 adult members (47 per cent), that is members above 16 years of age, and 16 per cent of families had 5-6 adult members, with 18 per cent having 1-2 adult members in their families.

The majority of the 4,030 respondents were in the age groups of 16-20 years (21 per cent) and 26-30 years (16 per cent). Nearly half the sample was concentrated in the 16-30 year age group. The sample consisted of a majority of males (62 per cent), 54 per cent of them married and 40 per cent single. In terms of level of education, the sample consisted mainly of college (51 per cent) and secondary school (30 per cent) graduates. Very few had higher education, that is, a postgraduate or other university degree (3 per cent). A majority of the respondents were working (41 per cent) and the remainder were students (26 per cent). All the respondents selected for the interview agreed to participate in the survey. The selected sample, in terms of gender, age and education, appear to be an appropriate representative sample in the case of each city.

It should be noted that, while the survey asked respondents to identify when they had been victimized, the resulting data should not always be regarded as reliable, given that the exact timing of incidents (in particular of less serious ones) was not always easy to recall.

The nature and extent of victimization

Vehicle thefts and related crimes

Only 6 per cent of the total sample owned cars; among these, 5 per cent had been victims of car theft within the last five years. In comparison with car theft, the number of incidents of theft from cars was remarkably high (27 per cent). Damage of cars was also high, with 9 per cent of those who owned cars having been subjected to car vandalism.

As most of the sample came from middle-class families, ownership of two-wheelers was nearly eight times (53 per cent) the ownership of four-wheel motor vehicles. Only about 4 per cent of the respondents who owned two-wheelers had been subjected to moped thefts, mostly in the years before 1998 (46 per cent). Nearly three quarters of the sample surveyed (72 per cent) owned bicycles. Of those, 9 per cent had been victims of bicycle theft, the majority before the year 1998 (46 per cent).

Interestingly, there exists a correlation between the education level of the victims and the risks of victimization: none of the uneducated were victims of bicycle theft. This indicates that the poorest members of the population take extreme care to protect their possessions, as the bicycle is their only mode of transport.

Burglary, robbery and personal theft

If the numbers of victimizations for burglary, attempted burglary, robbery and personal theft in the sample population are examined, 4 per cent have been victims of burglary, 3 per cent of attempted burglary, 2 per cent of robbery and 10 per cent victims of personal theft. In the majority of each of those crimes, except for personal theft, the maximum number of victimizations occurred prior to the year 1998. The majority of the personal theft cases were victims of pickpocketing. There was no significant difference between victimization by attempted burglary and the status of the residential area of the respondent.

Sexual offences and assaults or threats

Two per cent of the total sample population had been victims of sexual offences, with 56 per cent having been victims during the year 1999. Two per cent of the respondents were victims of assault or threat, the majority in the years 1999 (39 per cent) and 1998 (31 per cent).

The majority of victims had had secondary or college education. More specifically, a chi-square analysis shows the existence of a correlation between victimization by sexual offences and the educational status of the victims. The majority of the sexual abuse victims were school and college students (45 per cent). The higher incidence of sexual victimization of students could be due to the fact that they all travelled during peak hours by public transport and also that their age made them more vulnerable. In the majority of the sexual offence cases, the offenders were

single (52 per cent) and not known to the victim (61 per cent). The nature of the sexual offence was offensive behaviour in more than half of the cases (67 per cent) and indecent assault in 20 per cent of cases. A large majority of the victims (80 per cent) accepted the incident as a crime. In 46 per cent of the cases the victims were only threatened and in 32 per cent actual force was used. Weapons were used in 25 per cent of the cases, mostly weapons other than knives (34 per cent). Fewer than a quarter of the victims reported that they had been injured during the assault (15 per cent); 11 individuals had been injured gravely enough to seek medical assistance.

Consumer fraud and corruption

Significantly, victims of consumer fraud and corruption constituted 27 per cent and 26 per cent respectively of the total survey sample. More than half of the victims in the case of consumer frauds (55 per cent) had been cheated by shops; 14 per cent had been cheated by hotels and restaurants. About 13 per cent of victims had been cheated in consumer durable sales outlets by reduced weights, decreased quality of product and fake products. Just over half of the respondents (59 per cent), who had been victims of corruption had been victimized by government officials, 18 per cent having been victimized by police officers.

Interestingly, there is no significant correlation between victimization by corruption and the status of the residential area of the victim. However, nearly 75 per cent of the victims were from middle-class residential areas. In contrast, only 13 per cent of the residents of upper-class areas had been victims of corruption. At least one reason for this breakdown is the fact that members of the middle class usually approach government departments directly to get work done or for favours. In contrast, members of the upper class usually get such "business" done through their subordinates or mediators.

There is a significant difference between victimization by corruption and the level of education of the victim. The study revealed that the majority of those who had been victimized were college (40 per cent) and secondary school educated (35 per cent). It is perhaps surprising that 10 per cent of the victims had received some form of higher or university education and that almost all the victims of corruption had a relatively high level of education.

Reporting behaviour

Vehicle thefts and related crimes

Predictably, reporting behaviour was very high for vehicle theft, with more than three quarters of the victims of car theft (76 per cent) and moped theft (72 per cent) reporting the crime to the police. For theft from cars, non-reporting on the part of the victims occurred in only half the cases reported to the victim survey (43 per cent).

While car theft was considered very serious by a large majority of the victim sample, it is surprising that 15 per cent considered it fairly serious and the remainder a not very serious offence (8 per cent). Theft from cars, on the other hand, was considered a very serious incident only by 22 per cent of the victims. Car vandalism was considered a fairly serious offence by half of the victims, while nearly a quarter considered it as very serious (20 per cent). Moped theft was considered a serious offence by half of the victims, a quarter considering it very serious. More than 50 per cent of the victims of bicycle theft viewed it only as a fairly serious incident (62 per cent). This probably explains the corresponding high percentages in the reporting of those offences.

Burglary, attempted burglary, robbery and theft

According to the data for the reporting behaviour of the victims of offences such as burglary, attempted burglary, robbery and personal theft, the percentage of non-reporting was extremely high, for the crime of personal theft (79 per cent), burglary (48 per cent) and robbery (58 per cent). A majority of the victims of robbery (38 per cent), attempted burglary (43 per cent) and personal theft (62 per cent) stated that they regarded the incident as fairly serious, while 28 per cent regarded the offence of robbery as very serious. This is an important finding as it suggests that, despite the degree of seriousness with which an offence is regarded, victims think of reporting a crime only when there is actual loss of or damage to their property.

Sexual offences and assaults or threats

Reporting behaviour on the part of the victims of sexual offences and victims of assault or threat was poor. Only 4 per cent of the victims of

sexual offences and 24 per cent of assault victims had reported the crimes to the police. For a majority of sexual crime victims (64 per cent), the incident was fairly serious and for 28 per cent and 54 per cent of the assault victims the incident was regarded as very serious and fairly serious, respectively.

Consumer fraud and corruption

Non-reporting in the case of consumer fraud and corruption cases occurred in nearly 100 per cent of cases. In consumer fraud cases the reporting was less than 1 per cent, with this being the same in the case of corruption. Such behaviour is partly the result of fear on the part of citizens or consumers that they will incur the displeasure of officials and will have to face the consequences in future dealings with government and/or commercial organizations. There is a significant correlation between the level of education and the reporting of corruption cases, with respondents with higher levels of education being more likely to report such cases to the authorities.

Perceptions of police performance

Satisfaction by crime type

Among all the offences covered, levels of dissatisfaction with police performance appeared to be the highest among burglary victims (54 per cent) followed by the assault or threat victims (52 per cent).

On the whole, the victims of crimes such as theft from cars, burglary, robbery, sexual offences and assault or threat who were not satisfied with the police attributed this to the police not doing enough to find the offender and recover their goods. All the victims of theft from cars were dissatisfied with the police because they had failed to recover their lost property. Burglary victims, besides the other reasons already mentioned, also felt that the police had not kept them informed about any progress being made in the case. Similarly, 20 per cent of the robbery victims also felt that the police had not kept them properly informed about the case. Improper treatment by the police (although the form this took was unspecified) was one of the most significant reasons for dissatisfaction with the police by the assault or threat victims (75 per cent).

Perceptions of crime levels

As regard the opinion of the respondents on solidarity in their neighbourhood—defined broadly as to whether people in a given area help each other or go their own way—39 per cent said that generally they assisted fellow citizens who lived in their area. Interestingly, the majority of the respondents were from the city of Madurai (29 per cent), followed closely by Chennai (25 per cent) and Coimbatore (24 per cent). It should be noted, however, that 19 per cent of all respondents in the survey stated that they mostly went their way without attempting to assist their fellows.

Perceptions of local policing

Thirty-six per cent of the sample population expressed the view that the police did a good job in controlling crime, while 42 per cent were of the view that the police performed poorly.

There were, however, important differences, depending on the city of origin, among those who said the police did a good job in controlling crime: 41 per cent were from Trichy, 25 per cent from Madurai and 21 per cent from Coimbatore. In contrast, only 11 per cent in Chennai felt the same. Whatever the differences, however, less than half of the persons in the sample were happy with police performance in all four cities. In Coimbatore and Chennai in particular, the percentage of satisfaction was very low compared with the other cities. Since they are large cities in comparison with Madurai and Trichy, police public interaction is probably less and therefore there are higher levels of dissatisfaction with the police for failing to control levels of crime.

Of the total sample, only 18 per cent said that police patrolling by car or by foot was done once a day; 11 per cent believed that it was done once a week, 19 per cent that it is done only once a month, 14 per cent less often and 22 per cent never, while 11 per cent did not know how often patrolling was done in their area.

Conclusion

The figures drawn from the analysis make it quite clear that many crimes occurring in India are not reported and that police figures are only the tip of the iceberg. Not all crimes are reported, but when they are, victims

are more often than not dissatisfied with police performance. Overall, reporting behaviour depends largely on the value of loss incurred and the seriousness of the offence. Crime prevention does not just mean recording the occurrence of crime and increasing patrolling in the area for a period of time. What is necessary for crime control is analysing opportunities for criminals and studying victim-related issues such as the nature and extent of victimization, relationships between offenders and their victims, reporting behaviour and other factors. This is where victim surveys play a significant role. The need to conduct victim surveys is particularly apparent in developing countries such as India, where the quality of police recording of crime is questionable.

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