

# **SURVEYING CRIME IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

**Mike Hough  
Mike Maxfield**  
editors



**CRIME PREVENTION STUDIES  
Volume 22**

# **SURVEYING CRIME IN THE 21st CENTURY:**

**Commemorating the 25th  
Anniversary of the British  
Crime Survey**

Mike Hough

and

Mike Maxfield

editors

Crime Prevention Studies  
Volume 22

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# CRIME PREVENTION STUDIES

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Ronald V. Clarke, Series Editor

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Mike Hough  
Mike Maxfield

London and Newark  
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## Foreword

Towards the end of the 1970s, several of us in the Home Office Research Unit, including Pat Mayhew and Mike Hough, began to make the case for the British Crime Survey, a national survey of crime victimization similar to one that started in America. Speaking at least for myself, I thought the survey would be a corrective to crime policy by focusing more attention on crime victims. I also thought it would help sell the concept of crime prevention by showing that much crime experienced by the public never comes to the notice of the criminal justice system and is therefore beyond its influence. Finally, I believed that by providing a new and improved index of crime, the survey would raise the Research Unit's profile within the Home Office, and it would do the same in the broader field of criminology by making a rich new source of crime data available to researchers. (As regards the latter, Pat and Mike were in fact for many years the most cited British criminologists because of their British Crime Survey work.)

There were powerful objections to mounting the survey, however, which included the costs of interviewing the necessary large sample of the public, and the anticipated political fallout from revealing that much more crime occurred than was reported in the annual Criminal Statistics. So we knew it was going to be hard to get the survey off the ground. I clearly remember the many hours spent agonizing with Pat and Mike about ways of getting reluctant Home Office officials on board, particularly in the Criminal and the Statistical departments. We were fortunate, however, to secure the active support of Bob Morris in the Crime Policy Planning Unit. This alliance between the two departments was critical in finally getting agreement for the survey.

The process of securing this agreement was tortuous, however. We took great pains in drafting position papers and proposals and carefully planned our approach to every critical meeting, trying to anticipate the objections and difficulties that might be raised by those likely to be present. We carefully scrutinized the minutes of meetings with ministers and senior officials where we were not present, and we questioned the more accessible participants in order to divine unfavorable nuances of attitude that might later damage the enterprise. We also had to appease Research Unit colleagues who foresaw their own work being overshadowed. I can particularly remember the acute anxiety with which I faced the prospect of pitching our plan for funding the survey with John Croft, the head of the Research Unit. The plan involved taking a large portion of the budget reserved for funding university research to pay for the interviewing work. This would likely raise the hackles of universities, but to my relief, John Croft agreed readily to the idea and became a staunch advocate of the survey.

The intensity of this experience over many months, and the elation when the survey was approved by ministers, has always remained with me. I was therefore surprised to learn (see chapter 2) that the official files suggest it was the Crime Policy Planning Unit, not the Research Unit, that had led the effort to get the British Crime Survey approved. This chastening fact is perhaps an example of one law of human nature, which holds that all parties to a joint enterprise overestimate the importance of their individual contributions. It might also reflect the fact that most of the official record was produced by the Crime Policy Planning Unit, not the Research Unit, and “he who writes the minutes sets the agenda.” Another part of the explanation, however, is that the plotting and strategizing that Pat, Mike, and I had engaged in was deliberately concealed from view and unrecorded in the files because there is nothing as deadly to a civil service initiative as the appearance of unrestrained partiality! Last, we had probably underestimated the compelling case for the survey, though this was recognized by the Crime Policy Planning Unit, perhaps because it was somewhat removed from the day-to-day policy concerns of the rest of the Home Office.

Indeed, if we had failed to get the survey started when we did, it would probably not have been long before someone else would have got it off the ground. It was an idea whose time had come and we were in the fortunate position of giving it form because of our place in government. At the time, however, it did not feel like that. We really did see ourselves as outsiders arguing an unpopular case. In fact, this was how Home Office



researchers often thought of themselves because they so frequently found that they were advocating positions or producing research that seemed inconvenient or irritating to their official superiors and political masters. These feelings were rooted, on the one hand, in junior status and youthful insecurity and, on the other, in a general suspicion of social science and disdain for specialists amongst senior civil servants of the day. The relationship certainly had little resemblance to the role of “administrative criminologists” as portrayed by their academic critics outside government. Home Office researchers generally did not think their job was to conduct work that would support official policy. They did not see themselves as handmaidens of administrators and politicians, or even as working hand in glove with them. Instead, many saw themselves as working for the general public and saw their role as producing knowledge to inform more rational policy making, even if the resultant policies were in flat contradiction to those of the government of the day. This attitude inevitably brought them into conflict with the administrators whose lives were made more difficult by research. It explains why so few researchers remained comfortable with their positions in the Home Office and why so few stayed in the civil service for their entire careers but instead departed for the more congenial environments of university departments. In fact, the very availability of this ready escape route created by the expansion of universities was an important factor contributing to the quality and independence of Home Office criminology.

If the time was ripe in the early 1980s for a national crime survey, it appears from chapters in this volume that if an omnibus national survey is to continue, it has to adapt and evolve to meet new circumstances. The successive sweeps of the British Crime Survey have taught us a great deal about the experience of crime in this country and that knowledge has been fed into crime policy and criminological theory. Each sweep of the survey has also helped to expose our ignorance about many other aspects of crime and about the performance of the police and criminal justice system. Indeed, it has been continually modified to help fill the gaps in our knowledge. It is these achievements that are celebrated in this volume, published in the British Crime Survey’s 25th year. Although the survey is likely to continue, it may be time now to devote more energy to new kinds of

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surveys and research instruments to monitor more directly the performance of local police forces and to measure new manifestations of crime resulting from globalization, changing technology, and changed social arrangements. It is in these ways that we can best build upon the successes of the British Crime Survey.

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# Introduction

by

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This book marks the 25th anniversary of the British Crime Survey (BCS), which first went into the field in 1982. It has its origins in a conference held at Cumberland Lodge, Windsor, in October 2006. This event, funded by Rutgers University and the British Home Office, brought together many of those who have contributed to the survey in various ways over its life, as well as others with expertise in crime surveys in Britain and elsewhere.

The conference was co-organised by the editors of this book, by Ron Clarke, and by the current BCS team. We and the team thought that the survey's 25th birthday should not go unmarked. We all felt that the BCS has proved to be a significant phenomenon, both in terms of public administration and of criminological knowledge, and that some sort of stocktaking would be sensible at this juncture. We decided to combine forces, and organise an event that would bring together academic and government researchers, past and present, to reflect on the past and to consider the future.

Whilst it is obviously pleasant to look back with satisfaction on past achievements, the more important purpose of the event was to think about the future of crime surveys. The BCS – and its various cousins in other countries – have been subject only to small changes over the last quarter of a century. The genre is still largely unchanged. Whether it can and should continue well into the 21st century are important questions to ask. The answers partly turn on practical issues – whether, for example, a high enough proportion of the public will continue to take part in social surveys of this sort to guarantee reliable findings. In part, however, the survival of large national crime surveys depends on the changing informational needs of government. The 14 substantive chapters in this book all address these issues in various ways.

Chapter 2 traces the development of the BCS, noting its origins in the policy and research community of the day. The authors describe the most important contributions to research and practice that can be traced to the BCS. This includes methodological innovations in how basic counts of victimization can be combined with special-purpose groups of questions. Some thoughts about alternative futures for the BCS are expressed, themes picked up in the last chapter and applied to crime surveys generally.

Identifying the significance of multiple victimization is one of the major contributions of the BCS. Chapter 3 tells many tales, first tracing the discovery of repeat victimization to almost 30 years ago. Graham Farrell and Ken Pease then once again highlight the imbalance between the number of crime victims and the number of victimization incidents. The authors conclude that the BCS decision rule to cap incidents at five in a series seriously underestimates the incidence of both household and personal victimization. Further, truncating the distribution in this way systematically undercounts crimes targeting those most often victimized.

Recognition that victims and offenders are often the same people is an idea that predates victim surveys, traced in chapter 4 by Janet Lauritsen and John Laub to Marvin Wolfgang's study of a birth cohort. Most research in this area is based on either specialized samples, small numbers of individuals, or specific offenses. The BCS has been an important source of information from a general population sample, including selected self-report offending questions in a large victim survey. Nevertheless, Lauritsen and Laub argue that the existence of the overlap is now so well documented that further research with large-scale general surveys is not likely to produce much new information. The chapter concludes by describing more-focused research strategies that are more promising for understanding the mechanisms of victimization and offending.

Only a limited number of self-reported offending items can be included in a general-purpose crime survey. In chapter 5, David Matz describes the development of a remarkable survey that focuses on self-reported offending among the population at large, aged 10 to 65, and then from a subsample of respondents in younger age groups where offending is more common. Those aged 10 to 25 were interviewed in the second wave of the survey to reveal information about sequences of offending and victimizations. Matz presents brief results from the 2003 and 2004 waves of the OCJS, and describes how the survey articulates with other efforts to collect victimization and offending data from different target populations.

The ability to link individual and household characteristics to types of areas and neighborhoods has been a key feature of the BCS since the 1984 sweep. In chapter 6, Tim Hope takes advantage of this to examine dimensions of victimization in community context, finding covariation between burglary and a composite measure of community deprivation. The social environment of high-crime communities is different from that of low-crime areas. One important element of this, Hope argues, is differential ability to adopt personal crime prevention, something he calls “reflexive securitization.” Hope concludes by observing that the shift in sampling strategies introduced in 2000 has reduced the relative sample sizes of inner city areas, undermining the potential for subsequent research questions such as reflexive securitization.

Since its first wave in 1989, the International Crime Victims Survey has been conducted in dozens of countries, making it possible to compare crime rates, police reporting, and a variety of other basic indicators of crime and justice. Jan van Dijk begins chapter 7 with an overview of the ICVS. Because different countries and different regions often face varying crime problems, surveys in individual countries are partly tailored to meet more specific needs. Country-specific items supplement measures of traditional volume crimes. van Dijk discusses how indirect measures of crimes such as corruption or organized crime activity can complement survey measures of other crime types. This chapter also highlights key dimensions of crime that are not well measured by crime surveys and their focus on victims.

The NCVS is the only national crime survey that has provided annual data for an extended period. The U.S. survey has also been the model for other national crime surveys. Chapter 8, by Michael Rand, traces the evolution of the NCVS, highlighting its contribution to research. Conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, the U.S. survey includes certain distinctive features: large samples, bounded interviews, and a six-month recall

period. Each of these adds to the cost of conducting the NCVS. Rand describes how pressures to economize have mostly reduced sample sizes. Considering the future of the NCVS, Rand believes the survey will become leaner and more flexible, resembling early sweeps of the BCS.

Crime surveys provide information about police as well as about crime. In chapter 9, Wesley Skogan examines how surveys meet the growing interest in measures of police performance, concluding “not very well.” Memories of bad encounters are more long-lived and contagious than recall of positive experiences. Skogan also shows that citizen perceptions of police performance do not covary with measures of policing quality collected by direct observation. Given a range of problems with validity and reliability of survey-based measures, Skogan calls for a program of research aimed at learning more about patterns of error in perceptions of police. In the meantime, it appears that measuring change in attitudes is more reasonable than measuring variation across neighborhoods or jurisdictions.

Since its earliest sweeps in the 1980s, the BCS has incorporated many batteries of questions about police performance. Now, following heightened government interest in performance measures, the BCS sample has been redesigned to obtain at least 700 completed interviews in each of 42 police force areas nationwide. Jonathan Allen describes these efforts in chapter 10, explaining how they link up with different performance assessment initiatives.

Different sweeps of the BCS have included a variety of measures of public attitudes toward various elements of crime and justice. Chapter 11, by Mike Hough and Julian Roberts, discusses different attempts to gauge attitudes toward crime and punishment, culminating in a comprehensive bundle of questions in the 1996 BCS. Like Skogan’s analysis of attitudes toward police, Hough and Roberts’ findings show sharp discrepancies between public beliefs and other measures of such things as change in crime rates or criminal sentences. Disparities between opinion and purported fact are not limited to the BCS, as similar gaps in public knowledge have emerged from surveys in other countries. The authors conclude with a range of proposals for better understanding what survey data on public opinion do and do not measure.

Fear of crime has been of interest since the first sweep of the BCS. In chapter 12, Jason Ditton and Stephen Farrall briefly summarize what has been learned about fear over the past 25 years, concluding that despite a lengthy body of research a great deal of conceptual ambiguity still limits



what we can claim to know. This is especially interesting, since few attitudes in criminology have received as much attention in efforts to improve measurement. The authors conclude that fear is best viewed as a multi-dimensional construct that should be measured by multiple items together with experiments in scaling.

Mike Sutton, in chapter 13, argues that crime surveys yield little information about a growing variety of crimes and related problems. Frauds targeting individuals or businesses, together with an expanding range of computer-facilitated offenses, are the most well known of these. Sutton considers these problems broadly. Traditional crime types operate in realms of traditional physical and social behavior that form the basis of crime surveys. Individual behavior and economic transactions are increasingly framed by the Internet, and traditional conceptions of crime have not yet caught up. The chapter describes examples of basic research that would begin to address these shortcomings. Sutton offers suggestions on how to take advantage of changes in communications technology to measure victimization by fraud and other offenses.

The BCS and selected spin-offs have begun to accumulate knowledge about fraud, as described by Jacqueline Hoare in chapter 14. Questions in the BCS asked about individual experiences of fraud, though this assumes individuals are aware they have been victimized. Two surveys that sampled businesses included questions about fraud victimization. The Offending Crime and Justice Surveys contain items about fraud offenses committed by respondents. Hoare also describes a range of administrative and private sources of data on fraud, concluding with an analysis of what is needed to understand better this complex family of offenses.

David Cantor and James Lynch begin chapter 15 by describing how changes in the social environment of surveys have reduced response rates, presented new challenges in sampling, and generally made it more difficult to conduct large-scale crime surveys. At the same time, changes in telecommunications and other technologies offer opportunities for improving measurement and reaching target populations otherwise difficult to contact. Cantor and Lynch also discuss the changing role of crime surveys as part of a system of statistical indicators of crime. Just as many clusters of indicators monitor health and economic conditions, evolving crime problems should be measured through a statistical system.

The final chapter centers on the future of crime surveys, pulling together topics raised mostly in other chapters. In much the same spirit that surveys of victims were proposed as measures of unreported and