

Penal Issues

CESDIP

Centre de Recherches
Sociologiques sur le Droit
et les Institutions Pénales

UMR 8183

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Measuring Burglaries in France :Victimisation Surveys and Police Statistics Since the Mid 1980s

Penal Issues pursues the publication of studies on crime trends. Following the issues on homicide (September 2008, XXI, 4), non-lethal personal violence (December 2008, XXI, 5) and personal theft (June 2010, XXIII, 3), the present paper, on burglary, is based on research by **Renée ZAUBERMAN, Philippe ROBERT, Sophie NÉVANEN and David BON** on contract with the Agence Nationale de la Recherche.

Measuring crime is a complex operation, for which research has sought to diversify its sources, following early work based exclusively on institutionally produced data (on judicial statistics at first, more recently on police statistics). Because many illegal acts are not registered in police and gendarmerie activity statistics, social sciences have developed specific tools to grasp them. One of these tools is known as *victimisation surveys*, which question general population samples on the offences to which they claim to have been prey over a given period of time. We have compared these two sources, in order to observe the trends in burglaries in France since the mid 1980s.

More specifically, we will confine our study to burglaries committed in main homes and their annexes, since some of the surveys consulted did not include burglaries of other places.

Data and methods

Victimization Surveys

Surveys conducted in France form a heterogeneous collection :

- a first nationwide survey was conducted by the CESDIP in the mid-1980s, on a sample of 11,000 respondents ;
- following a 10-year interruption, 11 annual surveys called *Enquête Permanente sur les conditions de vie des ménages* (EPCVM), that is on the living conditions of households, included a module on victimisation and were conducted by the *Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques* (INSEE), the national statistical agency, starting in the mid-1990s ;
- since 2007, this module has been replaced by annual surveys called *Cadre de vie et sécurité* (CVS), that is on life environment and safety, entirely devoted to victimisation. This overhaul was introduced to improve comparability of the survey findings with police data rather than to retain their comparability over time, an option that has made their serialisation a complex venture¹.

The first EPCVM reached some 6,000-odd respondents; the following ones touched almost 11,000 people. The last two questioned as many as 25,000 people, after which the figure was adjusted at 17,000 for the CVS. Each of these surveys asks questions about victimisations suffered over the 2 years prior to the study. All contain a module on the burglaries that respondents felt their household had suffered (personal and vehicle-connected thefts were dealt with in separate modules).

They will be compared with :

- the surveys conducted every two years since 2001 in the *Île-de-France* region by the *Institut d'Aménagement et d'urbanisme* (IAU-ÎdF), covering large samples of some 10,500 respondents ;
- urban surveys conducted by the CESDIP in Amiens in the late 1990s and in 2005 in Aubervilliers, Aulnay, Gonesse, Lyons and Saint-Denis for the *Forum français pour la sécurité urbaine* (FFSU). Samples ranged from 1,000 to 5,000 respondents.

The nationwide surveys were all conducted face-to-face, whereas regional and local surveys were conducted by telephone.

Ministry of the Interior statistics, called *Crimes et délits constatés* count offence reports transmitted by the police and the gendarmerie to the criminal justice system; they exclude those involving traffic violations, those for negligence and petty offenses calling for the least severe sentences.

Methodology : various preliminary operations are required to make these two sources comparable:

Surveys provide information on the **proportion of victims among respondents (the prevalence)** and on the **number of victimisations incidents of a same type (multiple victimisation)** over the past two years. Multiplying one by the other yields the **rate of incidence** (number, per 100 respondents, of incidents suffered over the reference period). Applying this rate to the number of households in the surveyed population yields **estimates in absolute figures**, which may then be compared with police data.

Among the 107 crime categories used in police statistics, the one closest to the formulation of the surveys questions was selected (indicator 27 : burglary in main home premises).

Since victimization surveys were designed specifically for the observation of incidents that are not reported to or uncovered by the police and therefore are not counted as crime, police recordings stand theoretically at a lower level than survey estimates.

To account for this divergence, the notion of **reported incidence is brought in**, which includes only those victimisations for which respondents claimed to have filed a complaint. Here again, the rate found is applied to the reference population to obtain estimates in absolute figures comparable to the police data.

These should, theoretically, come close to estimated reported incidence, or at least fall within the confidence intervals for it. If such is the case, the difference between the two sources is entirely explained by the propensity of victims to report incidents to the police. Conversely, if police data are located above or below the limits of the confidence interval the reasons for the difference between the two sources must be sought elsewhere.

¹ For an in-depth discussion of the problems raised by this serialization, see MICELI, *et al.*, 2009.

² Since the findings of a sample survey can only be probabilistically extrapolated to the overall population, the confidence interval – more or less wide open depending on the size of the sample – is the interval in which there is a 95% chance that the real value is located.

A Lasting Decline, Perhaps Interrupted at the End of the Period

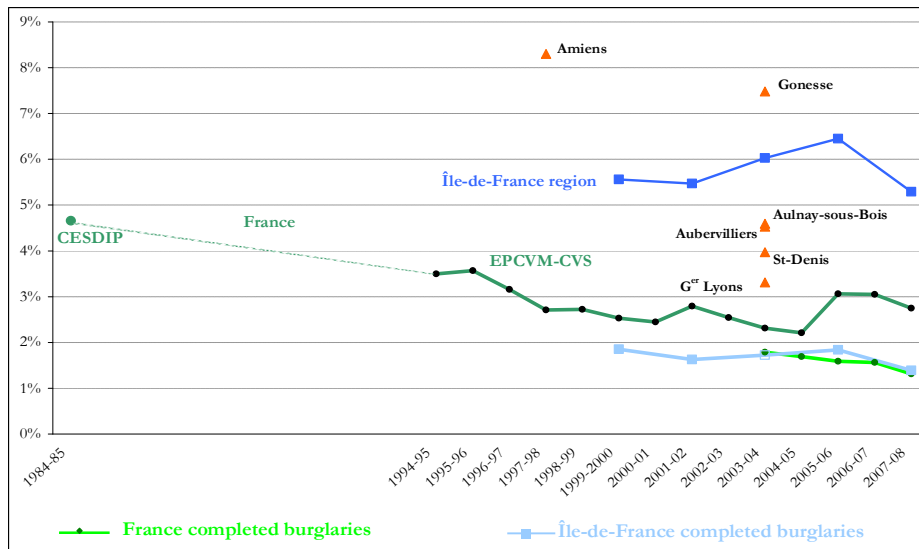
Table I. Burglaries of main homes; nationwide surveys 1984-2008

	% of burglarised households in population (prevalence)	average number of burglaries per household (multivictimation)	% of burglaries in population (incidence)
CESDIP 1984-1985	4.66	1.27	5.92
EPCVM 1994-1995	3.50	1.27	4.43
EPCVM 1995-1996	3.57	1.32	4.70
EPCVM 1996-1997	3.16	1.26	3.98
EPCVM 1997-1998	2.71	1.21	3.28
EPCVM 1998-1999	2.72	1.22	3.31
EPCVM 1999-2000	2.53	1.24	3.14
EPCVM 2000-2001	2.45	1.15	2.83
EPCVM 2001-2002	2.79	1.21	3.38
EPCVM 2002-2003	2.54	1.13	2.86
EPCVM 2003-2004	2.31	1.23	2.84
EPCVM 2004-2005	2.21	1.12	2.47
CVS 2005-2006	3.06	1.15	3.50
CVS 2006-2007	3.05	1.12	3.42
CVS 2007-2008	2.75	1.18	3.24

Source : CESDIP, INSEE.

Coverage : Metropolitan France.

Figure I. Burglaries of main homes, % of burglarised households within the population (prevalence), in various surveys (1984-2008)



Source : CESDIP, INSEE, IAU-ÎdF.

Coverage : variable, depending on the survey.

Burglaries of main homes as measured by surveys only affect a small fraction of households residing in metropolitan France : less than 5 %, and actually less than 3 % since the mid 1990s (see table I).

This type of victimisation has declined almost constantly from the mid 1980s to the mid 2000s. A first comparison between the CESDIP survey in the 1980s and the first EPCVM survey showed the drop to have begun by the gradual reduction of the extremely high rates characteristic of the Greater Paris area at the beginning of the period. Prevalence dropped from 14.5 to 5 % in Paris proper and from 11.2 to 5.1 % in the immediately adjacent suburbs (la *Petite Couronne*)³.

Extending time and space perspectives of this downward trend, international comparisons show that the long-term rise in property offences that attended the development of consumer societies has subsequently lost its impetus in many industrialised European countries, has levelled off

and sometimes even dropped sooner or later in the course of the 1990s or 2000s⁴. Various types of explanations have been advanced to account for this overall trend. Some are demographic, referring to the recent decline, much more marked in Europe than elsewhere, in the proportion of young people in the overall population, since it is youths who most frequently commit these offences. Others are technical, political or social: the widespread implementation of protective devices makes burglary more difficult ; security matters have become such important issues that governments address them with repressive policies that may have effectively curbed it; some social groups have developed strategies by which they succeed in removing themselves physically from high-risk locations, particularly through the selective mechanisms of the real estate market⁵.

More recently, however, the downward trend seems to have been interrupted in

⁴ For France, see *Penal Issues*, XXIII, 3 ; for European findings, see VAN DIJK, et al., 2007, 249 ff.

⁵ For an analysis of these trends, see ZAUBERMAN, 2010.

France. But the reversal is sufficiently surprising to raise the question of its possible spuriousness due to a change in the questionnaire design, and particularly to the modification of the phrasing of questions on burglary. Indeed, between 1996 and 2004 the question asked was : *Was your home burglarised ?* In 2005 and 2006 it was changed to *Did you experience a burglary in your home (main home) ?* Since 2007 the CVS asks *Did you experience burglary or attempted burglary of your home ? Can the explicit introduction of attempted burglary in the question have had a disturbing effect ?* If the analysis is restricted to the trend in completed burglaries, which is feasible from 2003-2004 on, the downward tendency seems to continue, as shown in the short bright-green line in Figure I. There is therefore a possibility that only unsuccessful attempts increased.

This uncertainty illustrates the value of stable survey protocols, failing which there is no way of knowing whether an observed change is ascribable to a change in the phenomena to be measured or to some instability in the measuring tool. From this viewpoint, the Île-de-France surveys are the most reliable. They cover large, representative samples of a population that constitutes close to one fifth of the inhabitants of metropolitan France, and their protocol has remained totally unchanged⁶. Their serialisation, which unfortunately only covers the last decade of the period surveyed nationally, shows an upward trend up to 2005-2006 (Figure I), following which a downward turn is visible.

Nevertheless, the figures from the Île-de-France surveys are consistently higher than those of nationwide studies (almost twice as high). In spite of declining rates for Paris between the mid 1980s and the mid 1990s, it is still true that burglary affects the Île-de-France region much more than the rest of metropolitan France. In the 2006-2007 CVS, the prevalence rate for burglary in main homes is 4.36 % as opposed to 2.75 % for the rest of the country. However, if restricted to completed burglaries only, the regional prevalence is of the same magnitude as for the country as a whole. Does this mean that there are more burglary attempts in the Île-de-France region, but not any more completed burglaries, or should this discrepancy be ascribed to some difference in the survey designs?

Be that as it may, and irrespective of whether the downward nationwide trend continues, it is noteworthy that most of the findings collected in 2003-2004 in the northern suburbs of Paris (in Aulnay-sous-Bois, Aubervilliers, and Saint-Denis) are higher than the national figures but lower than the regional ones, meaning that the peak in Île-de-France region burglaries is located elsewhere than in these cities of the Seine-Saint-Denis *département*⁷. It is noteworthy that in all five surveys conducted there since 2001, Paris proper always has

⁶ The question is : « *Did anyone enter your home without permission, or attempt to do so, and steal, or attempt to steal something... ?* ».

⁷ The *département* is the basic territorial unit of the French administrative organisation.

³ ROBERT, et al., 1999, 272.

the highest prevalence scores for this type of victimisation. Last, extremely high scores were found in Amiens in the late 1990s and in Gonesse in the middle of the following decade. Both findings seem to be caused by an exceptionally high rate of attempts.

The last remark derived from Table 1 is that the average number of burglaries suffered by households over the two previous years has tended to decline over the period, although this evolution is not linear. The upturn in incidence – the proportion of burglaries within the population – is therefore lesser than in prevalence (proportion of burglarised households).

Whatever the trend in the most recent years, burglaries have strongly decreased over a quarter of a century.

Low Consistency Among Sources

There is a serious discrepancy – a ratio of close to three to one – between survey findings and police statistics (Table 2). It seemed to have declined after the turn of the century, down to two to one, since the drop shown by police statistics was less sharp than in victimisation survey findings. Since then, the two are farther apart than ever. There is no statistically significant correlation between the two series.

Both sources definitely do agree that the overall trend is downward, but the evolution as shown in police statistics is greatly attenuated in comparison with survey findings. The same dulling, in institutional data, of upward and downward trends, is typical of all countries where similar comparisons have been done. Penal systems can only process a volume of offences corresponding to the resources available at a given point, and if that volume happens to change, the adjustment of those resources is never an immediate response, but rather, proceeds laboriously, in typical institutional fashion⁸. In the present case, the police series gives absolutely no indication of the upward turn indicated by the surveys at the end of the period. That particular discrepancy is probably due to the fact that recent surveys recorded a larger number of attempts.

In direct victimisation crime (violence, theft, damage, etc.), the main source of police recordings is the victim's report. The proportion of cases uncovered by police initiative is generally minimal, as opposed to so called « victimless » crime (illegal aliens, sale or use of illegal substances, etc.). It is the victims' propensity to inform the police (or the gendarmerie), then, which logically accounts for the difference between the two sources. This is only very partially true here, since, as shown in Figure 2, the green line of burglaries for which the victims claimed to have filed a complaint is still far above the line of police recordings. In other words, the police and gendarmerie do not, by far, write out reports for burglary in all of the cases in which victims claim to have filed a com-

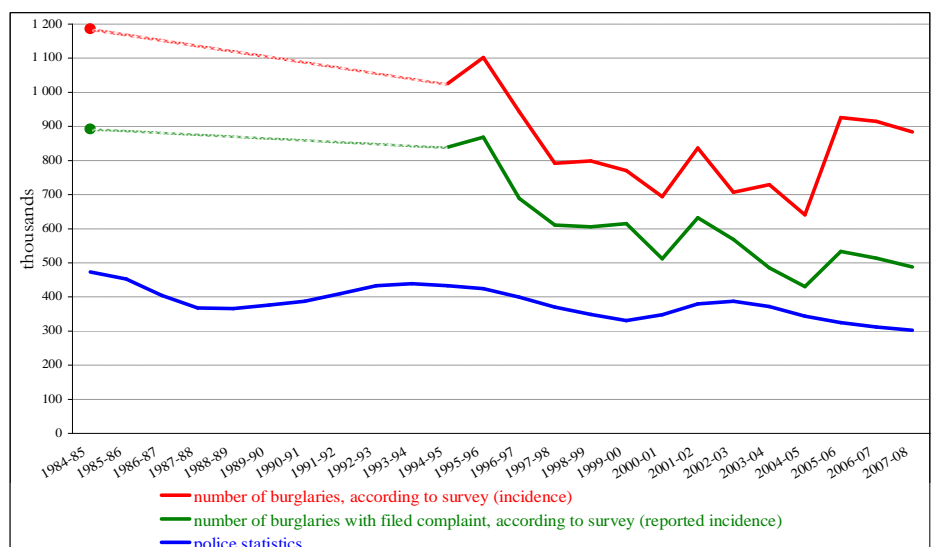
Table 2. Burglaries of main homes, a comparison between surveys and police statistics, expressed in thousands, 1984-2008

CESDIP	1984-1985	Estimated number of burglaries according to surveys	Estimated number of burglaries with filed complaint according to surveys (reported incidence)	Police statistics
	1985-1986	1 186 [1087-1286]	893 [818-968]	473
	1986-1987	453
	1987-1988			405
	1988-1989			368
	1989-1990			366
	1990-1991			376
	1991-1992			387
	1992-1993			410
	1993-1994			433
	1994-1995	1 026 [887-1164]	840 [726-953]	433
	1995-1996	1 102 [955-1248]	868 [753-984]	424
	1996-1997	943 [809-1078]	689 [591-787]	399
	1997-1998	792 [667-917]	611 [514-707]	370
	1998-1999	799 [676-922]	606 [512-699]	349
	1999-2000	771 [645-896]	615 [515-715]	331
	2000-2001	694 [581-807]	512 [429-596]	348
	2001-2002	837 [712-962]	633 [538-727]	380
	2002-2003	707 [599-815]	569 [482-655]	387
	2003-2004	729 [650-808]	485 [433-538]	372
	2004-2005	640 [568-713]	430 [381-479]	344
	2005-2006	926 [849-1 003]	533 [489-578]	325
	2006-2007	915 [838-992]	513 [470-557]	312
	2007-2008	884 [805-963]	488 [444-531]	302

Source : CESDIP, INSEE, Ministry of the Interior.

Coverage : Metropolitan France.

Figure 2. Burglaries of main homes, trends in incidence, reported incidence, police statistics (expressed in thousands)



Source : CESDIP, INSEE, Ministry of the Interior.

Coverage : Metropolitan France.

plaint. The same observation can actually be made when comparing regional and local survey findings on burglary with corresponding police statistics.

This unexpected situation seems to be largely due to diverging judgements over attempts. It is as if police officers wavered when it comes to record some incidents – such as a damaged lock – under the heading of burglary, whereas the survey respondents interpret these as attempted burglaries. So not only are victims more hesitant to inform the police of mere attempts,

but again, even if they decide to do so, their chances of being heard seem to be slight. The outcome is that the increase in burglaries exposed by surveys in recent years results in a larger than ever divergence from police statistics, because that rise seems to pertain mostly to attempts.

Conclusion

All in all, there has been a strong downward trend in burglaries, underestimated by police data, over the last quarter of a

⁸ For a systemic analysis of this sort of institutional inertia, see VAN DIJK, 2009, 40 ff.

century. Burglaries, and especially attempted burglaries, may possibly have increased somewhat in recent years, breaking in part with that overall trend. This hypothetical reversal should be monitored in coming years.

Furthermore, police statistics are not a very reliable indicator for this type of victimisation. Although definitely showing the overall trend, they do so very imprecisely.

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Further reading:

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