

VICTIMS OF OFFENSES

The CESDIP has recently implemented a series of victimization surveys. This term is used to designate the impression of having been a victim of an offense, regardless of the legal validity of the term. These are the first such surveys conducted on a national scale in France.

A *first survey* (1985), covering a sample of 11,000 individuals representative of the French population aged 15 and over, asked the following question : "have you been victim of one of the following acts (or tentatives there to), within approximately the past two years" : theft, burglary, physical assault, sexual violence, domestic violence, frauds or deceit of consumers, white collar crime, violation of labor laws. Data was also taken on age, sex, occupation and size of town of residence.

Social profiles of alleged victims of a certain number of criminal offenses were established, for the first time in France, on the basis of the information collected.

In a *second survey* (1986), varied groups of victims selected from the first survey population were questioned on the incidents (circumstances, offender/victim relationship, recourse, reactions), as well as on their own attitudes, and points indicative of lifestyle and social status.

A systematic attempt was made to bring out inter-group differences, on the basis of three comparisons.

I. VICTIMS/OVERALL POPULATION (see table)

20,5 % of those questioned claimed to have experienced at least one instance of victimization for one of the offenses listed. This proportion does not represent "victims of crime" : it may be increased or decreased by modifying the list of offenses. It is even less a gauge of delinquency, since it excludes all offenses with no direct victim, at the least.

► *Very few* people claim to have been victims of violence : 2,6 % for ordinary violent crimes, 1,3 % for domestic violence and 0,4 % for sexual violence.

A comparable proportion claim to have been victims of violations of labor laws (3 %) or of white collar crime (1,2 %). Comparison of these two categories is difficult, however : the latter offenses only apply to specific groups, as a rule (employees or the self-employed), whereas anyone may be assaulted.

► A *greater number* of people were victims of thefts or frauds (burglary: 6,3 %, consumer fraud: 6,3 % and simple thefts : 8,8 %).

Comparisons with data from other countries are extremely difficult for many technical reasons : differences in sampling, in periods of reference, in units of reckoning. Nonetheless, the difference in scale between violent crimes and property offenses is attested wherever such investigation are conducted. Further, comparative surveys done in 1989 in the industrialized countries have shown France to rank high among these for the percentage of victims of burglary and car theft.

Most victims are *young adults* : 25-49 year-olds are most affected, except for physical aggressions, which mostly affect younger people, and burglaries, which tend to touch 50-64 year-olds. The risks are generally very low for people over 65.

Three distinct cases may be defined with respect to *occupation* ;

► some groups, such as farmers, are under-represented ;
 ► others are only represented for certain types of victimization : craftspeople/shopkeepers for burglary and business crime, workers for labor-related offenses ;
 ► others again are over-represented in all cases. They include employees and middle management self-employed professionals and executives.

Last, residents of the Paris *area* are over-represented in practically all cases, especially for burglaries and violence (particularly sexual). Large-city dwellers are only over-represented for thefts and those in medium-sized cities for domestic violence. On the other hand, inhabitants of small towns and of rural districts are hardly mentioned.

II. COMPARISONS BASED ON TYPES OF OFFENSE

Burglaries and domestic violence are the only two offenses occurring in *private place* : ordinary physical violence or sexual violence usually takes place in public, as do half of thefts. Workplaces are very rarely mentioned for any offense.

9 out of 10 victims of theft or burglary are unable to *identify the offender*. The same is true for 3/4 of cases of violence or consumer offenses. In the other cases the offender is generally known to the victim.

Victims of some offenses often estimate *material prejudice* to be considerable. This is true of thefts and burglaries, but also of white collar crimes and labor-related offenses. In addition to the material loss, there may be a feeling of *sentimental loss*, but only victims of burglaries occasionally contend

loss of objects of little financial value was the cause of great sentimental prejudice.

Physical injury is most frequent for violence of all sorts. It is not necessarily present, however, and is not always serious, by far. Only in domestic violence does its frequency exceed 50 % and in such cases it usually occasions aftermaths.

Victims generally have *violently negative feelings* about the offender ; but the most long-lasting ruminations are observed in victims of domestic violence and of sexual assault.

Fear is a much more frequent aftermath of violent offenses than of property offenses, but burglary victims experience it twice as often as theft victims.

The *recourse* used by victims in attempts to solve their problem depends on the degree of intimacy between offender and victim. Three combinations are seen.

► when the offender is unknown (theft or burglary), massive recourse to the police is observed, along with less generalized recourse to insurance, sometimes completed by repair work and the purchasing of various devices.

► when the offender and the victim are acquainted, the level of police reporting drops sharply. In the case of physical violence, the police is only called in 3 or 4 times out of 10, and some attempts at direct settlement are documented.

Reasons for resorting to the police range from the simple fulfillment of a formal requirement for reimbursement of the damage by an insurance company to a demand for punishment or help, and including the feeling of doing one's civic duty or the wish to prevent repetition of the offense. In the opinion of victims, these complaints receive little follow up : hardly any for violent crime, and none at all for thefts. There is a tremendous gap between the propensity to call in the police and the services provided by it, as measured by the proportion of cases solved.

► last, for the other victimizations, the criminal justice solution is absent. Direct negotiations and specific types of recourse for each category of conflict are utilized (for example labor inspectorate, industrial court trade union or jurists specialized in labor laws).

III. DIFFERENCES WITHIN EACH TYPE OF VICTIMIZATION

There is no typical victims of each offense, any more than there is a specific definition of the "victim" in general. People react differently to a same incident.

One way of reacting may be seen among victims of *thefts and burglaries*. Certain groups react dramatically to the event, which they feel is extremely important. The dividing line does not separate different types of behavior (everyone, or nearly everyone, reports incidents, and turns to his or her insurance company when the losses are great enough) ; it only pertains to the way the situation is experienced.

These strongly reacting groups always include people in certain occupational categories (retired people, housewives or the self-employed) that are hardly affected by delinquency, on the whole, but express great fear of crime, and give high priority to the punishment of property offenses. For these two offenses, then, it seems that the way in which some victims react is more ideological than functional. This reaction leads them to place quite specific expectations in their recourse: they file a complaint like anyone else, but with a much more acute desire for punishment. When the existence of these dramatically reacting groups is viewed in the light of the ineffectiveness of their complaint, it is clear that the debate on criminal policy and insecurity is grounded in this contradiction.

In *consumer-related* offenses, the range of reactions takes on a very different pattern. The main differences pertain both to the way the situation is experienced and to the type of recourse (direct settlement, a consumers rights organization, or nothing at all). These different types of solution correspond to social groups with completely different attitudes: conservative people with little financial or cultural means, who are irritated but do not act; liberal white collar workers who attempt to defend their interests. Concern with the repression of consumer-related offenses is highest in this latter group.

The different strategies employed almost always have one point in common : the victims' deepseated pessimism as to their efficacy.

The *other types of victimization* seem to belong to a third pattern: reactions depend on the seriousness of the loss, which is decisive in determining whether or not the victims make use of the available means of recourse : lodging a complaint in case of aggression, administrative or legal action in labor-related cases.

Research on victims rest on the general assumption that the seriousness of the loss is decisive in determining reporting ; this is in fact only the case in our third model.

The investigations described above, instigated in response to a considerable need for information, first emphasize the flagrant inadequacy of criminal justice activity to the demands of plaintiffs.