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An Overview of the Differences between Police-Reported and Victim-Reported Crime, 1997



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Preface

The Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics (CCJS), a division of Statistics Canada, has the mandate to develop, and make available information regarding the nature and extent of crime and the administration of justice to the Canadian public.

This publication “An Overview of the Differences between Police-Reported and Victim-Reported Crime, 1997” was prepared by Lucie Ogrodnik, Integration and Analysis Program, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics and Cathy Trainor, General Social Survey Program, Housing Family and Social Statistics Division.

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I. Introduction

“Crime in Canada: Growing or not?” (CTV News, June 14, 1994)

“Crime up? Stats show we just think it is.” (*Toronto Star*, June 1994)

“Playing the crime numbers racket: Surveys show Canadians are of two minds when it comes to crime.” (*Edmonton Journal*, June 18, 1994)

“Cluttering – rather than illuminating – the criminal landscape is a confusing array of statistics which have been used both to uphold and dispute common wisdom on the rate of crime.” (*Toronto Star*, “The Politics of Fear,” October 1, 1994)

These were some of the headlines appearing in the news media a few years ago, highlighting the level of public confusion over crime statistics. Contributing to this state of confusion was the simultaneous release of two different sets of crime statistics: Uniform Crime Reporting Survey (UCR) data and General Social Survey (GSS) data.

It was reported that, while victimization rates (based on the GSS) had not changed substantially over a five-year period, police-reported (UCR-based) crime rates had increased. This apparent discrepancy led the media to question which, if either, set of crime statistics was correct, and to challenge the credibility and motives behind each survey.

The purpose of this report is to reduce the level of confusion arising from the use of crime data originating from two very different sources (i.e., the UCR and the GSS) and to inform discussions about which is the “better” measure of crime. It explains why the findings based on these data sources diverge and summarizes the major differences between the two surveys.

II. Why Police Surveys Produce Different Results from Victimization Surveys

According to the 1993 GSS, 24% of Canadians had been the victim of at least one crime the previous year. Essentially, the overall rate of victimization had remained the same as that observed in 1988. This trend seemed to contradict the slowly rising total crime rate derived from the UCR during the same time period (12%).¹

Although similar levels of victimization were reported in both 1988 and 1993, 46% of Canadians believed that crime had increased. In addition, respondents reported feeling less safe walking alone in their neighbourhoods at night in 1993 than they did five years earlier. There appears to be a troubling gap between the public’s perception of crime in Canada and its reality. This apparent discrepancy, as well as heightened concern about crime, has spurred the media to question which set of crime statistics is more accurate.

¹ See the section “Differences between the 1988 and 1993 Personal Risk Cycles of the GSS” for comparable UCR time periods.

The expectation that the two crime series examined in this report should produce similar figures lies behind this impression of discrepancy. Such expectations arise out of the false belief that the two surveys measure the same phenomena, and are based on identical objectives, methodologies and populations when, in fact, they produce two distinct sets of crime indicators. It is important to be aware of the fundamental differences between these surveys to understand why measures based on these data sources diverge. This section attempts to reduce some of the confusion surrounding crime data by examining the fundamental objectives, scope and characteristics of both the UCR and the GSS.

Uniform Crime Reporting Survey (UCR)

The UCR is a census of all criminal offences reported to, or detected by, the police and subsequently recorded as crimes. However, it has been well documented that only a small portion of all criminal events are reported to the police. To become “known to the police” a crime must survive a succession of victim and police decisions, including the following: recognition by the victim that a crime has occurred; police notification; and, entering the occurrence into official police records. Each decision is based on individual perceptions of the circumstances surrounding the event, and on the victim’s and/or witness’s cost/benefit analyses associated with reporting the crime. Costs include the time and trouble for a citizen to report a crime, and for a police officer to respond or to complete an investigation report. In addition, a “crime” may disappear or be re-defined at any point in the process, for example, as a result of record-keeping failures, departmental reporting practices, or the decision by the victim or the police to drop charges.

Any measure of criminal activity based on officially recorded crime statistics will be an underestimate. In addition, the extent to which crime is underestimated varies with time and location. For example, changing police charging priorities make comparisons of crime across regions problematic. As a result, small upward fluctuations in either crime reporting or recording can too readily be perceived as a “crime wave.”

Some would argue that crime trends are best revealed by official police-reported statistics. Others contend that reporting behaviour is erratic and the police often exercise discretion in deciding what is and is not a crime. Furthermore, in some cases, police officers may decide to divert an offender instead of laying charges. Out of these concerns have emerged attempts to develop alternative ways of measuring crime. The most significant of these is the victimization survey approach.

General Social Survey (GSS)

Statistics Canada established the General Social Survey in 1985 to broaden the range of social statistics available to Canadians. This annual survey was designed to fill some of the data gaps in health, personal risk, education and work, and family statistics (on a rotating basis). Each GSS collects data from a sample of approximately 10,000 Canadians aged 15 years and over in the ten provinces. The survey excludes full-time residents of institutions. The population is sampled using random digit dialling techniques and respondents are interviewed by telephone (thus excluding persons living in households without telephones²).

² Persons living in households without telephones represent less than 2% of the target population. Survey estimates are adjusted (weighted) to represent these individuals.

In 1988 and 1993, the core content of the GSS concentrated on criminal victimizations and accidents. In contrast to the UCR, the GSS provides the opportunity to go beyond counting criminal incidents. In addition to questioning respondents about their experiences with reported and unreported crime, the GSS includes questions about attitudes toward the various components of the justice system, awareness of victim services, and perceptions of personal safety.

III. Differences between the UCR and the GSS

This section outlines specific differences in the way the UCR and the GSS measure crime. The Figure summarizes these differences for easy reference.

Data Source

The most basic difference between the two types of crime surveys is the method of data collection. The UCR obtains all of its data from police administrative records, which contain incident-based information. Subsequent decisions by the courts to charge an offender with a lesser offence, or an outcome of “not guilty,” do not affect police records.

In contrast, the GSS collects personal information from individuals about their victimization experiences, through telephone interviews. This survey covers victims’ total experience of crime, for example, the number of crimes reported to police, the impact of crime on victims, the number of crimes not reported to police and the reasons why they were not reported, as well as perceptions of the level of crime generally.

Coverage

While the UCR uses a census approach – insofar as every police department in Canada participates in the survey – the GSS is a sample survey. The UCR has produced a continuous historical record of annual crime statistics, covering nearly 100 types of crime, since 1962. In contrast, the GSS operates on a repeating cycle. To date, GSS victimization data have been collected on two separate occasions: in 1988 and 1993. The next survey is slated for the year 2000. The GSS is not entirely national in scope. The target population excludes persons under the age of 15, full-time residents of institutions,³ households without telephones and the populations of the two territories.

Victimization surveys do not measure all types of crime. By their very nature, victimization surveys do not collect information on homicides or crimes committed against businesses and children. Moreover, information on consensual or “victimless” crime (i.e., drug use, prostitution, gambling), and corporate or white-collar crime, is typically not collected through victimization surveys.

³ The effect of this exclusion is greatest for persons 65 years and over, estimated at 9% of this age group in the 1988 survey.

Units of Count

The GSS and the UCR use different primary units of count. The GSS counts the number of criminal “victimizations,” that is, the number of times an individual or household was a victim of crime. The UCR counts the number of criminal “incidents” reported to the police. The GSS classifies crime into two types of criminal victimizations: crime committed against the person and crime committed against the household.

- a) Crime against the person: Includes actual or attempted sexual assault, robbery, assault and theft of personal property. Consensual or “victimless” crime, and crime involving a business (e.g. bank robbery) are excluded from this category.
- b) Crime against the respondent’s household: Includes actual or attempted break-ins, theft of household goods, auto/auto part theft, and vandalism.

In comparison, the UCR classifies violent crime differently from other types of crime. When violent crime is reported, a separate incident is recorded for each victim. For example, if one person assaults three people, then three incidents are recorded; but if three people assault one person, only one incident is recorded. The exception to this rule is robbery: this violent crime is recorded on an occurrence basis regardless of the number of victims involved.

For non-violent crime, one incident is counted for every distinct or separate occurrence. For example, property crime targeting several victims is recorded as a single offence if it is considered to be part of the same incident. Therefore, the total number of incidents recorded by the UCR equals the number of victims of violent crime, plus the number of separate occurrences of non-violent crime (including robbery).

Most Serious Offence Rule

The UCR classification rule that has the greatest impact on crime counts is the Most Serious Offence (MSO) rule; that is, incidents are classified according to the most serious offence occurring in the criminal incident (generally the offence carrying the longest maximum sentence). For example, under the UCR, a criminal event involving both a break and enter and an assault is classified according to its most serious offence – the assault. This rule results in an undercounting of less serious offences.

The GSS also reports victimization data according to the most serious offence. However, it is possible to examine the total number of offences within a criminal incident.

Unfounded Incidents

It is commonly assumed that all events that come to the attention of the police will be recorded in official crime statistics, but this is not always the case. Police exercise discretion in the formal recognition and recording of a crime. In some cases, it is discovered that no “crime” actually took place, and thus the original report is deemed “unfounded,” is pursued no further, and is not included in the total number of “actual” offences.

Victimization surveys, on the other hand, use a set of screening questions to ascertain whether incidents fall within scope. Nevertheless, the final count may include a number of victimizations that may be otherwise deemed “unfounded” according to UCR classification rules.

Differences between the 1988 and 1993 Personal Risk Cycles of the GSS

For the most part, the 1993 GSS Personal Risk Survey was similar to that carried out in 1988. However, a few changes – mostly minor – were made that may affect the comparability of the results. Some of the more notable revisions are described below.

The two Personal Risk cycles of the GSS are often referred to as the “1988” and “1993” cycles, since these are the years in which they were conducted. However, the reference periods cover different time periods. In the 1988 GSS, respondents were asked about their experiences with crime and the criminal justice system during the previous calendar year, that is, January to December 1987. The 1993 GSS asked about victimizations occurring during the previous 12 months, which may, depending upon when the interview was conducted, span the 1992 and 1993 calendar years.

It should also be noted that the 1993 survey included additional questions concerning sexual assault that were not in the 1988 survey. Since the 1993 questions elicited victimizations that would not have been surveyed in 1988, the overall sexual assault victimization rates are not comparable.

Sources of Error

It is important to recognize that any survey is subject to error. Survey errors can be divided into two types: sampling and non-sampling errors.

Because the GSS is a sample survey, the data are subject to sampling error. The sampling error is the difference between an estimate derived from a sample survey and the result that would have been obtained if the entire population had been surveyed. All other types of errors, such as coverage, response, processing and non-response errors, are non-sampling errors. While the size of the sampling error can be estimated, non-sampling errors are more difficult to identify and quantify.

One important type of non-sampling error is the respondent’s ability to recall relevant events and report them accurately to the interviewer. Errors may arise because respondents are simply unaware of such events, are forgetful of incidents, are unwilling to report a crime to an interviewer because of embarrassment or shame (e.g., where the victim and offender are related), or are unable to correctly place the incidents in time, either moving them into or out of the reference period. Other sources of non-sampling error include mistakes introduced by interviewers, the misclassification of incidents, errors in the coding and processing of data, and biases arising from non-response. These can be minimized through careful training and supervision, but can never be entirely eliminated.

Figure: Differences Between the UCR and GSS

UCR	GSS
Data Collection Methods:	
Administrative police records	Personal reports from individual citizens
Census	Sample survey
100% coverage of all police agencies	Sample of approximately 10,000 persons using random digit dialling sampling technique
Data submitted on paper or in machine-readable format	Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI); excludes households without telephones
National in scope	Excludes Yukon and Northwest Territories
Continuous historical file: 1962 onwards	Periodic survey: 1988, 1993, next survey anticipated in the year 2000
All recorded criminal incidents regardless of victims' age	Target population: persons aged 15 and over, excluding full-time residents of institutions
Counts only those incidents reported to and recorded by police	Collects crimes reported and not reported to police
Scope and Definitions:	
Primary unit of count is the criminal incident	Primary unit of count is criminal victimization (at personal and household levels)
Nearly 100 crime categories	Eight crime categories
"Most Serious Offence" rule results in an undercount of less serious crimes	Statistics are usually reported on a "most serious offence" basis, but counts for every crime type are possible, depending on statistical reliability.
Includes attempts	Includes attempts
Sources of Error:	
Reporting by the public	Sampling error
Processing error, edit failure, non-responding police department	Non-sampling error related to the following: coverage, respondent error (e.g., recall error), non-response, coding, edit and imputation, estimation
Police discretion, changes in policy and procedures	
Legislative change	

While the above sources of error tend to apply to victimization surveys, many other factors can influence official police-reported crime statistics. For example, changes and biases in victim reporting behaviour, changes in police reporting and recording practices, new legislation, processing errors, edit failures and non-responding police departments all affect the accuracy of crime statistics.

IV. Comparing UCR Police-Reported and GSS Victim-Reported Crime Rates

While recognizing the underlying differences between the methodologies of the two surveys, crude comparisons can be made between the two sets of survey estimates. In this section, comparisons between UCR and GSS statistics are carried out for five types of offences: sexual assault, assault, robbery, break and enter, and motor vehicle theft (including attempts).

Comparisons are provided for two different time periods. Results from the 1988 GSS, which pertain to the 1987 calendar year, are compared with UCR data for 1987. Data from the 1993 GSS, which had a reference period of 23 months (i.e., February 1992 to December 1993)⁴ are compared with 1993 UCR data.⁵

Because of conceptual differences between the two surveys, several “global” adjustments were required before making comparisons. These adjustments include the following:

- Crimes mentioned by GSS respondents that were not reported to the police were excluded from the GSS counts.
- UCR data for the Yukon and Northwest Territories were omitted from the UCR counts.
- Police reports of “unfounded” incidents were included in the UCR counts.
- UCR-based rates of offences reported to police were converted to conform to GSS rates for both persons and households.

Results

Rates were calculated on a per 1,000 population basis or per 1,000 households, depending upon the offence. Individual offence rates were computed and expressed as ratios. These ratios are presented in the Appendix. Each ratio is accompanied by survey definitions and a summary of the adjustments applied to better equate the two sets of survey statistics.

The ratios shown in the Appendix are not one-to-one. There are various reasons for these discrepancies, including the following:

- Undercounting of less serious offences in the UCR: for example, an incident consisting of a break and enter followed by a robbery would have only the robbery offence entered in the UCR.

⁴ While the 1993 GSS involved a 23 month period, each respondent had a 12 month reference period that started between February 1992 and December 1992.

⁵ Although weighted UCR data for the same 23 months might provide better estimates, only the 1993 UCR data are examined in this report.

- Respondent error in the GSS may be significant and varied: for example, “telescoping” events into the reference period (i.e., the event actually occurred before the reference period but the respondent believes it took place more recently), forgetting some events (especially property related offences), assigning an event to the wrong offence category, not reporting an event due to its sensitivity (e.g., rape).
- Some of the GSS reported incidents may not have been entered into the police administrative systems due to time-lag, different offence recording practices, etc.
- In the 1988 GSS, it was reported that about 2% of the incidents took place outside of Canada. The 1993 GSS did not collect information on the country where the incident occurred.
- The type and amount of non-sampling errors vary between the two surveys. The impact of these errors on survey estimates is difficult to measure. Furthermore, because the methodologies underlying the two surveys are quite different, survey estimates are affected in different ways.

Because police-reported statistics tend to underestimate the actual number of offences taking place, UCR-based rates are expected to be lower than their GSS counterparts. This is the case for all offences except for motor vehicle theft. Because of the personal nature of the GSS questions, it is unknown whether the reported offence rates are above or below the actual rates. Because the GSS is a sample survey subject to sampling error, calculated rates will be different for each sample taken. Therefore, the ratios presented in the Appendix should be viewed as a crude correspondence between statistics which are created from two quite different survey vehicles.

V. Summary

One advantage of victimization surveys is that information is gathered directly from respondents, including their experiences as victims, associated socio-economic risk factors and the after-effects of crime. This type of information is valuable to researchers in measuring the impact of crime, a dimension of information unavailable from a survey based solely on administrative data. As well, victim surveys offer greater flexibility in that descriptive details can be collected on relatively rare but serious criminal events (e.g., stalking). The scope of these surveys can also be expanded to include crimes that are believed to be under-reported in police administrative systems (e.g., hate-motivated crimes, elder abuse).

The UCR has the major advantage over victim surveys with respect to coverage and volume. The database allows for the analysis of crime data by small geographic area (municipalities) and over time (since 1962). In comparison, the GSS sample size (10,000 persons) allows fairly extensive analysis at the national level, but only limited analysis at the provincial level. Disaggregation is also restricted at the Canada level for smaller target groups and less common offences.

Joint publication of victimization and police-reported crime data with a clear statement of their appropriate uses contributes towards informing the public about the full nature and extent of crime. Data from GSS victimization surveys can be used to contextualize information from the UCR. Alternatively, the two data sources can be used to test alternative hypotheses related to criminal activity. Neither administrative statistics nor victimization surveys alone can provide comprehensive information about crime. Each is useful for addressing specific issues.

Appendix: Comparative Analysis of Police-Reported and Victim-Reported Crime Rates⁶

1. Sexual Assault

GSS definition:	Sexually assaulted, molested or attempt to sexually assault or molest
UCR category:	Sexual assault (level 1) Sexual assault with weapon (level 2) Aggravated sexual assault (level 3) Other sexual offences Attempts
Adjustments:	To the UCR: combine all sexual assault offences and other sexual offences reported or known to police (including unfounded incidents) to approximate the GSS category of sexual assault and molestation; adjust UCR data using UCR2 ⁷ data to estimate the number of persons aged 15 and older; exclude the two territories and calculate a rate per 1,000 GSS population.
Results:	<u>Rate (per 1,000 population) of offences reported to police</u> Only one ratio (for 1993) is calculated (see p. 7). GSS:UCR Ratio, 1993 = 1.8 : 1 (This ratio means that for every 18 sexual assaults reported in the GSS, ten sexual assaults were reported in the UCR.)

2. Robbery

GSS definition:	Something taken, or there was an attempt, and the person who committed the act had a weapon, or there was an attack or threat of force
UCR category:	Robbery with firearm Robbery with other offensive weapons Other robbery Attempts
Adjustments:	To the UCR: exclude the two territories and calculate a rate per 1,000 GSS population. (Because the UCR does not record the actual number of victims in an incident, the UCR2 was used to calculate the average

⁶ Results are based on a rudimentary analysis and are subject to high sampling variability.

⁷ The UCR2 (Revised UCR), introduced in 1988, collects detailed information on up to four separate violations committed during an incident. Coverage is limited, however (approximately 46% of the volume of all reported crime in 1995).

number of victims per robbery incident. A factor of 1.2 persons per UCR robbery was used in both 1987 and 1993.

Actual or attempted robbery of a business was not to be reported by GSS respondents. The aggregate UCR does not distinguish between business robberies and other robberies. UCR2 estimates for 1995 show that 49% of robberies occurred in a commercial or corporate location.

Results: Rate (per 1,000 population) of offences reported to police
 GSS:UCR Ratio, 1993 = 2.7 : 1
 GSS:UCR Ratio, 1988 = 3.0 : 1

3. Assault

GSS definition: A weapon was present or there was an attack (ranging from being hit, slapped, grabbed or knocked down, to being shot or beaten up) or threat of an attack

UCR category: Assault (level 1)
 Assault with weapon, causing bodily harm (level 2)
 Aggravated assault (level 3)
 Unlawfully causing bodily harm
 Other assaults
 Attempts

Adjustments: To the UCR: combine the UCR assault categories to roughly equate the GSS category; exclude the two territories and calculate a rate per 1,000 GSS population.

Results: Rate (per 1,000 population) of offences reported to police
 GSS:UCR Ratio, 1993 = 1.8 : 1
 GSS:UCR Ratio, 1988 = 2.3 : 1

4. Break and Enter

GSS definition: The person had no right to be there and actually got in; or, the person tried to get in, or not known if actually got in, and there is evidence of force, or knowledge of how a person tried to get in.

UCR category: Residential break and enter
 Other break and enter
 Attempts

Adjustments: To the UCR: exclude business break and enter incidents; exclude the two territories and calculate the rate per 1,000 GSS population.

Results: Rate (per 1,000 population) of offences reported to police

GSS:UCR Ratio, 1993 = 1.2 : 1

GSS:UCR Ratio, 1988 = 1.3 : 1

5. Motor Vehicle Theft

GSS definition: Theft of car, truck, van, motorcycle, moped, other motor vehicle; attempted theft of motor vehicle.

UCR category: Motor vehicle theft – Automobiles

Trucks

Motorcycles

Other

Attempts

Adjustments: To the UCR: combine all UCR motor vehicle theft categories to roughly equate the GSS category; exclude the two territories and calculate the rate per 1,000 GSS population.

To the GSS: Use only actual or attempted motor vehicle thefts; exclude actual or attempted theft of motor vehicle parts.

Results: Rate (per 1,000 population) of offences reported to police

GSS:UCR Ratio, 1993 = 1 : 1.5

GSS:UCR Ratio, 1988 = 1 : 1.4

Possible explanations for the higher rates of motor vehicle theft reported to the UCR than the GSS include the following:

- 1) The UCR includes motor vehicle thefts from car dealerships, while the GSS only includes motor vehicle thefts from households. In addition, GSS respondents are asked to exclude company owned vehicles.
- 2) The GSS treats motor vehicle theft as a household crime and assumes that anyone living in a household would report a motor vehicle theft regardless of whether or not they owned the vehicle. However, if some respondents' perception is that the vehicle is personal property rather than household property, they may not report the incident, thus underestimating the number of vehicle thefts.

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