

Methodological problems of a victimization survey: an overview of a continuous working progress in Italy

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The first Italian victimization survey was carried out for the first time in 1997-1998. This was also the first survey Istat carried on by using the CATI method (Computer Assisted Telephone Interview). Even if it gave good results in terms of feasibility, subsequent evaluation analyses revealed some critical points. The following survey conducted in year 2002 addressed these limitations and changes were included in the new questionnaire used.

The victimization survey, in fact, is a cyclical one conducted every five years and focuses on citizen's safety, both in terms of measuring 'objective' events occurred to individuals (i.e. types and characteristics of victimization), as well as 'subjective' views of the phenomena under investigation; fear of crime is one of these. The sample consisted of 60.000 males and females aged 14 and over, each selected from 60,000 corresponding households previously selected with a stratified sampling method. ,

The evaluation phase concerned several aspect, following two main directions: the methodology of the survey and content of the survey.

From a methodological point of view, the focus was on the interviewers and their possible influence on data output. All stages of the CATI technique were highlighted with special reference to the interviewers performance, their strength and weakness elements.

The interviewer effect was also accurately studied; it revealed that it mainly emerges in the more sensitive questions, such as those measuring for instance assault, rape and attempted rape.

The new survey took into consideration these aspects, some change were included during the training (psychological support for the interviewer, role playing to practice difficult and empty possible scenarios), some others were inserted in the CATI system (automation of the outcome of some calls, different management of the appointment). The use of the toll free number was extended.

From the content point of view of the questionnaire, our focus was on the telescoping effect, the crime classification bias and the accurate recognition of a crime as attempted or perpetrated, and reporting to the police.

The paper will focus mainly on this latter aspects.

1. How to reduce the telescoping effect

Between the two victimization surveys, a telephone experiment was conducted on households victimized. These households had been interviewed in a multipurpose survey about their victimization rate on crimes such as pickpocket, bag-snatching, and burglary. Questions were referred to the type of crime suffered, the time of occurrence, whether the victim reported the crime to the police, and where.

The results were surprising, and shed some light on a new point of view of what happens during the recollection.

Even if we already used funneling effect in order to reduce the telescoping one, we decided to gather information on month and the year of last event, by having the interviewer refer to some dear dates; this technique is very useful in reducing the telescoping effect, but it works differently according to the crime under investigation.

2. How to recognize bias in crime classification

Many questions on how the offences took place were had open ended answers. Content analysis of answers allowed to identify mistakes. Sometimes, in fact, confusion is made regarding the typologies of crime that took place, even if the screening questions to identify the occurrence of that crime were accurately formulated with the use of examples.

The possible mistakes were taken into account and appropriate changes have been implemented by extending alternatives to the questions. Corrections can also be made ex-post; in one case there is the on-line recognition of the error, the correction is subsequently implemented and the sequence of other questions is also changed.

3. The definition of crime consumed/attempted

Distinction between attempted and perpetrated crimes seem easy, but when it comes to victim to make this distinction, problem arises.

In 1997 we used, questions regarding stealing included the question whether something was ever stolen from that person, and the question went on asking what was really stolen .

To provide some examples, from the analyses of the open questions and thanks to some checks, we discovered incompatibility with data; it emerged, for instance that someone had declared that something was considered as 'attempted' stolen when it was returned, or in some cases if the object value was so trivial, then the interviewee said it was not really stolen.

For this purpose we left in the screening section the original questions, but in the detail section we went in depth, to better define the identity of the crime.

This was the set of questions that online showed the incompatibility, if any, and thanks to the reconciliation with interviewee corrected the identification. Ex-post the screening was corrected too.

4. The meaning of reporting to the police

Differences between several sources of data are almost always a sensitive topic.

Their aims are different, their tools and their methodologies also. But sometimes it is important to look at the possible bias concerning the two sources: the police data and the victimization survey.

Many things could be said and could be done in this regard, but this is not the aim of this specific work. Our attention is on the perception that citizens have of the act of reporting to the police.

Data underline that contacting the police and making them aware of what has happened does not mean reporting to the police. Experiments conducted on no-victimization survey showed the importance of asking to the interviewers, after having asked if they have reported the crime to the police, if people went to the police station and they have actually signed the reporting sheet. The output of this experiment shows that around 10-15% of victims have not signed anything with clear consequences on register of crime statistics. Nevertheless this percentage is not so high when experimented in victimization survey and vary according to the different crimes.