

Three years of the crime and victims survey in New Zealand – lessons and perspectives

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Abstract:

The New Zealand Crime and Victims Survey (NZCVS) was introduced in 2018. In less than three years this face-to-face survey interviewed more than 23,000 randomly selected adult New Zealanders (15 years and older) and released almost 40 documents available through the Ministry of Justice public website. The NZCVS is the only source of comprehensive victimisation data in New Zealand. Administrative data does not provide a full picture of crime and victimisation because only one quarter of incidents are reported to police.

Victimisation surveys are unique in their approach to design and statistical analysis due to highly sensitive questions, difficulties in coding, interpretation and presenting of data. In addition to the above issues, the third cycle of the survey was interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic and some additional safety measures had to be implemented for further field work.

The survey has explored some special topics such as highly victimised people, offences by family members and public perceptions of the criminal justice system. This paper summarises key lessons learnt from three years of data collection, analysis and reporting. We also discuss the future of victimisation surveys in New Zealand and their importance for decision making and policy development.

Keywords:

Sample surveys; Victimisation; Survey methodology; Dissemination

1. Introduction:

The NZCVS is the most comprehensive source of data on adult (aged 15 and older) victims of crime in Aotearoa New Zealand. Because only about 25 per cent of crime is reported to police, the NZCVS provides the only data on the true nature and volume of crime in New Zealand. The survey also provides rich information on the experiences of victims of crime, and how they were affected.

The key research objectives of the NZCVS are to:

- measure the extent and nature of reported and unreported crime across New Zealand
- understand who experiences crime and how they respond
- identify the groups at above-average risk of victimisation
- facilitate a better understanding of victims' experiences and needs
- provide a measure of crime trends in New Zealand
- provide timely and adequate information to support strategic decisions
- significantly shorten the period between data collection and reporting compared with previous victimisation surveys
- match survey data with relevant administrative records to reduce information gaps in the decision- and policy-making process.

Since it was established in 2017, the NZCVS has dramatically increased knowledge and understanding of crime and victimisation and is widely used by key government agencies and Non-Government organisations to support better policies and interventions.

2. Methodology:

The NZCVS is a nationwide, face-to-face random probability survey, with one respondent selected per household using multistage stratified cluster sampling methods. The survey covers usually resident, non-institutionalised, civilian population of New Zealand aged 15 years and over, living in private dwellings.

The NZCVS is using two samples: a general or ‘main’ population sample and a Māori booster sample that aimed to increase sample size for Māori. Every year the survey includes a core module consisting of same unchanged questions and additional module focussed on a particular topic prioritised for this year.

In the NZCVS, questions are asked about different events (incidents) that might have happened to the respondent or their household. These incidents are then coded by legal experts to determine whether the incident was a crime, and what type of offence (or offences) occurred. The coding process is coordinated with New Zealand Police to guarantee consistency with coding in Police administrative data. It is important to mention that the NZCVS does not directly ask survey participants about crimes that happened to them. This is because people don’t always view some things that happen as crimes and may not know what are legally considered crimes and what aren’t.

The NZCVS covers events happened within 12 months from the date of the interview, with one exception related to the lifetime experience. The questions are about incidents both reported and not reported to the Police. Highly sensitive questions mostly related to interpersonal violence were responded by interviewees without interviewers’ assistance.

During first three cycles the NZCVS maintained a very high response rate of 79%-81%.

3. Results:

Three years of the NZCVS allowed us to learn several lessons about victimisation data and trends.

We found that on the high-level victimisation measures (prevalence and incidence) are very stable over time (see **Figure 1**).

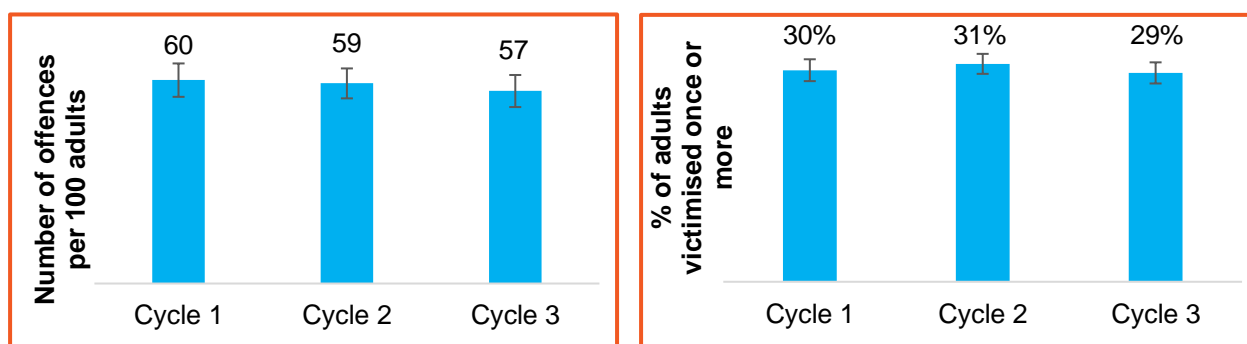


Figure 1. Incidence (left) and prevalence (right) of victimisation in New Zealand during three first cycles of the NZCVS

Although the overall proportion of crime incidents reported to the Police is very stable over time (25%), it varies significantly for different offence types, from 50% for vehicle offences to only 8% for sexual assault (see **Figure 2**).

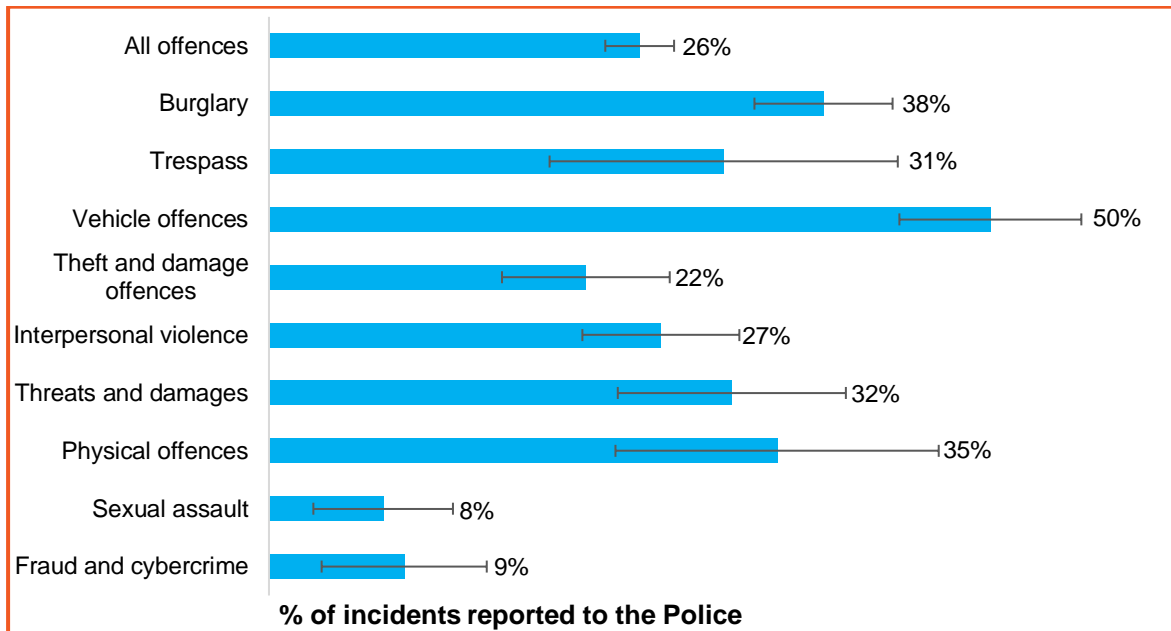


Figure 2. Proportion of crime incidents reported to the Police by offence types.

Even for a small country like New Zealand, regional differences in victimisation may be significant. For example, proportion of household experienced property offences varied in different New Zealand regions from 10% to 24%.

Controlling for important variables may significantly change the interpretation of survey outcomes and needs to be thoroughly considered. For example, the NZCVS data consistently shows that young adults are at higher risk of victimisation than older people. This fact needs to be taken into account to accurately compare victimisation of population groups with different average age. For instance, direct comparison of prevalence rates of people with disabilities and New Zealand average does not show statistically significant difference. However, after controlling for differences in average age between people with disabilities and average adults, people with disabilities were significantly more likely to experience crime across all offences (**Figure 3**).

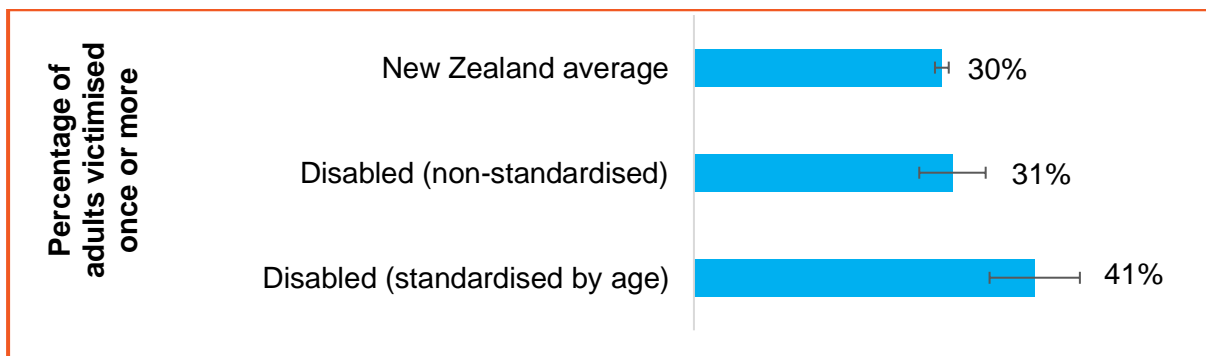


Figure 3. Comparison of prevalence rates of victimisation between people with disabilities and New Zealand average.

Another key lesson for correct interpretation of victimisation data is that “outliers” identified during data collection are often very important and should not be ignored. For example, only 2% of New Zealand adults experience one third of all crime incidents (**Figure 4**). Obviously, this group is subject to in-depth analyses despite its relatively small size and distinctive behaviour.

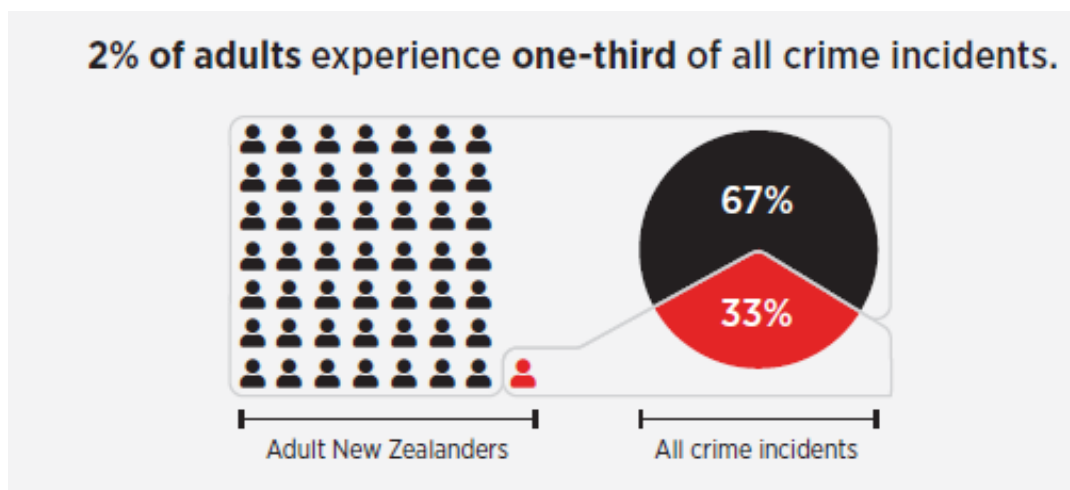


Figure 4. Small proportion of highly victimised people experience a third of all crime incidents.

The NZCVS data confirmed that perceptions may not always reflect reality. For example, for most population groups feeling of safety negatively correlates with the prevalence rate of victimisation. However, a notable exception is the group of young adults who have the highest feeling of safety among the age groups while also having the highest prevalence rate of victimisation.

Finally, Cycle 3 data indicates that COVID-19 pandemic may affect the level of victimisation. In particular, we found that prevalence of burglaries and overall household crime were reduced after the nationwide lockdown in March-May 2020. However, more observations are needed for robust analysis.

4. Discussion and Conclusion:

After three cycles of the NZCVS data collection, analysis and reporting it became evident that the survey delivers a more comprehensive picture of crime in New Zealand compared with administrative data. This is because only about one quarter of offences are reported to Police, and because administrative data provides more details about offenders than about victims. Therefore, the NZCVS offers unique data for analysts, policy makers and the entire justice sector allowing to improve services and make better decisions.

The key benefits that NZCVS provides are:

- an increased ability to quantify the underlying level of crime
- an improved ability to monitor crime trends over time by delivering annual reports
- an ability to collect particular aspects of victimisation or types of crime and to learn about victims' experience related to the selected prioritised topics
- an ability to link victimisation to other outcomes by bringing the NZCVS into Stats NZ's Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) in order to better inform conversations and decision-making.

Success of the first three NZCVS cycles also highlighted some survey limitations which we intend to address in our future work. First of all, while an annual sample size (8,000 interviews) is sufficient for analysing victimisation on the high level and for large population groups, it is still not big enough for smaller population groups and for multidimensional analysis. To allow the latter we combine annual observations into a pooled dataset which makes it possible comparison between population groups but limits the analysis of changes over time. Future increase of the sample size may improve the NZCVS ability to analyse time series.

We also consider extending the NZCVS scope by including children from 12 years. This will require significant review of the survey instruments including questionnaires, sampling frame and interviewing technique. All this should be done without compromising the consistency of the NZCVS reporting.

Lastly, we are considering extension of the perceptual part of the NZCVS in order to analyse relations between victimisation and public perceptions of justice sector in more detail.

From the beginning of the NZCVS our policy is to make its results available to all interested in victimisation data and analysis. The NZCVS target audience is very diversified and includes public sector employees, policy developers, academics, researchers, media and general public. To reflect this diversity we offer on the Ministry of Justice [website](#) a wide range of products including annual and topical reports, brief key finding booklets, methodology reports, infographics, data tables and answers on frequently asked questions. We consider high transparency of the NZCVS methodology and results as key success factor for the survey.