
INTERNATIONAL OVERVIEW: A CROSS-NATIONAL COMPARISON OF RATES OF REPEAT VICTIMIZATION¹

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***Abstract:** Research on repeat victimization to date has been at the local or national level, leaving skeptics room to argue that it is an isolated phenomenon. In this chapter, the rate of repeat victimization — the proportion of crimes that were repeated against the same persons or household — is compared across country and crime type for the 1989, 1992 and 1996 sweeps of the International Crime Victims Survey (ICVS). Repeat victimization is found to be widespread in the industrialized countries surveyed. Some of the similarities and variations between countries are explored. Possibilities for further cross-national research are suggested. It is recommended that the United Nations develop guidelines and training to promote international good practice in the prevention of repeat victimization.*

Research on repeat victimization to date has been at the local or national level, leaving skeptics room to argue that it may be an isolated phenomenon. The result is that the potential for developing repeat victimization policies has been recognized at the national level in several countries, but not at the international level. Simply put, there has not been sufficient proof of the global importance of repeat victimization to warrant the development of international policy, standards or guidelines for its prevention. This chapter addresses this

issue by developing a cross-national comparison of different crime types using data spanning a decade. It is found that repeat victimization occurs in significant amounts in all countries studied, and at levels that suggest there is scope for focusing national crime prevention efforts. We conclude that economies of scale would be gained from developing guidelines and training to promote the prevention of repeat victimization among the international community.

The International Crime Victims Survey (ICVS) has made an enormous contribution to criminological research and knowledge over the last decade. It allows comparison of victimization rates across many countries using a common methodology and definitions.

However, the main reports of the survey do not compare rates of repeat victimization in different countries. In this chapter, we provide evidence from three sweeps of the ICVS to suggest that repeat victimization plays a significant role in the overall makeup of crime rates regardless of country.

The following section of the paper defines our usage of the term "the rate of repeat victimization." This is followed by the cross-national comparative analysis. Rates of repeat victimization are compared across countries and crime types for the 1989, 1992 and 1996 sweeps of the survey, and the "international mean rate of repeat victimization" for different crime types is developed. Following this, ways in which the survey systematically undercounts repeat victimization are discussed. The conclusion suggests ways in which preventing repeat victimization might be promoted internationally.

THE RATE OF REPEAT VICTIMIZATION

The analysis herein is based on a methodologically simple manipulation of the data included in the appendices of the main publication of the third sweep of the International Crime Victims Survey (van Dijk and Mayhew, 1997). The two well-known crime rate measures — the incidence rate (crimes per capita or household) and prevalence rate (targets per capita or household) — were transformed to produce a third measure, the rate of repeat victimization.

The rate of repeat victimization is interchangeably called the repeat rate and "% repeats." The definition will be proposed formally for clarity: *The rate of repeat victimization is the percentage of incidents of a given crime type that are repeated against the same persons or households within a given time period.*

That is, it is the percentage of crimes that were second, third, fourth or subsequent victimizations against the same persons in the

same year covered by the survey. For the purposes of the present analysis, the given time period is the one year covered by each sweep of the survey. There were, as there always is, some discrepancies in the survey data. Where repeat rates were calculated to be either negative or zero, and it was statistically and logically improbable that this was correct, they were dropped from the analysis that follows.

MEAN INTERNATIONAL REPEAT RATES

Table 1 shows rates of repeat victimization by country, survey year and crime type. What follows is based on analysis and interpretation of these data.

Data were not available for every country and crime type combination, as the empty cells in Table 1 show. However, the development of preliminary mean international rates of repeat victimization might still provide a useful baseline or benchmark measure. Individual variations from the mean might then be more easily noted.

The mean international rates of repeat victimization are shown visually in Figure 1. The actual data, the number of contributing countries and standard deviations are shown in Tables 2 to 5.

The mean international repeat rates are remarkably consistent across ICVS sweeps. Using this indicator, rates of repeat victimization have changed little over time as a proportion of all crime. The anomalously high repeat robbery rate in 1992 is due to the fact that data were only available for Sweden. This small number of responding countries was unusual since the average number of countries included for all other crime types in 1992 was 8.3, with a median and a mode of 8 countries, as shown in Tables 1 to 5.

In general, personal crimes have higher rates of repeat victimization than property crimes. Of the crime types covered in the survey, sexual incidents consistently have the highest rates of repeat victimization. Between 40% and 50% of sexual incidents were repeat incidents against the same women, for each sweep of the survey. Between 30% and 40% of all assaults and robberies were repeats against the same persons, followed by robberies and car vandalism. The reader should note that for methodological reasons these are almost certainly conservative rates, an issue that is discussed below.

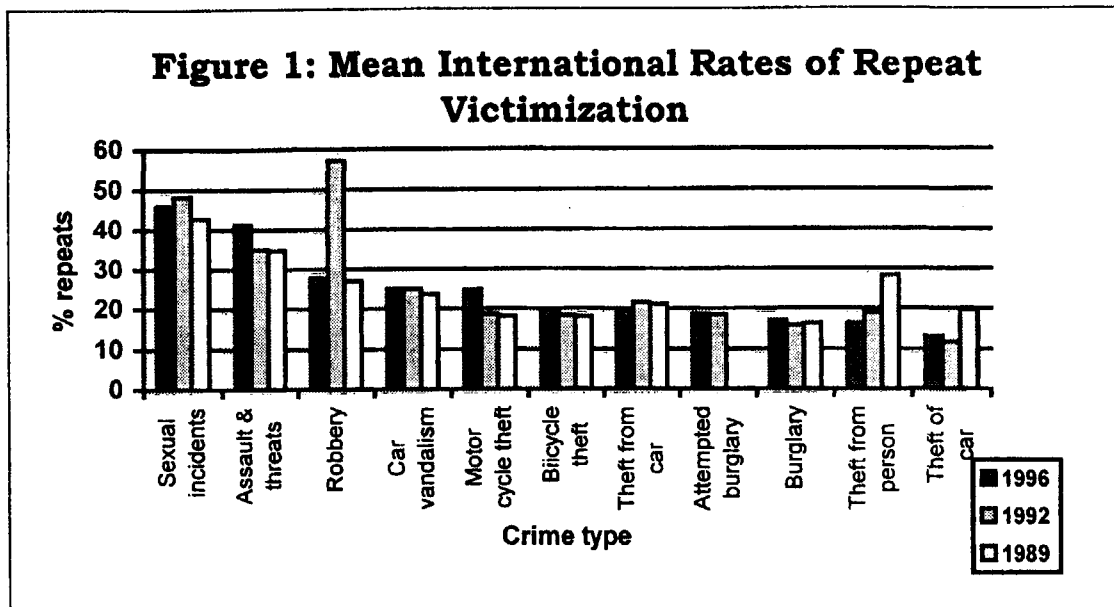
Table 1: National Repeat Rates by Crime Type and Year

Country	Year	Burglary	Attempted Burglary	Theft of Car	Theft from Car	Car Vandalism	Assault & Threats	Bicycle Theft	Motorcycle Theft	Theft Person	Robbery	Sexual Off.
England & Wales	1989	4.55	-	5.00	13.85	22.73	20.83	23.08	-	24.39	12.50	8.33
England & Wales	1992	6.25	19.44	5.13	24.56	32.48	30.91	23.08	-	16.00		27.59
England & Wales	1996	11.76	22.73	10.71	28.32	35.40	39.80	16.67	-	9.09		35.48
Scotland	1989	13.04	-	-	30.77	26.14	41.94	23.08	25.00	7.14	16.67	47.83
Scotland	1992	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Scotland	1996	6.25	13.79	15.00	25.84	27.94	42.47	13.64	-	18.18	20.00	13.33
Northern Ireland	1989	15.38	-	20.00	14.89	29.03	33.33	11.11	-	24.14	-	50.00
Northern Ireland	1992	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Northern Ireland	1996	16.67	21.43	-	11.43	22.09	55.26	7.69	-	16.67	28.57	68.42
Netherlands	1989	7.69	-	-	24.64	24.77	47.62	27.88	-	15.38	33.33	48.00
Netherlands	1992	16.67	16.67	16.67	27.66	28.89	34.43	29.08	9.09	6.12	-	46.34
Netherlands	1996	21.21	19.51	-	23.94	25.93	45.21	26.92	36.36	24.44	25.00	40.00
West Germany	1989	7.14	-	20.00	14.55	29.84	34.04	13.16	-	20.00	27.27	49.09

Country	Year	Burglary	Attempted Burglary	Theft of Car	Theft from Car	Car Vandalism	Assault & Threats	Bicycle Theft	Motorcycle Theft	Theft Person	Robbery	Sexual Off.
West Germany	1992	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
West Germany	1996	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Switzerland	1989	9.09	-	-	13.64	18.00	25.00	17.95	25.00	21.05	-	43.33
Switzerland	1992	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Switzerland	1996	18.75	15.38	-	9.09	23.66	24.39	29.29	26.32	16.18	-	52.08
Belgium	1989	17.86	-	18.18	20.59	25.00	30.00	25.00	-	6.98	23.08	43.48
Belgium	1992	19.23	27.27	-	20.41	20.51	28.00	22.22	20.00	22.50	-	-
Belgium	1996	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
France	1989	27.27	-	-	20.00	16.88	31.03	-	25.00	14.29	33.33	38.89
France	1992	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
France	1996	17.24	-	15.79	22.58	27.19	31.58	24.32	20.00	16.67	-	47.06
Finland	1989	-	-	-	18.18	13.04	14.71	18.42	-	15.69	-	-
Finland	1992	-	-	22.22	19.44	17.65	31.25	13.79	-	12.82	-	57.47
Finland	1996	25.00	12.50	20.00	17.14	12.24	44.59	20.31	-	11.11	37.50	44.68
Spain	1989	19.05	-	26.32	31.43	31.25	50.00	8.33	11.11	20.00	29.55	34.29

Country	Year	Burglary	Attempted Burglary	Theft of Car	Theft from Car	Car Vandalism	Assault & Threats	Bicycle Theft	Motorcycle Theft	Theft Person	Robbery	Sexual Off.
USA	1996	33.33	31.82	5.00	21.05	23.86	43.00	13.16	-	15.22	-	48.98
Canada	1989	16.67	-	11.11	20.88	14.78	38.46	15.00	-	20.29	26.67	42.03
Canada	1992	19.05	27.03	7.14	26.26	22.02	34.25	30.19	33.33	20.29	-	46.48
Canada	1996	15.00	22.22	6.25	21.52	20.51	43.66	17.50	-	21.92	-	43.75
Australia	1989	25.42	-	23.33	24.18	26.05	46.39	17.39	25.00	92.06	18.18	61.38
Australia	1992	30.19	20.83	11.43	22.35	31.65	41.98	8.70	-	27.78	-	54.55
Australia	1996	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
New Zealand	1989	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
New Zealand	1992	21.82	20.00	15.63	25.81	21.57	41.24	13.73	-	28.38	-	44.00
New Zealand	1996	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Japan	1989	22.22	-	25.00	12.50	22.86	11.11	13.95	-	88.24	-	34.78
Japan	1992	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Japan	1996	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Source: Derived from van Dijk and Mayhew (1997).



**Table 2: 1989 ICVS Repeat Victimization Rates
(n = countries)**

	n	Mean	Median	S.D.	Coeff. Var.
Sexual incidents	14	42.76	43.41	12.49	29.21
Assault & threats	15	34.68	34.04	12.63	36.42
Theft from the person	14	28.28	20.14	26.85	94.94
Robbery	11	27.01	27.27	9.10	33.69
Car vandalism	15	23.63	25.00	5.56	23.53
Theft from car	15	21.12	20.59	6.67	31.58
Theft of car	9	19.61	20.00	7.41	37.79
Motorcycle theft	7	18.25	25.00	25.50	139.73
Bicycle theft	13	18.11	17.95	5.76	31.81
Burglary	14	16.33	16.03	8.26	50.58
Attempted burglary	N/A				

**Table 3: 1992 ICVS Repeat Victimization Rates
(n = countries)**

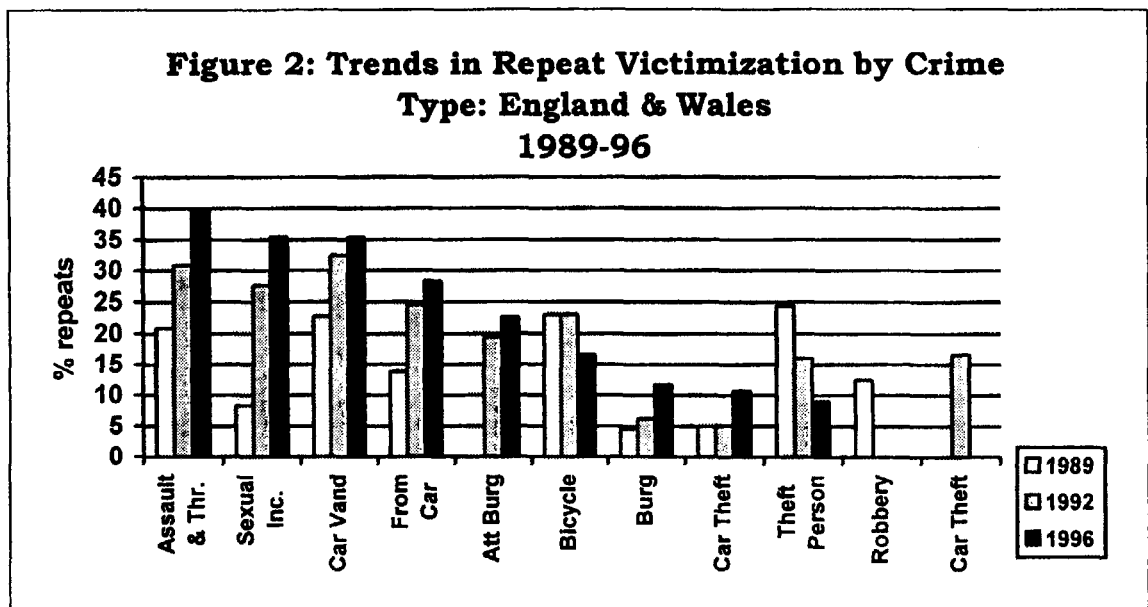
	n	Mean	Median	S.D	Coeff. Var.
Robbery	1	57.14		.	.
Sexual incidents	8	48.34	50.51	9.79	20.25
Assault & threats	9	35.04	34.25	6.60	18.84
Car vandalism	9	24.97	22.02	5.77	23.11
Theft from car	9	21.50	22.35	5.38	25.02
Theft from person	9	18.93	20.29	7.28	38.46
Motorcycle theft	5	18.66	20.00	11.32	60.66
Attempted burglary	8	18.49	19.72	7.40	40.02
Bicycle theft	9	18.46	17.65	8.23	44.58
Burglary	8	15.95	17.86	8.51	53.35
Theft of car	8	11.72	10.71	6.04	51.54

**Table 4: 1996 ICVS Repeat Victimization Rates
(n = countries)**

	n	Mean	Median	S.D	Coeff. Var.
Sexual incidents	11	45.95	47.06	14.14	30.77
Assault & threats	11	41.27	43.00	7.86	19.05
Robbery	4	27.77	26.79	7.38	26.58
Car vandalism	11	25.03	25.93	5.84	23.33
Motorcycle theft	4	24.84	23.16	8.66	34.86
Bicycle theft	11	19.60	20.31	6.53	33.32
Theft from car	11	19.55	21.05	5.90	30.18
Attempted burglary	9	18.64	19.51	6.98	37.45
Burglary	11	17.14	16.67	7.49	43.70
Theft from person	11	16.43	16.67	4.84	29.46
Theft of car	7	13.25	15.00	6.11	46.11

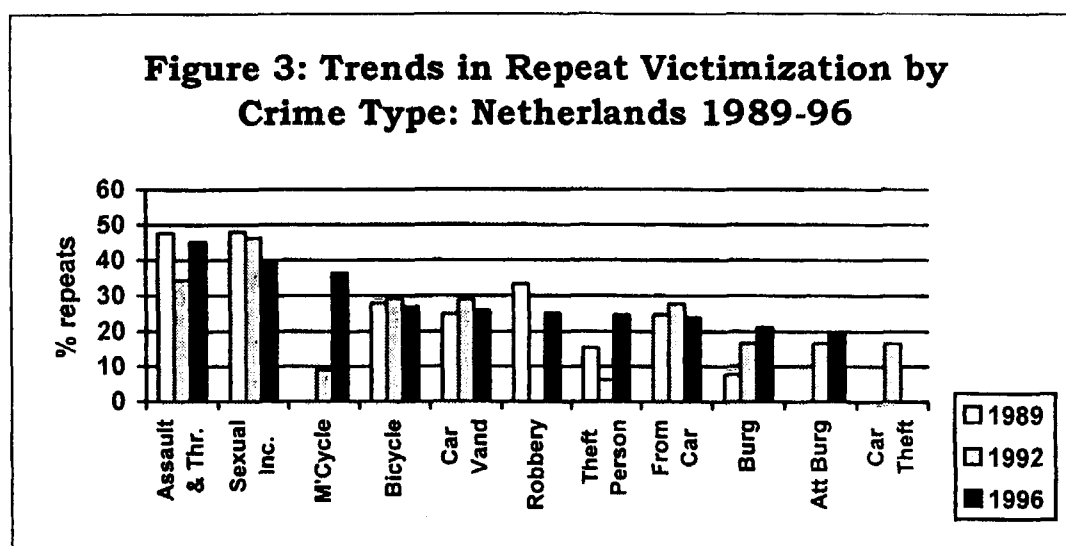
Repeat Rates by Country

In England and Wales between 1989 and 1996, rates of repeat victimization appeared to increase for seven crime types, namely, assaults and threats, sexual incidents, car vandalism, theft from the car, attempted burglary, burglary, and car theft. Rates of repeat victimization declined for two crime types only: theft of bicycles, and theft from the person. Information on repeat robbery rates was available for 1989 only. Repeat rates in England and Wales increased far more than crime incidence rates. Future research might seek to examine this finding using the larger data set of the British Crime Survey.



The Netherlands is one of the few countries for which data are available for all three sweeps of the ICVS. Ranked by the rate of repeats in 1996, assaults and threats are higher than sexual incidents, although this does not hold for previous years of the survey. Repeated motorcycle thefts and bicycle thefts are higher than in most other countries: around a quarter are repeats compared to an international mean of less than a fifth. The absolutely large increase in motorcycle theft may well reflect methodological change in measurement of repeats, or a large variation due to small sample sizes. While it has long been recognized that Dutch bicycle theft is higher in terms

of incidence (crimes per capita) than elsewhere, almost certainly due to the greater ownership and use of bicycles, there seems to be no intuitive reason why this would lead to a higher rate of repeats. Perhaps the same persons fall afoul of opportunist thieves by repeatedly leaving their bikes unlocked. Perhaps the same owners have their expensive bicycles stolen (for sale) and replaced via insurance on several occasions, by the same or different offenders. Perhaps the same types of attractive or fashionable bicycles are targeted more than others. Even if this is the case, however, it would not explain why rates of repeated bicycle theft are higher in the Netherlands than elsewhere.



Japan presents a fascinating case study. It is well known that Japan has low crime incidence rates compared to other industrialized countries. Are rates of repeat victimization also lower? This preliminary analysis suggests that rates of repeat victimization are not lower in Japan than elsewhere. Data were only available for Japan from the 1989 ICVS sweep. All crime types in Japan had a repeat rate within 8% of the mean for industrialized countries, with two exceptions: repeated theft from the person and repeated assaults and threats. In general, there seems to be no overall pattern of significant difference between repeat rates in Japan and the mean rate of industrialized countries (Table 5). In particular, there is not a systematic difference akin to that of the incidence rate. It would seem reasonable to conclude that the situations that lead to crime in Japan also lead to re-

peat crime. This finding requires replication and verification using other data sources. Some examination of the possible implications of the finding are warranted, however. First, it suggests that crime prevention policy in Japan might be usefully targeted at repeat victimization. Second, the finding points to possible implications relating to the nature of crime in Japan. The differences in crime incidence rates between Japan and most other industrialized countries are sometimes explained in terms of cultural differences. The similarity in the repeat crime rates would suggest that repeat victimization is a rational choice in Japan, as elsewhere. Whatever causes low crime rates in Japan does not cause low rates of repeat victimization, and where criminal opportunities exist they are repeatedly exploited in Japan, as elsewhere.

Table 5: Repeat Victimization in Japan Compared to International Mean Rates

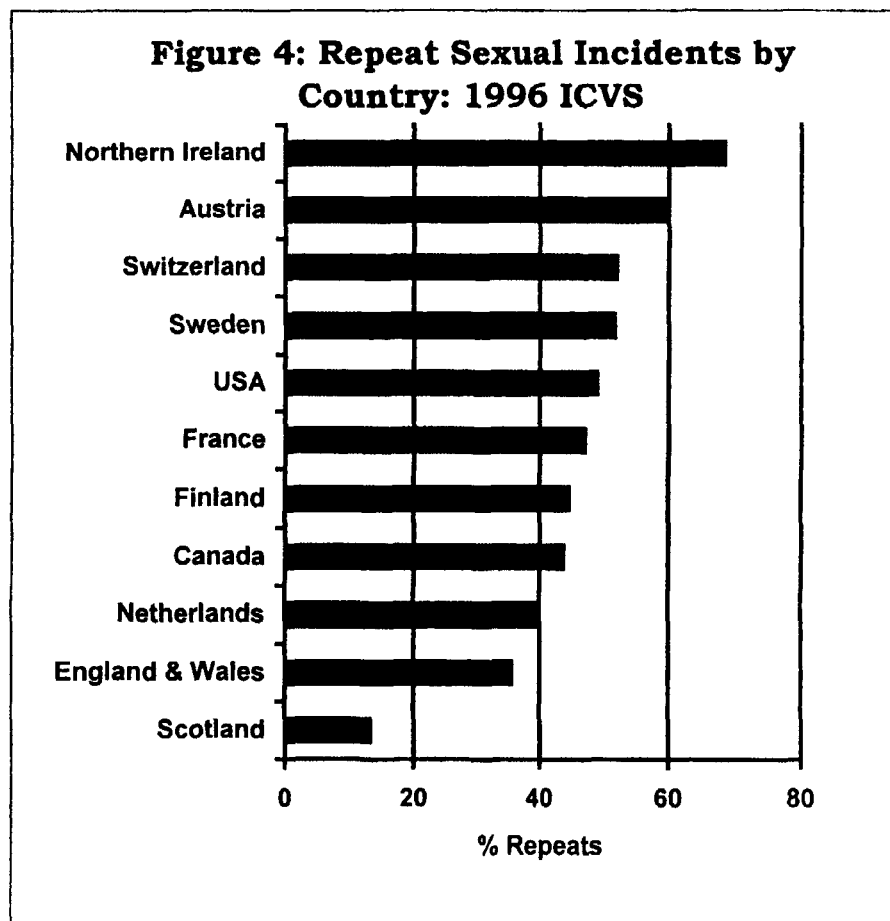
	Japan	International Mean	Difference
Sexual incidents	34.78	42.76	-7.98
Assault & threats	11.11	34.68	-23.57
Theft from the person	88.24	28.28	59.96
Car vandalism	22.86	23.63	-0.77
Theft from car	12.50	21.12	-8.62
Theft of car	25.00	19.61	5.39
Bicycle theft	13.95	18.11	-4.16
Burglary	22.22	16.33	5.89

In general, many if not most countries show patterns of repeats similar to those of the international means in Figure 1. By no means are all of the national variations discussed herein. There are myriad avenues of possible research to be explored, some of which will be discussed later. At this point, the focus will shift to crime type rather than country.

Repeats By Crime Type

Sexual incidents show high and remarkably consistent repeat rates across countries. Eight of the 11 countries for which data were

available from the 1996 ICVS had sexual assault repeat rates between 40% and 60% (Figure 4). The obvious question relates to Scotland, which appears to have anomalously low rates. Do Scottish women fight back more? Are they empowered in such a way that they take more effective avoidance and prevention measures after victimization, from which crime prevention lessons might be learned? Unfortunately, the answer seems to be no. An examination of the data from Scotland in Table 1 shows that repeat sexual incidents in 1989 were nearly 50%. The low rates in 1996 are probably just an artifact of the data. A likely explanation is that the low prevalence of sexual assaults leads to high variance in repeats caused by a few cases being different from the mean. What the consistently high rates of repeat sexual incidents across countries do suggest is that, although general education and prevention measures may work, efforts with victims of sexual incidents may be an efficient means of developing focused prevention and detection measures.



Assaults and threats also show high and remarkably consistent rates of repeat victimization across countries. Eight of the 11 countries for which 1996 rates are available lie within a 5% band between 40% and 45% of all assaults and threats being repeated against the same persons. A quick visual examination of Figure 5 raises the question as to why Northern Ireland has unusually high rates of repeated assaults and threats. The authors' initial reaction was that this could be due to the Northern Ireland troubles (political conflict) that may lead to the same persons being more likely to be assaulted and threatened time and again. However, a closer look at the Northern Ireland data suggests an alternative explanation. Assaults and threats were not unusually high in the previous sweep for which data were available. As with sexual incidents in Scotland, the situation warrants closer local inspection to determine that there was not a far greater change in repeat victimization compared to incidence. However, the more likely explanation is that the 1996 data for Northern Ireland are skewed by the small sample size, and the true rate of repeated assault and threats lies closer to the international mean.

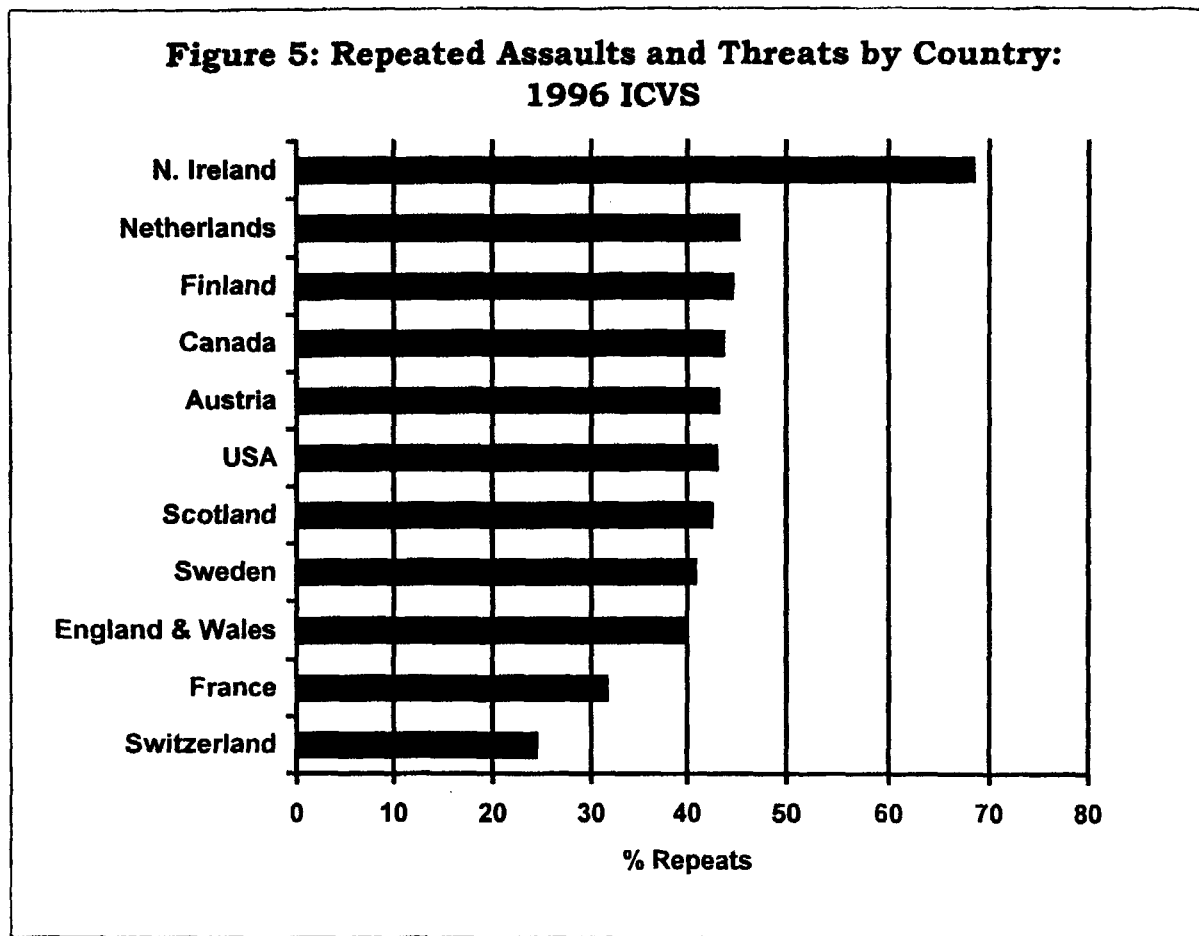
Repeated robbery, at around 28% of all robberies, has the third highest mean international rate of repeats. However, there seems to be greater between-country variation than there was for sexual incidents or assaults. The relative dearth of data for 1996 means that utilizing the most recent data for each country seems a justifiable alternative. In Figure 6 the relevant year is shown next to the country name when it is not the 1996 sweep. This substitution with data from other years is justified if rates of repeat victimization are assumed to be relatively consistent across time, which the prior analysis of the means suggest is not an unreasonable assumption. The absolute rarity of robbery may well increase the variance in the data. However, the rarity of robbery also makes this finding all the more interesting and potentially useful for developing approaches to robbery prevention. Some effort is warranted to examine if the difference in repeat rates is true or an artifact of the data, and, if true, examination of the differences may be revealing: why are repeated robberies higher in some countries compared to others? Is this phenomenon related to overall robbery rates? Further exploration of the phenomenon should not preclude some effort and resources being used to develop prevention efforts focused upon repeats.

Car vandalism seems highly likely to be repeated, more so even than theft of or from cars. The international mean repeat rate is around 25% for each year of the ICVS. Around a third of all car vandalism in England and Wales, having increased from 1989, seemed to

have been directed against the same vehicles in the 1990s. It may be that high rates of repeat car vandalism occur because, although car vandalism may be a property crime in legal terms, it may be a personal crime in terms of intent. Car vandalism may be a crime committed repeatedly out of vindictiveness as part of an ongoing dispute, or as a form of harassment. Alternatively, it could be a crime of envy if the same expensive cars are repeatedly damaged by different persons — the practice of running a coin or key down the side of an expensive car to scratch it is fairly widespread. Whatever the reasons, some minor adjustment to parking routines and procedures of victims, other routine precautions or detection of offenders returning to the targeted vehicle could be a means of empowering victims to eliminate the occurrence of the crime being repeated.

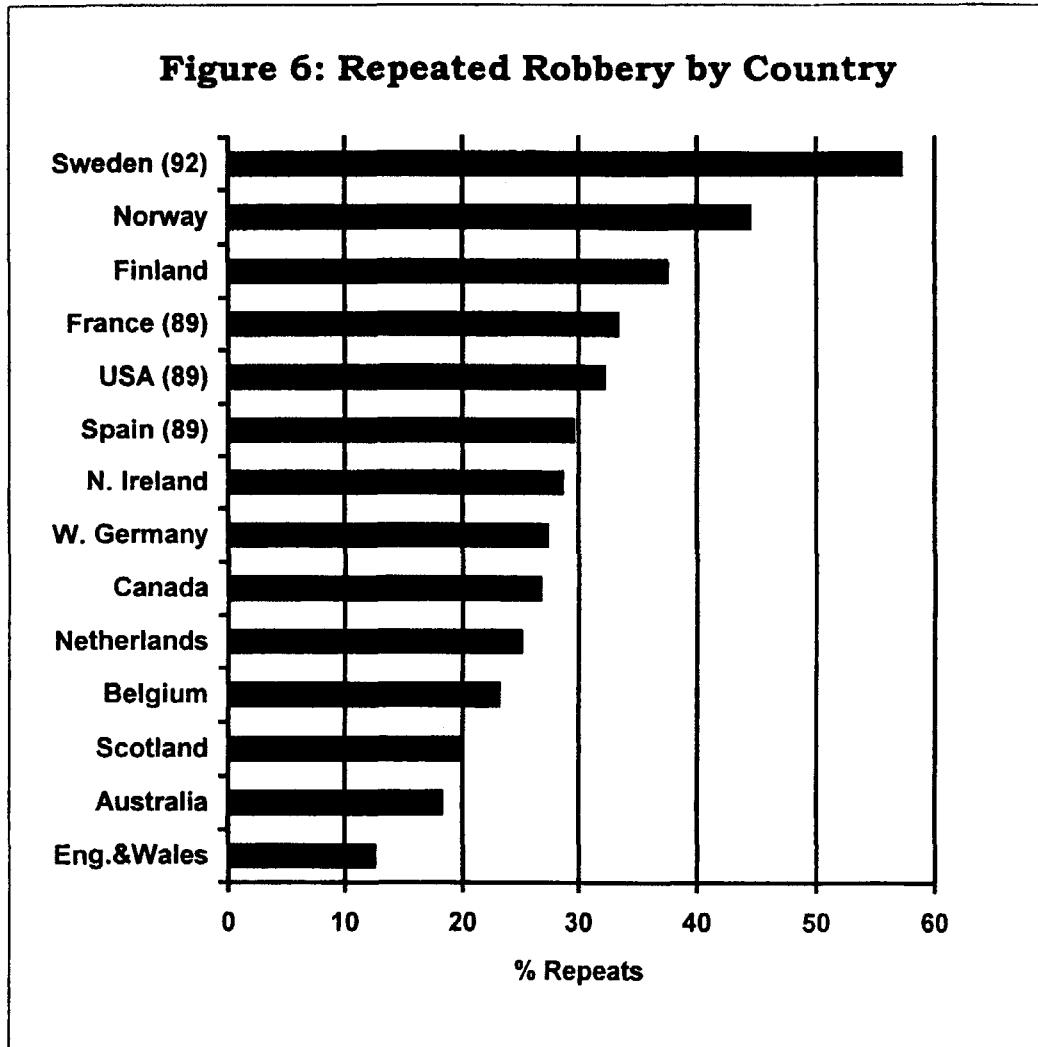
Much of the work to date on the study of repeat victimization has been in relation to burglary. Like robbery, rates of repeat burglary as measured by the 1996 ICVS seem to vary by country. This is potentially important because it suggests that there may be general differences in housing type or other characteristics between countries that lead to differences in the rate of repeats. Further examination of other variables available on the ICVS data set would be a good first step towards understanding this variation, supplemented with a trawl of local knowledge. Determining what causes low rates of repeat burglaries in some countries might be an important step in developing prevention measures, or perhaps in developing the pool of crime prevention measures related to property design.

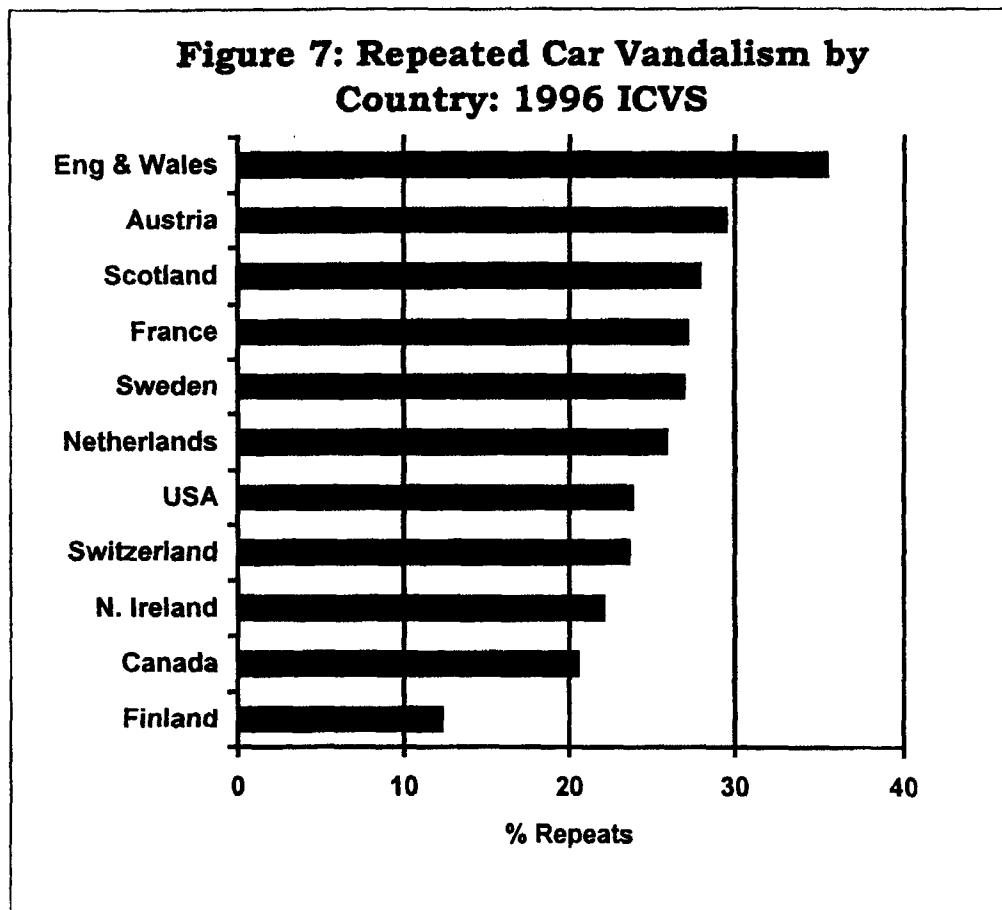
The relatively low apparent rates of repeat burglaries in the U.K. highlight at least two methodological issues. Firstly, the low rates may be an example of the ICVS generating an underestimate of the rate of repeat victimization. Even the extremely conservative estimates of the main publication of the British Crime Survey estimate repeat residential burglary at 22% (calculated from Mayhew et al., 1993:49), compared to the maximum of 12% found here. Secondly, the low rate of repeats is a reminder of the importance of how some crimes, and even more so their repetitions, cluster spatially within a country. Repeat burglary is disproportionately concentrated in certain areas, more than burglary itself (Trickett et al., 1992). The mean national rates presented throughout this paper will severely understate the possibilities for developing crime prevention in high-crime areas.



This specific discussion of the underrepresentation of repeat burglaries in the U.K. is a case study of how the ICVS may well produce artificially low rates of repeat victimization in general. Hazel Genn was the first to note two important issues: most crime surveys limit the number of series of incidents that a respondent can report, and most crime surveys impose an artificial limit on the number of crimes that are counted as having occurred in a series (Genn, 1988). A third aspect of surveys that produces an underestimate of the rate of repeats is the length of the study period. Most crime victim surveys measure a one-year window of crime. This acts to artificially truncate series of repeats at either end of the reporting period. A recent study in which one of the present authors is involved estimated that a one-

year survey produces a repeat burglary rate that is 40% lower than a three year survey.²





DISCUSSION: THE UNITED NATIONS AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

For some years, the United Nations (U.N.) and the international community have been interested in the plight of victims of crime, and have sought to assist governments in implementing strategies to reduce the likelihood of victimization. On 29 November 1985, the General Assembly of the U.N. adopted the Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power (resolution 40/34). Although the Declaration is largely interested in defining victims and specifying their right to have access to justice, fair treatment, assistance and compensation or restitution, it does point to the need for crime prevention strategies and action-oriented research. The authors feel the present paper is consistent with the goals of the Declaration.

As a bit of history, the U.N. Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), in its resolutions 1986/10, 1989/57 and 1990/22, stressed the need for the effective implementation of the Declaration. Among other things, the ECOSOC called upon the U.N. Secretary-General to consider the preparation, publication and dissemination of a guide for criminal justice practitioners and others engaged in offering assistance to victims of crime. The ECOSOC, in its resolution 1995/13 of 24 July 1995, called upon member-states to provide input on the advisability of preparing a manual on the use and application of the Declaration. As a result of three expert group meetings (Vienna, December 1995; Tulsa, 1996; the Hague, 1997), two documents have been prepared (they are in draft at the time of writing): a short manual, and a lengthy handbook designed to assist the establishment of programs and policies for the implementation of the Declaration.

Both the draft manual and the draft handbook note two issues that are relevant for the present research. First, they note the research finding that those already victimized are particularly susceptible to subsequent victimization. Second, they note that action-oriented research and ongoing information exchange is required to help governments formulate crime prevention strategies.

The authors would suggest that the U.N. and its international partners take note of this research, since the prevention of repeat victimization promotes more efficient use of scarce crime prevention resources. The dissemination and promotion of good crime prevention practice is a key comparative advantage of a body such as the U.N. Center for International Crime Prevention. In addition, as recommended by ECOSOC resolution 1996/14, the international community may wish to include the findings of repeat victimization research in its proposed database on promising practices relevant to victim-related issues.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE WORK

The ICVS has enormously broadened the horizons of criminological research and crime prevention practice. The present paper only scratches the surface of the utility of the survey for examining repeat victimization. At worst, we propose that our findings suggest the need for a broadening of the agenda of research and practice related to repeat victimization. The following three suggestions might lend specific focus to these developments:

- Demonstration projects need to be continued and expanded in those countries where they exist, and replicated and begun in others. Projects based on the prevention of repeats of sexual incidents, robbery and car vandalism, for example, would serve as useful supplements to the knowledge base that has developed around the prevention of repeated residential and commercial burglary, domestic violence and racial (hate) crimes.
- A larger-scale, cross-national comparative analysis of repeats utilizing the ICVS data sets in more detail, perhaps alongside or parallel to national crime surveys, and comparing repeat rates more directly to incidence and prevalence rates, would be a source of much information of relevance to crime prevention practice.
- The cross-national comparison of repeat rates for many crime types suggests that preventing repeat victimization may warrant international crime prevention efforts. The practice may proceed at a greater pace, and with greater efficiency and effectiveness, if there were a coordinated international pooling of information and expertise. It may be timely for an international body, such as the U.N. Center for International Crime Prevention, INTERPOL, or the European Commission, to consider the development of police training and other guidelines to develop the prevention of repeat victimization as an international crime prevention strategy.



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NOTES

1. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations. An earlier version of this paper was presented to the American Society of Criminology in San Diego, November 1997.
2. The ICVS includes questions relating to victimization over a five-year period that deserve examination. However, the authors anticipate that memory decay will result in repeats being grossly understated.