

High frequency repeat victimisation in the Crime Survey for England and Wales

16 July 2015

Introduction

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is reviewing the treatment of high frequency repeat victimisation in estimates derived from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW). This note provides a brief background to the issue and outlines forthcoming work.

Background

One of the primary purposes of the survey is to monitor trends in crimes experienced by the household population.

The CSEW operates as a face-to-face victimisation survey in which a large random sample of people resident in households in England and Wales are asked about their experiences of a range of crimes in the 12 months prior to the interview.

Like other victimisation surveys, the CSEW has a defined reference period (the 12 months prior to interview) in which respondents are asked to recall the number of incidents experienced. This approach tends to work well for crimes that occur as a discrete event and which respondents can easily recall the details. The experience of being robbed or burgled tends to be memorable and recalled fairly easily. However, for some victims crime is not experienced as a single discrete event, but as a lived experience of ongoing victimisation; the most obvious example of the latter being domestic violence¹. Victims with high frequency repeat victimisation can find it much more challenging to accurately recall the number and details of such incidents.

Where respondents report more than one incident of the same offence in the reference year, the survey seeks to split such incidents into single events and series. The survey defines incidents as part of a 'series' of repeat victimisation if the incidents described were 'the same thing, done under the same circumstances and probably by the same people'.

Skewed distribution of victimisation and use of capping

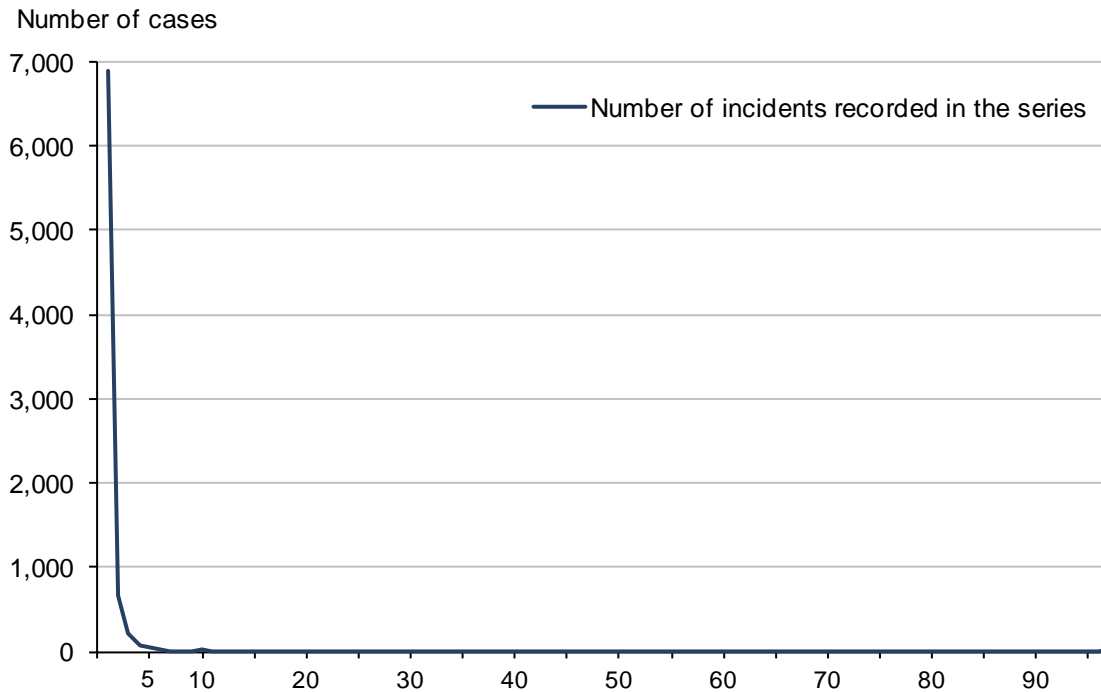
As Chart 1 shows, the distribution of the number of incidents experienced by victims is skewed with a small number of people experiencing a disproportionately high number of crimes. As the CSEW is based on a sample of the household population, each respondent's answers are weighted up to reflect their probability of being selected in the survey and to ensure the final sample reflects the demographic profile of the population it represents.

The average weight for individual respondents to the 2014/15 survey was 1,369. To derive the estimate of the total number of incidents of crime this weight is used to multiply the counts of incidents reported by respondents to the survey. Thus a relatively small number of respondents with high levels of repeat victimisation could make a significant contribution to the overall estimate of CSEW crime. The number of such victims sampled by the survey is likely to

¹ It should be noted that the CSEW measure of domestic violence referred to here is that derived from the face-to-face component of the survey and is restricted to wounding and other physical assaults where the assailants were partners, ex-partners, other relatives or household members.

vary from one year to the next and, thus, spurious volatility could be introduced to trends from the survey if no adjustments were made to the raw data.

Chart 1: Distribution of number of incidents recorded in a series in the year to March 2015 CSEW



Since the first survey in 1982, a crude method of capping counts of series incidents at five has been used. This has the effect of smoothing the distribution seen in Chart 1 but in a fairly arbitrary way.

Secondary analysis of the 2011/12 CSEW by UK academics² has questioned the appropriateness of the current method of capping and the authors have argued that it risks obscuring differential levels of repeat victimisation experienced by female and male victims.

Preliminary analysis by ONS has suggested that using uncapped counts of high frequency repeat victimisation would lead to spurious volatility in CSEW estimates. It also indicates that uncapped estimates do tend to reveal that female victims, especially of domestic violence, are more likely to suffer high frequency repeat victimisation, relative to male victims, than is suggested by capped estimates.

Next steps

ONS will be publishing a fuller methodological paper in the autumn once the analyses have been completed and quality assured. The paper will review the use of capped and uncapped estimates and the impact on CSEW time series. It will also explore alternative approaches to dealing with high frequency repeat victimisation. ONS will also be consulting with users of the statistics as this work progresses.

² http://eprints.lancs.ac.uk/72272/4/Violence_Society_Research_briefing_1.pdf