Work to extend the Crime Survey for England and Wales to include fraud and cyber-crime

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Background
The Crime Survey for England and Wales was established in 1981 to provide a measure of the volume of crime experienced by the resident household population. Since then, the questions to produce the main estimate of crime have remained largely unchanged. The consistency of the survey over time has been seen as one of its great strengths. However, this can also become a weakness and with the rise of the internet there have been concerns that the survey has failed to keep up with the changing nature of crime. The National Statistician’s independent review of crime statistics (2011) recognised the need for improved measurement of fraud and cyber-crime to provide a more informed picture for users.

In January 2014, ONS, in consultation with the independent Crime Statistics Advisory Committee (CSAC), published a discussion paper on the coverage of crime statistics¹. This paper presented an overview of the existing survey coverage, challenges in measuring cyber-crime, and outlined the steps being taken to improve measurement of cyber-crime.

The Crime Survey² provides an estimate of the number of victims and the number of incidents of crime experienced by the household population. These are derived from two linked modules of questions referred to as the ‘screener’ and ‘victimisation’ modules. The former includes a series of screening questions to identify incidents that are followed up in more detail in the victimisation module. The latter collects details such as what, when, and how the incident occurred.

Currently fraud or cyber-crime are not covered by these modules and therefore are not included in the survey’s main estimates. Attempts have been made in the past to explore elements of these crime types through ad hoc modules of questions included in the survey. However, it has not been possible to incorporate these into the headline figures due to different data collection approaches and challenges around measuring fraud and cyber-crime.

ONS established a project in early 2014 to explore the feasibility of covering fraud and cyber-crime in the main crime survey estimates. A procurement exercise was undertaken during May 2014 and a contract awarded to the National Centre for Social Research in June to take this work forward.

The project
The current research project comprises three stages: initial desk research to review the literature and existing international approaches; developing and cognitively testing new questions with a cross section of the public; and recommendations on the future implementation of the questions in the main survey. The project is currently in the cognitive testing stage.

Findings from the initial desk research stage have informed the development of a number of new screener questions, designed to identify victims who have experienced different types of fraud and cyber crime. It has also informed modifications to some of the existing follow up questions, such as where the incident took place and the cost of incident.

² More information about the Crime Survey for England and Wales can be found in the User Guide.
Cognitive testing aims to capture people’s thought processes and understanding as they respond to survey questions. Cognitive interviewing methods are particularly well-suited to exploring the validity of participants’ responses and their ability to provide the information being sought in the form required. The method can also provide qualitative information on willingness to provide the information, specifically the features of the questions that can encourage or discourage reporting.

The aims of the cognitive testing in this study were to assess participants’:

- initial reaction to the new screening questions; and
- understanding of the test questions.

In addition, the testing explored any difficulties participants have in being able to answer the questions, such as recall of the event, and whether the new screener questions are picking up the types of crimes they are designed to identify.

The testing for this study used a mixture of ‘think aloud’ and ‘probing’ techniques. In the think aloud technique, respondents were asked to say out loud what they are thinking as they go about answering the questions. Interviewers would then follow up with specific probes, to explore in more detail specific issues, such as:

- understanding of questions and terms;  
- recall strategies used;  
- factors affecting recall (and the accuracy of information); and  
- factors influencing the choice of answer option or the type and level of detail of the response.

As part of the testing, different forms of the new screener question wording were compared using a split ballot design, whereby participants were asked one or other version of the question and responses compared.

**User engagement**

To support this research project, ONS has set up an expert group. This group assists in the research by providing expert advice and challenge on plans and findings. The group includes those responsible for developing government and police response to fraud, as well as representatives from other organisations involved in combating fraud such as the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau, and the National Crime Agency. It also includes criminologists based in universities.

We welcome views of users and responses to the NatCen paper once published on our website. Please email crimestatistics@ons.gov.uk for more information.

**Next steps**

NatCen are due to submit a final paper covering the results from all three stages at the end of November 2014. This will be published as a methodological paper on the ONS website and ONS will then be seeking advice from the independent Crime Statistics Advisory Committee and the views of users about taking the work forward.
It is anticipated that the questions developed within the current project will be subject to further large scale field testing in 2015 before being added to the main survey.

This is a challenging area and good progress has already been made during the cognitive testing. If this progress continues through the next stages then the work will follow the provisional timeline set out below. This timetable is dependent on findings during the next stages of testing. The first estimates available will be a total figure for England and Wales, for one quarter, which is included in the main survey estimate.

- Methodological report published on ONS website – December 2014
- Views sought from users and the Crime Statistics Advisory Committee – January 2015
- Large scale field trial of new questions – February/March 2015
- Incorporation of new questions into main survey – April 2015
- First estimates from new questions released – October 2015

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