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MEDIA RELEASE

Public perception of the risk of criminal victimisation in Australia

The first national study of public perceptions of crime risk in Australia has shown that Australians greatly exaggerate the risks associated with most major categories of crime.

A number of surveys over the last few years have found that the Australian general public is greatly concerned about crime but these surveys have not addressed the question of whether this is because the public exaggerates the risk of criminal victimization.

The present study provides the first objective statistical evidence that public fear of or concern about crime may in fact stem from an exaggeration of the perceived risks associated with it.

The study involved personal interviews in August last year with a representative sample of 2,164 Australians. Survey interviews were carried out by staff of the Australian Bureau of Statistics on behalf of the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research.

Each respondent in the survey was asked to rate the chances over the next twelve months of experiencing one or more of four different crimes. The crimes covered by the survey included: having their home, garage or shed being broken into; having their vehicle stolen; being assaulted or being robbed.

Respondents estimates of crime risk for each of these four offences were then compared with actual risks for the same offences, as estimated by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in its 1993 national Crime and Safety Survey.

The results show that Australians greatly exaggerate the risks associated with all four offences, although the level of exaggeration is notably larger for the two more prevalent property offences (break and enter and vehicle theft) than for the two less prevalent offences (assault and robbery).

For example, whereas the risk of break and enter in any twelve month period is generally less than six per cent, 27 per cent of those surveyed judged their risk of break and enter in the next twelve months to be greater than 30 per cent.

Again, while the risk of robbery in any twelve month period is less than two per cent, 12 per cent of respondents judged their risk of robbery in the next twelve months to be greater than 30 per cent.

The study also shows that there are marked differences between Australian States and Territories in terms of the perceived risk associated with the offences examined in the survey.

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Queenslanders experience the highest perceived risk of assault and robbery. Residents of the ACT experience the highest perceived risk of break and enter. Western Australians experience the highest perceived risk of motor vehicle theft.

Residents of Western Australia are correct in their judgement about motor vehicle theft but the perceptions of residents in other States and Territories are generally incorrect.

In fact there is no statistically significant relationship across jurisdictions between the actual and perceived risks of criminal victimisation for any offence except motor vehicle theft.

For this offence at least, the relationship is as it should be. Jurisdictions with higher actual risks of motor vehicle theft generally have a smaller proportion of residents who perceive the risks associated with this offence to be small.

When it comes to violent crime, however, young women tend to perceive their risks to be much greater than those of young men when the reverse is actually the case.

In fact, whereas for nearly all age groups, men are more at risk of personal crimes such as assault and robbery than are women, in most age groups women tend to perceive their risks to be higher.

According to the Director of the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, the results suggest that greater effort needs to be made by all State and Territory Governments to give citizens a clearer picture of the true risk of crime.

‘Most Australian States and Territories have significant crime problems,’ he said, ‘but when public perceptions of crime risk are so highly exaggerated they can make rational debate about law and order policy very difficult’.

‘Given the influence that public opinion about law and order sometimes has on government policy and spending priorities, exaggerated public perceptions of crime risk can also lead to serious distortions in government spending priorities’.

According to Dr Weatherburn no single factor can be blamed for the distorted perceptions Australians have of crime risk. One of the factors highlighted in the Bureau report, however, is selective attention on the part of the media to the incidence rather than the prevalence of crime.

The report points out, for example, that Australia records about 300 murders per annum which means that a media outlet can run a story on murder, if it so chooses, once every 30 hours. However the probability of an individual Australian falling victim to murder in any twelve month period is only about 1 in 60,000.

Other factors highlighted by the Bureau report as contributing to public exaggerations of crime risk include deliberate exaggeration of crime risk by opposition political parties, commercial exploitation of public fear of crime by insurance and security companies, neighbourhood change, urban decay and harassment of women and the elderly by young males.

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