

Better Servants of Development: Improving Surveys as Sources of Indicators of Public Safety

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Introduction

This paper proposes solutions to some of the challenges of using surveys as the source of indicators of “public safety.” Drawing on the results of recent surveys in Jamaica and Sierra Leone, it describes several ways to manage the volatility of public perceptions of crime and insecurity, especially their susceptibility to influences over which governments have little or no control. It also describes how governments and development organizations alike can build more dependable indicators of people’s *subjective* sense of safety – for example, by elucidating the relationships between people’s experiences of crime, victimization, policing, and justice, on the one hand, and their perceptions and beliefs about these things on the other.

With funding from the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development, (DFID), the Program in Criminal Justice Policy and Management (PCJ) at the Harvard Kennedy School has been supporting state officials and civil society organizations in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Jamaica, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria to develop and use their own indicators to spark, reinforce, and communicate progress toward strategic goals in justice and safety.

The aim of the project is to equip government and civil society organizations with the skills and experience to design their own indicators, routinely assess those indicators, and use them to drive meaningful reform in the justice sector.

Building this capacity is a long-term undertaking, for the desire for indicators and the skill in their construction must permeate the organizational culture in governmental and non-governmental bodies. It is also a fluid process: indicators serve ambitions, policies, governments, and staffs that inevitably change over time.

More about this project: <http://bit.ly/IIDSJOverview>



Finally, the paper explains how the results of surveys can be used to supplement administrative data on recorded crime and thereby encourage agency leaders to solve problems that stand behind crime and insecurity.

Rather than prescribing specific indicators or survey instruments, this paper recommends experimentation in the design and administration of surveys as well as closer collaboration with the government officials whose work they seek to influence. Examples are provided of questions that can be used in surveys to precisely define and calibrate “sense of safety” as well as its conceptual cousin, “fear of crime.” Also outlined are ways in which development organizations can strengthen the capacity of national governments to interpret and use the results of surveys over time, continuously mining data that is generated by infrequent surveys.

The paper does not address challenges in the use of surveys as sources of indicators of government *performance* in the justice and safety sector, nor for indicators to *monitor and evaluate* the impact of development programs or innovations in policy. Surveys that serve these purposes suffer from a different set of challenges and require other solutions.¹

¹ Some of the problems of measuring the impact of small-scale programs on the population as a whole are described in “Aligning Indicators and Ambitions: How to Improve Indicators Used in Programs to Reduce Violence Against Women and Girls,” Program in Criminal Justice Policy & Management, Harvard Kennedy School of Government, February 2012. <http://bit.ly/IIDSJvawg>

Executive Summary

Many development organizations would like an indicator of public safety that motivates national governments to look beyond crime and solve the social problems that compromise people's sense of safety. They know that official reports of recorded crime in any country are inadequate measures of the actual incidence of crime and victimization, and they worry that efforts to reduce crime, especially violent crime, do not always result in lasting improvements in safety and justice for the most vulnerable people in society. They believe that equitable development is hindered not just by the experience of crime and victimization but also by an array of public perceptions and practices, including fear of crime and the avoidance of public spaces, which may or may not be directly related to crime.

Surveys can be the source of a more robust and discerning indicator of public safety, but a broad measure of safety can intimidate governments and even thwart reform, especially when it draws exclusively on data generated by surveys. Most governments already respond inadequately to the amount of crime recorded by the police, which is a small fraction of people's experiences and problems that make up "public safety." By adding pressure to resolve un-recorded crime, too, a more ambitious indicator of safety can overwhelm weak and ineffective systems of justice and security. Also, by highlighting the scale of injustice and insecurity and other problems without identifying ways to fix them, surveys can cause governments to distance themselves from their news. Surveys, in short, can be politically disruptive. Like elections and referenda, which they sometimes resemble, surveys

compete with and sometimes discredit government claims about the degree of safety and order in people's lives.

If development organizations wish surveys to become a source of indicators that are used by national governments, they must develop strategies to tame these political provocations. They must also ground the findings from surveys in deeper insights about the problems surrounding crime. Many surveys barely scratch at the surface of persistent social problems; they sometimes take respondents' answers at face value, ignoring distinctions between opinions and beliefs as well as the experiences and expectations that sometimes shape them. To generate the kind of knowledge on which adjustments in public policies and government practices can responsibly be made, surveys must fit into the streams of knowledge about safety and justice that dominate government action.

This paper shows how surveys can become sources of reliable insights about public safety and at the same time create incentives for governments to use their results. It begins by recommending three ways to strengthen the **validity** of data on public perceptions of safety and fear of crime. Next it suggests ways to boost the **utility** of surveys as tools of governance, for example by investigating questions governments may need or want to answer but cannot answer through existing systems of information. Finally, it proposes ways to **tame** the political provocations of surveys, including by showing where gains in safety have already been accomplished or are possible to achieve soon.

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1. The Subjective Side of Safety

Most development organizations today use surveys of the population to guide their work in some way – to assess the gravity or prevalence of a problem, to design a program that might rectify that problem, to evaluate its impact. Surveys of the population are especially popular in programs that seek to improve safety and justice. The vast majority of these surveys solicit answers to questions about how residents **feel** about their lives – whether they feel safe at home or in public during the day and night, whether they are worried about becoming a victim of crime, whether they fear their neighbors or the police, whether they respect or detest the state, whether they are hopeful or dread the future. In fact, many surveys ask more questions about people’s opinions, beliefs, and perceptions than they do about their experiences.

The Department for International Development of the United Kingdom (DFID) is a frequent user and commissioner of surveys in all areas of its programming. Many DFID programs on justice and safety rely heavily on surveys as the source for an indicator of public safety. For example, DFID programs in Jamaica, Sierra Leone, and Bangladesh are using a survey of a representative sample of the population to generate a measure of the proportion of residents that is “fearful” or “worried” or “very worried” about crime or, conversely, “feels safe.”

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Malawi, Nepal, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and other countries as well, DFID has supported, commissioned, or plans to commission surveys of the population to generate indicators of the safety or insecurity of the public as a whole.² DFID programs in Nigeria, by contrast, rely on a survey of foreign experts to assess the overall situation with crime, conflict, and the operation of the legal system, and then rate progress toward improved “personal security” and greater “peace and stability.”³

There are many good reasons to include a measure of peoples’ state of mind in an indicator of public safety. One is that fear of crime may itself be a genuine social problem, an unhealthy condition that upsets

people’s lives, diminishes their welfare, and curtails relations with strangers. But perceptions of crime and safety are so volatile and susceptible to prejudice and other influences that few governments accept their findings. The fact that beliefs saturate perceptions is of course only one reason why national governments are much more reluctant than development organizations to commission and take seriously the findings of population surveys.⁴ But the volatility of public perceptions of crime and safety is at least part of the problem, and it is a problem that can be managed.

The Special Problem of Volatility

Perceptions of crime and individuals’ subjective sense of safety can be mercurial, weakly related to personal experience, and strongly shaped by forces beyond the influence of government, and particularly for agencies in the justice sector. This is especially true for people’s perceptions of the amount of crime in society, which in many countries is strongly influenced by socio-economic status and newspaper readership as well as the composition of communities in which respondents live.⁵

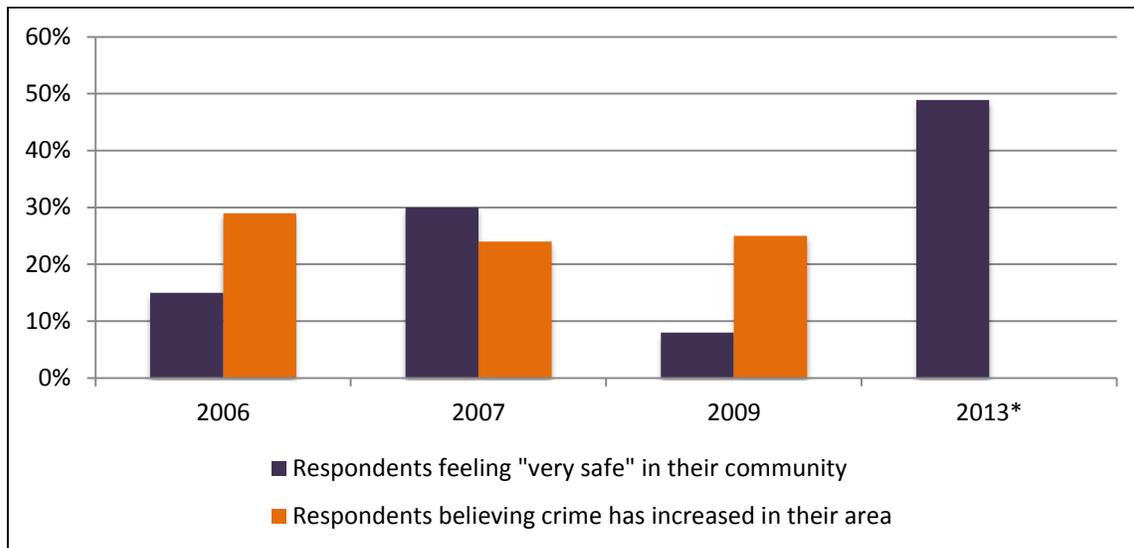
² For an inventory of surveys in DFID programming on justice and safety, see the report commissioned by CHASE, “DFID’s Use of Surveys and Polls on Conflict, Security and Justice,” Social Development Direct, November 2011.

³ Surveys of experts, especially those that generate compound indices such as the Ibrahim Index of African Governance or the World Justice Project’s “rule of law index” have their own challenges and merit a separate discussion. The focus in this paper is on solutions to problems with indicators that come from surveys of the population as a whole.

⁴ Several senior police officials in Sierra Leone told me in January 2014 that they believe were “set-up” to be vilified by a recent survey of public perceptions of the police.

⁵ The British Crime Survey in 2010 found that residents in ethnically mixed neighborhoods in the UK were significantly less likely to believe crime was increasing nationally than residents in homogeneous communities. See John Mohan, et. al., “Mind the Double Gap,” *British Journal of Criminology*, 51, 6 (November 2011).

Figure 1. Perceptions of Crime and Sense of Safety Sierra Leone Police Public Perception Survey



Even questions that solicit perceptions about intimate subjects, such as people’s personal sense of safety, can yield inexplicably volatile results. In Sierra Leone in 2006, 15 percent of survey respondents said they felt “very safe” when asked: “generally speaking, when it comes to the threat of crime, how safe do you feel in your community?” In 2007, twice that proportion (30 percent) said they felt “very safe.” Two years later, when funding for the replication of the survey was found, only 8 percent of respondents said they felt “very safe” in their community. Four years later, as Figure 1 above shows, a survey found that 49 percent of residents “always” felt safe in their community.⁶

Confidence in the validity and reliability of this measure of personal safety is further diminished by its apparent incongruity with respondents’ perceptions of the amount of crime “in their area.” As Figure 1 above also shows, a relatively stable portion of respondents (between 24 and 29 percent) thought crime had increased in their area between 2006 and 2009.⁷ To which response and sentiment should governments pay attention? Without an understanding of the factors on which these perceptions depend, and without confidence in their ability to move them, governments might be unwilling to make them targets of efforts to improve public safety.

2. Strengthening the Validity of Data on Perceptions of Crime

There are at least three strategies for strengthening the validity of data on perceptions of crime and sense of safety:

1. Bundle questions about fear and safety;
2. Distinguish and then connect perceptions to experiences;
3. Disaggregate results by location or groups of special interest.

⁶ In 2013, a DFID-funded contractor changed the response scale for this same question, asking whether residents were “always,” “usually,” “usually not” or “never” felt safe in their community rather than whether they felt “very safe” or “safe,” or “unsafe.” That change makes it even more difficult to understand the magnitude of the apparent increase in personal sense of safety.

⁷ The problem is not limited to Sierra Leone. According to a national victimization survey in Nigeria, people’s sense of safety in their area plummeted between 2006 and 2010 while perceptions of the amount of crime in their area hardly changed at all. See <http://www.cleen.org/crimevictimisationsurvey.html>

Strategy One: Bundle Questions about Fear and Safety

Because responses to any single question can be an unreliable source of indicators for governance purposes, it is wise to bundle questions about people's perceptions and treat the resulting nest of data as a source of learning about the drivers of public opinion.

Good surveys also ask very specific questions to counteract the potentially uninformed or unconsidered nature of people's responses to questions about rare events, such as crime. For example, instead of asking about the degree to which people generally worry about crime and whether or not residents believe "crime" has increased, surveys might ask how afraid people are of specific behaviors, how big of a problem certain crimes are in their lives, and whether or not other people they know are, would, or should be afraid of crime in their area.

The responses to these questions are unlikely to be uniform, but the specificity of each question can help discipline responses to one or another question, and the array of questions can help analysts interpret the results. Furthermore, surveys that compare results to individual questions and uncover patterns over time can help governments identify perceptions that may be responsive to their work.

The "national crime victimization survey" (NCVS) in Jamaica provides a good example of this strategy. In 2009 and 2012, the NCVS asked 20 different questions about people's sense of safety and their fears of different types of crimes (rape vs burglary vs robbery vs assault) in different circumstances (at night, during the day, at home, walking around, out shopping, on public transport), and under hypothetical situations (e.g. "how safe *would* you feel in a bar at night?"). The same survey employed an additional tactic, asking respondents to hold their own perceptions in abeyance and express an opinion about whether or not a relative or friend would be safe upon visiting their area.

The results, depicted in Figure 2 on the next page, show that an overwhelming majority of residents felt

"very safe" or "safe" in their homes and communities during the day and night, and that much smaller proportions feel safe or would feel safe in public at night. They also show that the proportion of respondents feeling "very safe" in four different types of public settings more than doubled, building confidence in the reliability and validity of the responses.

The bundling of questions about sense of safety in Jamaica has three virtues. First, because these results tell us *when and where* residents feel insecure, they circumscribe the problem that needs to be addressed. This distinction helps limit the burden a government might feel when asked to reduce fear of crime or boost residents' subjective sense of safety. The results also provide clues about how some deficits of safety might be quickly replenished – for example, through efforts to modify the conditions of public spaces, such as buses and parks at night.

Second, responses to the question about the safety of relatives or friends that might visit helps calibrate responses to questions about sense safety in public spaces. Nearly three times the proportion of respondents that said they felt "very safe" in bars,

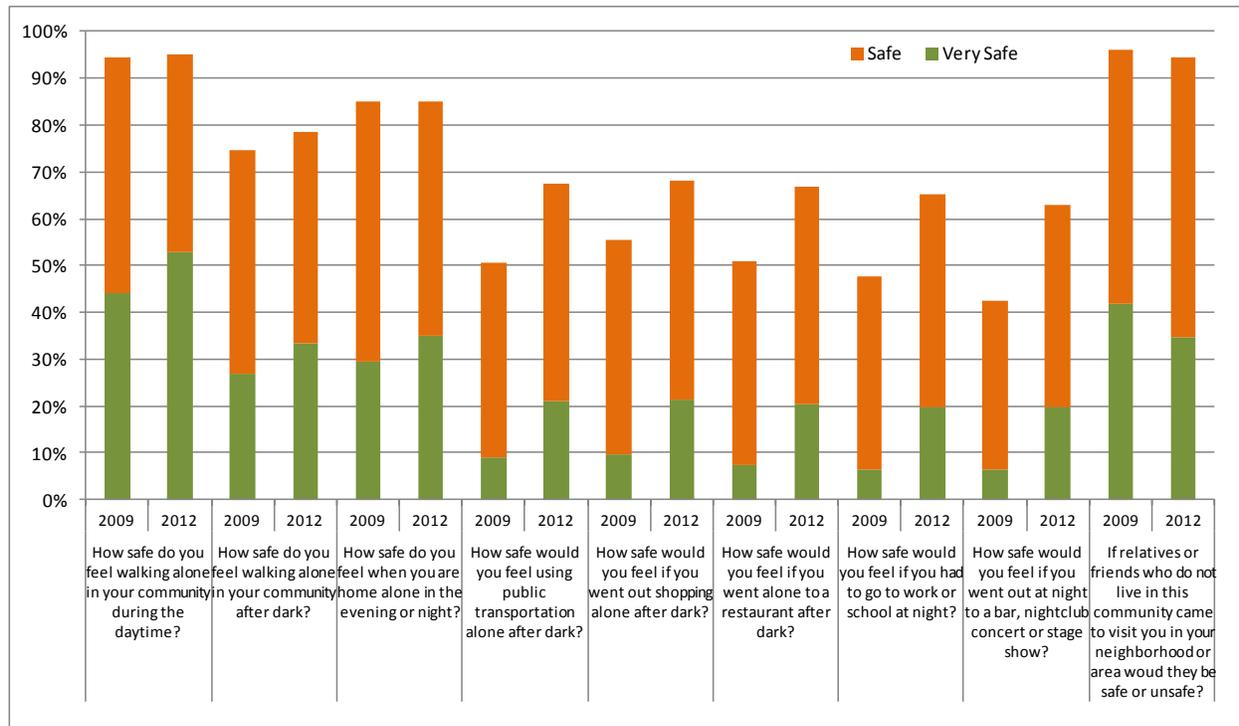
PRACTICE TIP 1

Calibrating "fear of crime"

How should you measure fear of crime, given the volatility of such perceptions? Two of the tactics described here – posing multiple questions, and asking respondents to evaluate their safety from the perspective of an outsider – are used in the 2010 version of International Crime Victimization Survey, which asks:

- How safe do you feel are *other* members of your family in your area after dark?
- What would you say are the chances that over the next 12 months someone will try to break into your home?

Figure 2. Responses to Selected Questions about Sense of Safety in Jamaica, 2009 and 2012



shopping centers, schools, or buses at night said their relatives would be safe coming to their communities. Since visiting people in other communities implies traversing public space, the results suggest that fear of bars and shopping centers may be highly sensitive to individual events or specific locations and thus unreliable or exaggerated by themselves.

Third, the relationship *between* people's sense of safety in public and private spaces might serve as a better indicator than any single perception. In 2009 the sense of personal safety in public spaces was approximately half what it was in private spaces such as homes. In 2012 the proportion of respondents feeling "very safe" in public spaces doubled, compared to modest increases in sense of safety in private settings. A progressive decrease in the size gap between sense of safety in private and public settings might be a stronger indicator of generalized improvement in safety than an increase in the proportion of respondents that feel safe or very safe in one or another context. Moreover, governments might be more likely to be able to increase the sense of safety in public than private spaces.

Strategy Two: Relating Perceptions to Experiences

Another strategy for managing the volatility of public perceptions about crime is to clearly distinguish and then connect perceptions to people's experiences and behaviors. For example, surveys that ask "*how safe do you feel walking alone at night?*" should also ask: "**Do you walk alone at night?**" (and if so, how often).

If surveys inquire about respondents' fear of government, they should also ask about the kind and incidence of people's contacts with that government. Surveys that connect the two domains are more likely to encourage governments to treat people's state of mind as an integral part of public safety, and something they can at least indirectly influence.

At least two types of experiences are worth investigating with surveys: first, **victimization** – the frequency and type of crimes or other illegal behavior that have been directly experienced or suffered by survey respondents, including

misconduct by public officials; second, the **consequences** of crime and fear of crime – how upset respondents were as a result of a crime, how much time and money was lost or spent to overcome the effects of crime, or whether they or others have adjusted their behavior and routines in response to crime or the fear of crime (such as moving to another neighborhood, installing locks on doors, creating other obstacles to criminal activity). Information about both types of experiences ground the results of surveys in phenomena that governments can observe and influence.⁸

Victimization

Victimization surveys have a lot of cachet in development work today in part because of a desire for comprehensive measures of the amount of crime in society. In most countries, people report to the police or other government bodies only a fraction of the crimes they experience and witness, and police officials everywhere record and treat as crimes only a portion of these reported incidents, further limiting the accuracy of measures of crime generated by administrative systems of information. Victimization data can supplement and strengthen government accounts of the extent of problems with crime in society, but not replace them, as we explain in section two of this paper.

Not all victimizations warrant a response from government, and not all victims want such attention. For these and other reasons, most governments reject measures of victimization as performance indicators, even when they trend with administrative measures of the amount of crime.⁹ Victimization data may help identify the sources of people's sense of safety and fear, although the relationships between individual experiences and perceptions may be tenuous, indirect, and counter-intuitive. In Nigeria, for example, the correlations between fear of crime and victimization are statistically weak.¹⁰

In some contexts, the experience of certain kinds of crime victimization, such as burglary and robbery, may be more strongly correlated with sense of safety

in public spaces than other kinds of victimization, including violent crime. The experience of mobile

phone theft and pick-pocketing, also, may be linked to more negative perceptions of personal safety on the street despite higher ratings of safety at home. Nevertheless, the cross-walk between victimization (or other experiences) and perceptions may hold clues for governments that are interested in reducing fear of crime and boosting the mobility of people in society.

Consequences

Insights about the consequences of crime and victimization may guide the interpretation of public perceptions of crime and safety and also indicate areas in which governments can help improve them. But these questions must be carefully composed and framed with an explicit theory of change in mind.

The national crime victimization survey in Jamaica, for example, asked more than 30 questions about the impact of fear of crime on people's routines – whether respondents cancelled plans or stopped going out at night as a result of a fear of crime, whether they had moved or hired a security guard or dog or installed locks or burglar alarms or acquired a gun in order to “protect themselves” from crime.

⁸ Some surveys ask also about respondents' *observations* of crime and victimization -- how often in a recent period of time they have seen, heard, or otherwise witnessed criminal activity, such as shootings and robberies or sales of illicit drugs. Data on observations may be useful for getting accurate measures of the total amount of victimization in society but they are unlikely to identify goals for government interventions and otherwise shape policies.

⁹ Since 2002, the results of the British Crime Survey generally trended with police recorded crime, causing some officials to question its utility. See the report “Crime in England and Wales, Year Ending 2013,” p. 6. http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778_360216.pdf

¹⁰ See, for example, the results of the 2013 Crime Victimization Survey administered by the CLEEN Foundation, <http://cleenfoundation.blogspot.ca/2013/10/public-presentation-of-findings-of.html>

Most of these questions were designed to elicit information about individual strategies for crime prevention and avoidance, focusing in particular on solutions that interest the private sector. The survey would have yielded insights on which the government could act as well as potential indicators of governance if it had investigated the **reasons** for fear of crime in specific locations such as bars or schools or work places, and asked whether or not public solutions such as better lighting, less traffic, and more pedestrian space could have resolved the problem for respondents.

PRACTICE TIP 2

Measure What You Can Manage

“You can’t manage what you don’t measure” is a popular adage in development practice. The same rule in reverse may be equally important in the matter of surveys: don’t measure what you can’t manage. Surveys that unearth problems that appear to be insoluble may reduce receptivity to their results and cut short conversations about how to develop more discriminating indicators of justice and safety. In short:

- Beware of surveys which measure problems that cannot be managed by anyone.
- Pose questions that generate answers to which governments or non-government agencies already are willing and able to respond.

In order to generate indicators that might move in response to government actions, surveys must ask

about behaviors and experiences that are likely to respond quickly and noticeably to changes in the state of mind of the person or their objective danger. Questions about protective behaviors, such as purchases of alarms, mace, guns, and security guards, are likely to generate less value than questions about socializing behaviors, such as attending movies, parties, or just being out with friends and neighbors in the evening. These are the behaviors that most governments seek to increase.

The former are the preoccupation of the private sector.

Strategy Three: Disaggregate Results by Location and Group

Indicators rely on averages and per capita rates in order to tell a story or grab attention, but like health, wealth, and education, insecurity and injustice are unequally distributed in society and poorly captured by a statistical mean. If only small fractions or certain segments of the population feel insecure or experience crime, reporting public perceptions as averages may misrepresent people’s lives and views, and it may encourage misguided policies and practices, such as the deployment of law enforcement resources without regard for the places where problems are greatest. To avoid the distorting effects of averages, you should always disaggregate survey findings by location and groups of special concern¹¹

Location

Surveys consistently uncover large differences between perceptions of the amount of crime in respondents’ own areas and the perceived amount of crime nationally or in other areas. In Jamaica in 2009, for example, 89 percent of respondents thought crime had increased on the Island in the past five years, while 15 percent thought it had increased in their area. In Nigeria in 2010 a total of 34 percent of respondents thought the level of crime in the country as a whole was “extremely high” while only 14 percent thought it was extremely high in their area.¹²

¹¹ Introducing a recent critique of GDP as an indicator, Nicolas Sarkozy: “Our measuring systems make us reason on the basis of averages. But if we go on reasoning in averages, we will forge our beliefs and build our decisions on data that are increasingly divorced from real life.” See Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen, and Jean-Paul Fitoussi, *Mis-measuring Our Lives: Why GDP Doesn’t Add Up* (2010), xiv.

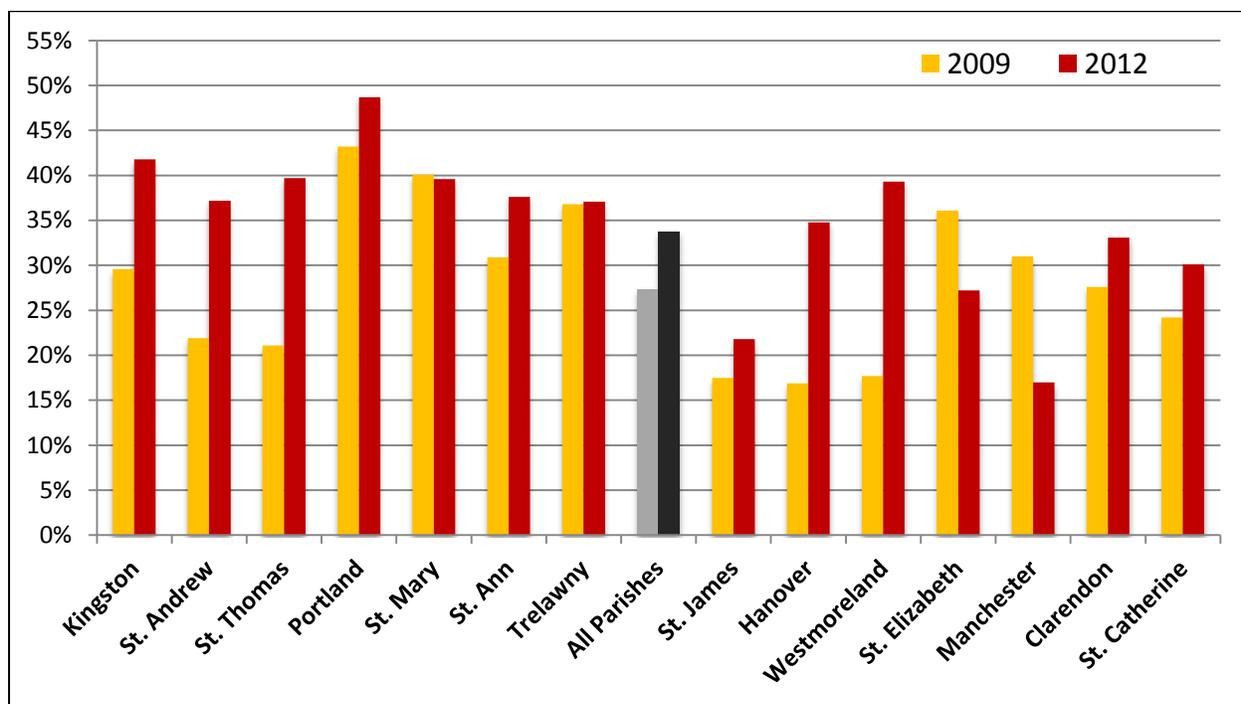
¹² These findings mirror results of surveys in the US, where, according to a Gallup Poll in 2010, 21 percent of residents thought the crime problem “in the country” was extremely serious yet only 4 percent thought it extremely serious in “their area.” <http://www.gallup.com/poll/165677/say-crime-serious-problem-locally.aspx>

Surveys that capture variation in levels of fear or sense of safety *across* communities also may encourage more focused efforts to improve people’s sense of safety. In Jamaica, as the data in Figure 3 below show, more than twice the proportion of residents in Portland and St. Mary in 2009 felt “very safe” walking alone in their community after dark as did residents in St. James, Hanover, and Westmoreland, which all recorded responses well below the national average. In 2012 a strong sense of safety increased in most areas, and more than doubled in Hanover and Westmoreland. The sharp

variation suggests that government might focus efforts to improve sense of safety in the future in St. Elizabeth and Manchester.

The next iteration of the survey might also oversample residents in parishes in which perceptions have moved dramatically – in either direction – in order to generate additional insight about the factors that seem to affect senses of safety in less fortunate areas.

Figure 3. Respondents Feeling “Very Safe” Walking Alone in Community after Dark Jamaica, 2009/2012



Source: J-NCVS, Ministry of National Security, Jamaica

Groups of Concern

Surveys should specify **whose fear of what** kind of behavior is being measured. Fear of certain kinds of crime may be more debilitating than others. A single-parent, multi-child, migrant family in an urban township might fear theft of its property more than it worries about violence. Conversely, older people or young women in city centers might fear violence more than any other type of crime. Focus groups are one way of identifying the priorities among the poor and most vulnerable members of

society, which, when measured in a national survey, might yield clear targets for government agencies.

Surveys should pay close attention to **sources of the fear of crime**. Fear of crimes committed by powerful corporations or business competitors might be important components of generalized fear, and yet surveys should focus on fear of persons since most systems of justice and policing are designed to prevent or respond to crimes committed by individuals. The type of person that is fearful, too, may matter a lot, especially if the persons that are

most feared work for the state or are part of a family. For example, fear that the police will extort, rob or beat you is fundamentally different than fear that your neighbors or some stranger will do so. When people fear their supposed protectors, even if that fear is exaggerated and unwarranted, safety can be deeply compromised. The long-term destructive power of betrayal and fear of betrayal may lay behind the special concern today with domestic violence in developing countries as well as the Global North.

3. Boosting the Utility of Survey Results

Two features of population surveys limit their utility as tools of governance:

- First, surveys are rare and costly events. Government efforts to improve safety and justice require indicators that are generated and replenished on a recurring basis and in time frames that help officials regulate routines and priorities. Most survey results today are discussed once and then shelved.
- Second, surveys rely on a source of information that competes with and may discredit government views and records. Because much of the population may have no direct experience of crime, victimization, or justice, surveys can resemble plebiscites that enlist the opinions of amateurs about matters that usually require professional expertise. To some public officials, surveys may look like a vote of no confidence.

Consider three strategies for domesticating surveys and making them trusted servants in governance:

- One is to have surveys *fit into the life-cycle of governance* in the justice sector, with more regular returns and a predictable, multi-year line of production.
- A second is to *supplement administrative data* on crime with additional knowledge about both crime and victimization.
- A third strategy is to *strengthen the capacity to design and interpret surveys* in national governments.

All three strategies will help align surveys with the needs, interests, and responsibilities of managers and leaders in the justice sector.

Strategy One: Fitting the Life-Cycle of Governance

One way to make the results of surveys yield dividends over time is to conduct focus groups before and after the surveys. Focus groups convened before the administration of a survey can define the problems to be addressed, and focus groups convened afterwards can deliberate the stark problems or deep puzzles they raise.

Focus groups can be particularly helpful in understanding perceptions since participants often change their opinions in response to new information and the experiences and views of others. Quarterly reports on the results of these deliberations would help sustain attention to the issues unearthed by the survey. Periodic interviews with community leaders are another option, although such conversations may be more difficult to summarize without individual biases or concerns about attribution. Knowing that another survey is on the horizon will drive attention to such interim reports, minimize the shock of unexpected results, and add fresh questions for subsequent surveys.

Another tack is to repeatedly interrogate the results of the survey. Rarely are the results of surveys unambiguous, and published reports may create productive disputes over their interpretation. A series of short reports published on a regular basis, each one addressing a different question, may be more likely to sustain conversation in government circles about the meaning of results and potential uses of surveys than a large compendium published at a single point in time. Governments may be more likely to pay attention to the questions and concerns that surveys raise if the results are presented around the times of the monthly, quarterly, or semi-annual meetings that assess the state of public safety.

A different strategy entirely is to make the survey a rolling poll, with recruitment of respondents on an on-going basis. Some government agencies use

rolling polls with voluntary enrollment, a strategy that yields information from a less representative portion of the population than a survey with a standard sampling frame.¹³ Another possibility is to ask a government agency without justice functions and a wider population base, such as a tax administration or voting authority, to host a rolling poll, actively recruiting participants. Rolling polls require greater resources and constant management.

Strategy Two: Supplementing Administrative Data with Results of Surveys

It may be tempting to try to supplant administrative data on crime with surveys. Safety, after all, is not the obverse of crime, and in no country is the number of crimes recorded by the police a reliable or valid measure of the prevalence of crime and its associated problems.¹⁴ Crime also may be too rare an event to serve as an indicator of anything in the public as a whole. In Bangladesh, for example, with more than 155 million residents, the police in 2013 recorded 179,199 crimes – one crime for every 865 inhabitants.¹⁵ The lives and perceptions of safety of the vast majority of people are eclipsed by data on police recorded crime, and even large changes in the number of crimes recorded by the police will tell us little about those who did experience and report a crime.

Nevertheless, survey data cannot substitute for administrative data on crime, and treating the two as competing accounts of the same problem may cause confusion. Consider the juxtaposition of survey and administrative data in Jamaica in Figure 4 (next page), which shows that the proportion of residents feeling very safe walking alone in their community during the day increased from 23 to 30 percent between 2006 and 2009 even while the number of major offenses recorded by the police increased 60 percent.

In the next three year period, the proportion of residents feeling very safe walking alone during the day increased to 53 percent while the number of major offenses recorded by the police fell 20 percent. Both results might be valid. That is, more Jamaican residents might feel safer despite the greater number

of crimes recorded by the police, especially if their sense of safety is disconnected from the actual incidence of crime or if those feeling safe reside far away from places where the recorded crimes are increasing.

These and other complications may help explain why government officials are reluctant to prefer survey results to police recorded crime as the source of an indicator of safety. Even officials who recognize the limitations of their own data on crime might not see how the contrast with survey data on perceptions helps them understand a problem or build more reliable and valid measures of safety. Surveys, in short, should supplement administrative data rather than seek to displace and disparage them.

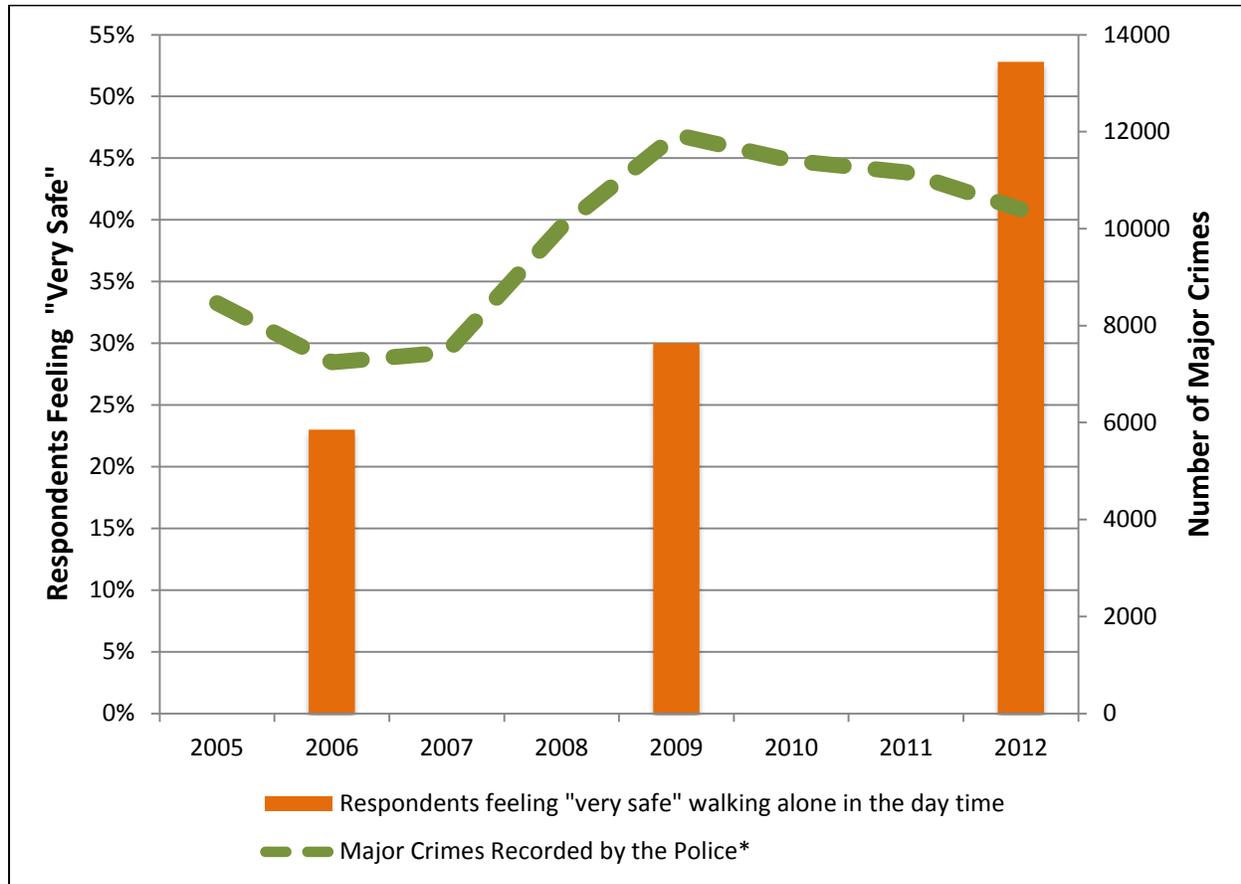
One way surveys can augment government accounts of crime and the problems with crime is by measuring the incidence of repeat victimization and shedding light on the relationships between victims and offenders. Repeat experiences of the same problem within a family, household, or neighborhood constitute a large portion of all crime in many societies, and victims often know their offenders. Since police reports rarely capture information about past events or the texture of relationships between the people involved, surveys can help bridge this gap. If, for example, government records indicate an increase in robbery and burglary, surveys might focus on how often victims of robbery and burglary have had this experience before or know or believe they know the perpetrators. Data on repeat victimization may help governments design more effective responses to the problem. They may also help counteract unfounded fears about the contagiousness of crime.

¹³The Metropolitan Police Authority in London uses a rolling survey for feedback on resident experiences of police. See <http://www.met.police.uk/about/performance/faq.htm>

¹⁴ According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “it is now widely acknowledged that [administrative data] alone is not sufficient and should be integrated with victim survey results. See <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/Crime-Victims-Survey.html>

¹⁵ In the UK, by contrast, the police recorded 3.7 million crimes in 2012/2013, or one for every 15 residents

Figure 4. Perceptions of Safety and Police Recorded Crime, Jamaica, 2005-2012



Sources: J-NCVS, Ministry of National Security, Jamaica; Jamaican Constabulary Force

For example, nearly a quarter of respondents in the Jamaican survey in 2012 that reported some victimization in their life time had experienced a victimization in the last twelve months; this figure varied from a low of 9 percent in Portland and a high of 33 percent in Manchester.

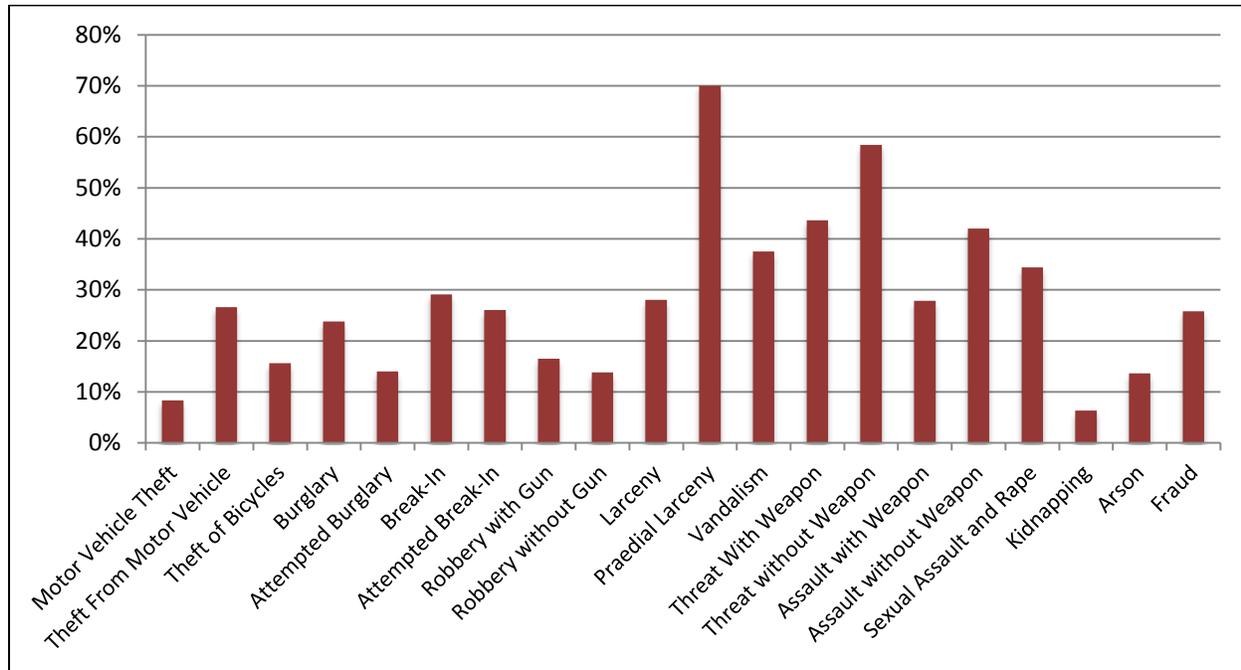
Nearly half of these victimizations in each parish were repeat incidents, respondents said, but there was substantial variation by the type of incident. For example, seventy percent of the incidents of "praedial larceny" (the theft of agricultural produce or livestock) and over forty percent of the incidents of being "threatened with a weapon" were repeat incidents. By contrast, theft of cars and bicycles and attempted burglaries were rarely repeat incidents. A repeat victimization incident might be easier to prevent than a first-time incident, and justice officials in Jamaica could learn more about how to

achieve such prevention by inquiring into the prior experiences of people say

they reported the first incident of such an experience to the police. The fact that a large portion of incidents might be preventable is not obvious through administrative data on crime.

Another way surveys can supplement existing systems of information is by illuminating processes beyond the reach of administrative data on crime, focusing on problems not always considered criminal but that may nevertheless shape people's experiences and sense of security. Surveys that record people's experiences of mistreatment by government officials, for example, whether or not it amounts to crime, can help extend the government's understanding of insecurity, especially if such encounters are strongly related to perceptions of safety.

Figure 5. Repeat Victimization by Type of Incident, 2012



Source: J-NCVS, Ministry of National Security, Jamaica

Surveys that generate knowledge about infractions or minor offenses that are not captured by police reports can also widen the understanding of safety. When surveys help contextualize crime and safety and reveal its associations with other social problems, they may encourage responses from agencies beyond law enforcement and thus prompt closer collaborations between police and other government departments.

Strategy Three: Strengthening National Capacity to Design and Interpret Surveys

Another factor limiting their use is that most surveys are conceived, designed, paid for, and analyzed by consultants or organizations in developed countries, while responsibility for using the results and changing outcomes lies with governments in developing countries. A gap between survey designer and user might be justified in the short term, but because the medium and long-term utility of surveys depends largely on their assimilation by government departments, development agencies should support the strengthening of capacity to design, interpret, and analyze the results of surveys. The skills required for effective survey design, administration, and

interpretation are not common or prized in most agencies in the justice sector; they tend to privilege expertise in law and administration over social science. Development agencies may need to support additional partnerships between non-governmental organizations with research skills in ancillary fields and government departments, including ones beyond the justice sector. Even if an NGO administers a national survey, as is common practice, the effective design and interpretation of results will require skilled counterparts in government, individuals who will find data useful for the performance of their day jobs. Collaboration with government officials can be particularly helpful in the design of surveys with pragmatic purposes, including by pruning questions that have little practical value (e.g. ones soliciting opinions about ideal punishments or length of sentences for convicted offenders).

Development organizations could play a special role in building this capacity in three ways: One way is by combining survey and administrative data in their own work, including log frames, which would signal to government the importance it places on the reconciliation of different sources of information and evidence, modeling careful development work.

A second way is by facilitating appropriate cross-national comparisons. Many states and civil society organizations in developing countries wish to compare outcomes with results of surveys from countries in the Global North. Development organizations could help avoiding the import of inappropriate standards by build a common pool resource of findings from surveys in contexts more comparable to the ones in which they work. A third and related way is to more clearly articulate the norms and standards by which to judge result. A third and related way is to more clearly articulate the norms and standards by which to judge result.

Norms and Standards in the Interpretation of Survey Results

The meaning of the results of surveys is never self-evident, and the articulation of standards and criteria by which to judge the results is a special challenge in this field. Published reports of surveys commonly express judgments about results without making explicit the standards on which they rest, and more often than not these judgments are negative. One recent survey, for example, concluded that “**only** 10 percent of residents said they felt safe,” but it did not specify the reasoning and yardstick by which these appraisals were made. When surveys fail to make explicit the standards on which they rely, invisible and usually foreign norms are smuggled into development work.

In practice it is often unclear how to appraise the outcomes of surveys. Is it good or bad, for example, that 43 percent of residents in Jamaica feel “very safe” walking in their community during the day time and that 27 percent feel “very safe” walking in their community after dark? Are these high or low levels of personal safety? Should we add to these percentages the proportion of residents that feel “safe” or “somewhat safe,” or should we consider only the share of the public that expresses strong feelings and unambiguous opinions? Should we worry that fear of crime in some parishes is much higher than others, or is such variation of “normal”?

Might there be a developmentally appropriate or even “functional” level of fear of crime in some

communities, a morally acceptable or economically productive level of worry about burglary and theft?¹⁶

There may be no single answer to such questions, but there are strategies for managing uncertainty about the norms for interpreting survey results:

- One is to create a norm through cross-country comparisons – using the results from neighboring or “peer” countries or otherwise compelling contrasts in order to appraise findings.
- Another is to abjure alien norms and instead focus on change over time within one context, encouraging incremental movement from whatever baseline measure is available.
- A third is to ask governments to stipulate a norm or assign a judgment to the results – by fiat, instinct, or some more deliberative process. All three strategies have shortcomings, but used in combination they can discipline and make transparent the process of assigning meaning and value to outcomes.

¹⁶ Some researchers in the UK suggest that certain kinds of fear of crime are “functional,” and “akin to a problem-solving activity.” See, for example, Jonathan Jackson and Emily Gray, “Functional Fear and Public Insecurities About Crime,” *British Journal of Criminology*, v. 50 (August 2009).

PRACTICE TIP 3

Three Sources of Norms for Appraising the Results of Surveys

Survey *results* get converted into *findings* by application of a norm or rule of judgment. To avoid an arbitrary or alien rule, you might cultivate three sources of transparent norms:

1. Cross-Country Comparisons
2. Change Over Time Within a Single Country
3. Government Ambition

4. Managing the Political Character of Surveys

Some of the problems with survey-based indicators of safety described in this paper would be diminished or perhaps disappear entirely if their purpose was simply to learn about a persistent problem in development.

Governments and development organizations alike might appreciate the opportunity to ponder over the results of surveys, compare variation across countries, and launch new lines of inquiry, generally enjoying the kind of knowledge and learning that comes from joint exploration. But the advancement of higher knowledge is not the purpose to which surveys are being put today. Surveys are the source of

targets for government performance and the condition of ongoing development assistance. They are not merely learning devices.

The tensions created by surveys are not trivial. Surveys provoke competing claims about what the public truly believes, experiences, needs, or wishes. Elected governments, even those with firm democratic foundations, can be unnerved by their results. The findings can be especially threatening when governments are unsure of the truth of the account of public safety provided in reports from the police and/or military, or when surveys expose practices that are deliberately concealed. Such provocations may be the intended or unintended result of surveys, but they nevertheless represent a risk in collaborative development. This risk might be particularly acute in justice and safety, two realms of governance in which most governments seek or declare a state monopoly over operations.

Insisting that the survey is scientific, or treating it an example of a “best practice” in democratic governance and an international standard is unlikely to manage the risk. The fallout from surveys is never politically neutral. Opposition parties and media organizations will use the results of surveys for adversarial purposes, no matter how encouraging the news may be for the incumbent government. Like indicators and medicine, surveys become used for purposes never imagined by designers. A partial solution to this problem is to more clearly define the purposes of surveys, making explicit the theory of change behind them.

The Independent Political Lives of Surveys

A 2009 victimization survey in Canada found that 93 percent of residents over the age of 15 were “satisfied” with their personal safety from crime. Published for the first time in 2011 on the eve of parliamentary debate over draft legislation on crime, the results were used by critics to assail proposed sentencing policies of the conservative government:

“In light of the sense that Canadians have that they do feel safe ... there should be no motivation or reason to bring in these very, very harsh measures that we are told by experts won't work.”

- Liberal Party Spokesman, *Globe and Mail*, December 1, 2011

Some surveys, for example, might be conceived as part of a long-term process of justice reform, first helping to chart or diagnose the needs of the population and then building up the capacity of government and civil society to monitor changes in

PRACTICE TIP 4

Preparing Governments for the Results of Surveys

The results of the first national victimization survey in Nigeria, published in 2006, so alarmed justice officials that they doubted its findings and questioned the methods and purposes of the organization behind it. The following year, the survey designers decided to brief officials about both the methods and results before they were published.

“It took us quite some time to repair the relationship... When we eventually did, the Police were so thrilled by the findings and their potential usefulness that we entered into agreement with them to first present summaries of findings of subsequent surveys to the monthly meetings of senior police officers in Nigeria before they are made public.

We did not have any problem with this request before the purpose of the surveys was to influence public policy and police performance in crime prevention and control in Nigeria.”

Innocent Chukwuma,
Executive Director
CLEEN Foundation, Lagos

such needs. Other surveys might be intended to change or catalyze a public conversation about the priorities of the government. Still other surveys might be conceived as supplements to existing systems of information, especially where local officials are already trying to improve them. Being explicit about whom or what process the survey is intended to help, and how the knowledge is supposed to translate into action can help alleviate concerns about the prospect of unflattering findings. Another strategy is to make the design and review of surveys part of the collaboration with national governments about the course of development.

Agreeing on the phrasing and purposes of key questions with government officials is one tactic. Justice officials in particular might appreciate the opportunity to deploy their expertise in the formulation of leading survey questions. Another tack is to add questions that solicit information about progress achieved so far. All governments need good news, and since at least some of the findings from surveys about safety and justice will inevitably be highly critical of the government, it makes sense to balance the design with questions likely to yield encouraging results for the government. Respect for negative results can be built by simultaneously appraising progress in areas about which officials are confident or particularly hopeful. Finally, briefing top officials and providing opportunities for discussion before publishing results can build receptivity to findings and also to the ongoing use of surveys and other independent sources of information for the improvement of public safety. Collaborative analysis of results before or during a test of the survey instrument can also help. Failure to manage the potentially negative repercussions for government of the results of surveys can compromise relationships and taint their reputation.¹⁷

These strategies are not a panacea. After all, many of the results of the Jamaican survey were encouraging to government, portraying a relatively favorable situation with public safety in some realms. This finding was welcome news for a government facing tough criticism about high levels of violent crime, and yet the Jamaican Constabulary Force (JCF) and the Ministry of National Security in Jamaica today are still looking for ways to convert the insights from surveys into a source of indicators.¹⁸

¹⁷ A full account of the process of preparing government officials for the results of victimization surveys in Nigeria, see Innocent Chukwuma, “Designing Indicators of Justice and Safety: Lessons from the CLEEN Foundation’s National Crime Victimization Surveys,” at <http://bit.ly/IIDSJPublications>

¹⁸ The JCF is now considering a special survey to answer questions about people’s encounters with police, focusing on stops and searches. With a decline in the number of unplanned police searches, and a reduction in violent crime, and signs of improvement in subjective sense of safety, the JCF is eager to know if improvements in these aspects of public safety have yielded an increase in public confidence and respect for the police.

5. Conclusion

Taken together, the recommendations in this paper yield a framework for building indicators of safety that are more likely to be used by national governments in the future.

Surveys with this purpose should elucidate relationships between two dimensions of “public safety” – people’s state of mind or feelings about crime and safety, on the one hand, and people’s experiences of safety and its opposite, on the other.

Relevant measures for both domains should be disaggregated by locale or special groups of concern, and then contrasted with one another in order to focus attention on improvements or deterioration in their relationship over time. The neighborhoods, communities, and segments of the population whose fear matters most have to be identified in concert with government officials. So do the precise fears, behaviors, and types of victimization of greatest interest.

Surveys designed along these lines would help development organizations and their counterparts in government and civil society identify relationships that matter most to the population in need of greater safety, and therefore indicators that might move in response to government efforts. They also might yield more discriminating targets for improvements in public safety.

For example, instead of “reductions in the percent of residents worried about crime,” national governments might seek incremental increases in the percent of residents that feel safe using public spaces in parishes with comparatively high rates of police recorded incidents of violent crime. Such an indicator would reinforce a government’s interest in improved systems of administrative data and at the same time see its relationship to the subjective side of public safety.

In sum, government officials and development organizations can use surveys effectively to build a portrait of public safety that can serve as a useful indicator, but doing so requires a high degree of clarity about the purposes that the government intends to pursue, and a long-term commitment to the use of surveys.

The indicators of public safety that governments can use constructively will have to measure a wide variety of fears, behaviors, and responses lurking deep in the minds and experiences of people in very different positions from each other. Since most surveys barely scratch this surface, development organizations must help governments connect the portraits that come from surveys with other knowledge and information about safety, building up national capacity to understand changes in justice and the nature of security over time.

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