

The Comparability of Government Surveys across the UK: Some Observations from the Crime Surveys

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Secondary analysis of existing survey data has always been a mainstay of quantitative social science research. The popularity of this strategy may be expected to increase as researchers, aim to reduce the costs of conducting research. Researchers in the UK have unparalleled access to government surveys covering a full range of social science topics(see <http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/find>). While many of these surveys have been conducted multiple times, the way the surveys have been conducted has changed over time. Furthermore, separate surveys are often conducted within each of the nations which make up the UK. This allows for greater consideration of local circumstances, however, it can limit comparability across the UK - a growing area of research interest following the development of devolution.

The population of the UK is covered by three crime surveys, the British Crime Survey (BCS) which covers England and Wales, the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey (formally the Scottish Crime Survey - SCS) and the Northern Ireland Crime Survey (NICS). Although these surveys have shared origins (for instance, southern Scotland was included in early sweeps on the BCS) the differences between them serve to illustrate issues which can limit comparability across the UK.

All three surveys aim to sample the same population (those aged 16 and over living in private households), although they do employ different sampling frames. Notably, reflecting a believe that the small user postcode file did not accurately reflect addresses in Northern Ireland, the NICS draws its sample from the Land and Property Services. While the sampling frames may be different, this may aid comparative research as each survey is using the most complete sampling frame for their population. The BCS typically includes

booster samples for young respondents and those from ethnic minorities. However, booster samples are generally analysed separately and, as such, their absence from other surveys should have a minimal impact on comparability.

Patterns of non-response may also affect comparability between surveys if non-response was correlated with particular patterns of answers (for instance, if groups with lower response rates exhibit higher victimisation rates). Response rates do vary between the three surveys, typically around 75% for the BCS, around 70% in Scotland, and 64% for the last NICS. Relatively little is known about the characteristics of non-respondents, although all three surveys include weighting variables intended to reduce the impact of non-response.

There are many similarities between the questionnaires employed by the surveys. For instance, all three begin with a series of screener questions aimed at identifying respondents who have suffered victimisation. However, they do vary in how they follow-up on respondents who have experienced victimisation. Where screener questions identify a respondent as a victim of crime, a "victim form" is used to collect additional information about the incident. This information is used to decide which type of crime occurred. Respondents to the BCS and NICS can complete upto six victim forms, while those in Scotland are asked to complete a maximum of five. It is important not to overstate the impact of this, only around 1% of victims in the BCS complete a 6th victim form. However, given the importance of victim forms in coding offences and calculating victimisation rates, this provides one example of how differences in the survey instrument may restrict comparability between surveys.

The questions used to identify respondents who have experienced crime are generally the same across all three surveys (minor differences in wording exist but these can be expected to have little impact on comparability). However, differences do exist in how particular types of victimisation are coded. Many of these coding differences reflect how crimes are considered by their local criminal system. As such, they illustrate how a trade-off exists between collecting information which reflects local context, and ensuring comparability between surveys. Such differences could be expected to limit the extent to which levels of victimisation can be compared across surveys. However, comparisons of trends within a jurisdiction over time can be made with more confidence.

Qualitative comparisons of trends across jurisdictions can then be made with caution.

The UK is well blessed with large-scale government funded surveys covering a range of social science topics. The data from these surveys are freely available for secondary analysis. However, researchers wishing to make comparisons across the UK must be aware of any differences between surveys in terms of sampling, patterns of response, questionnaire design and coding to ensure these do not undermine any comparisons being made.

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Original sources: Hough, M and Norris, P (2009) "Comparisons Between Survey Estimates of Crime and Crimes Recorded By The Police: The UK Position", in Robert, P (ed) Comparing Crime Data in Europe, Brussels: VUBpress.

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