

The EU ICS 2005: Highlights and Policy Implications

Introduction

A European consortium comprising, inter alia, Gallup Europe, Belgium, UNICRI, Italy, Gallup Hungary, the Max Planck Institute, Germany, CEPS/INSTEAD, Luxembourg and GeoX Ltd., Hungary conducted a sample survey among inhabitants of the European Union about their experiences with crime and law enforcement. The survey was carried out in the 15 old member states of the Union plus Poland, Hungary and Estonia. The study was co-funded by the European Commission, DG RTD. Preliminary results were presented at a workshop convened at Gallup/EU headquarters in Brussels on 21 November, 2005. The event was attended by representatives of the EC and stakeholders from several member states.

The consortium has summarised its findings in a large comparative work (titled “Burden of Crime in the EU”) about the levels of crime in European Union member states. A series of working papers have also been drafted, each of them dealing with a particular aspect of safety and criminality in a more in-depth way. The analyses and research data are available on the consortium website at <http://www.gallup-europe.be/euics>.

This document provides highlights and policy relevant recommendations based on the analysis of the EU ICS data.

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General Trends

Key findings indicate that the levels of common crimes such as burglaries, thefts, robberies and assaults have over the past ten years decreased significantly everywhere in the Union with the exception of Ireland and possibly Belgium. The decreases are especially marked in Poland and Estonia and in Southern Europe.

In line with developments observed in the North America and Australia, most EU countries are now recovering from a ‘crime epidemic’ that has lasted for three or even four decades. Since 2000 most other EU countries have finally managed to reduce levels of crime thanks to, among others, more effective policing and crime prevention measures, promoted by the EU European Crime Prevention Network as well

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Recommendation 1: Special efforts should be made to actively communicate to the public in the EU that across the Union the level of common crimes has significantly decreased over the past five years, especially in the new member states and in Southern Europe and that evidence-based policies promoted by the Union have evidently started to pay off for ordinary citizens.

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Public attitudes

The survey results indicate that somewhat fewer residents in most countries are concerned about the likelihood that their houses will be burglarized. These perceptions seem to be in line with the actual drop in burglary risks. Feelings of unsafety in the street have not diminished much, although violent crime has gone down in many countries as well.

This incongruence between feelings of unsafety and actual levels of crime may be the result of deteriorations in other relevant areas such as different forms of public nuisances including public drunkenness and drug dealing. These factors may also have become more relevant to feelings of unsafety due to the ‘greying’ of the EU population. There is a need for further research and analytical clarification in this respect.

The survey addressed experiences of the public with drug-related problems. Respondents were asked whether they had personally been in contact in their area with drug-related problems such as drugs dealing or syringes left in parks. Such experiences were most common in Greece, Portugal, Luxembourg, Spain and Italy and least common in Finland, Sweden, Hungary and Denmark. The results confirmed that many inhabitants feel personally exposed to drug-related problems and that these experiences fuel their feelings of unsafety.

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Recommendation 2 : More attention must be given by relevant entities within the EU to the role of public disorders including public drunkenness and public drug ‘scenes’ in fuelling feelings of unsafety and to ways of reducing such sources of anxiety about crime among the population at large.

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Situational crime prevention

The survey asked respondents about the use of special measures to protect themselves against victimization by crime. Across the Union, the level of self-protection against common criminality has increased significantly over the past ten years. Increased self-protection might be one of the main factors behind the drop in property crime in the Union such as household burglaries and car-related theft. The use of precautionary measures is closely linked to perceptions of victimization risks. It is currently most common in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Sweden and France. It is to be expected that readiness to invest in anti-burglary and theft measures will dwindle if these types of crimes become less common.

Recommendation 3 : Discussions should be initiated about how high levels of investments in self-protection against crime by the private sector can be maintained in spite of falling levels of crime, e.g. through special efforts by police forces and insurance companies to promote the use of such measures and the introduction of new, cost-effective technologies. The Union will have an important role to play in standard setting and funding research and development in the field of crime prevention.

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Country risks and causes of crime

In 2004 levels of crime were most elevated in Ireland, United Kingdom, Estonia, The Netherlands and Denmark and lowest in Spain, Hungary, Portugal and Finland. The most common factors associated with high levels of crime are urbanization and the proportion of young people in the population.

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Recommendation 4 : The EU should give special priority in regional funding policies to programmes aimed at the social integration of young people in urban areas.

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Risks to be victimized varied by type of crime. Risks to be assaulted were found to be highest in the United Kingdom, Ireland the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden and Denmark. Risks were lowest in Italy, Portugal, Hungary, Spain and France. Rates of violent crime were found to be associated with the consumption of alcohol, especially beer, per 100 000 population.

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Recommendation 5 : The EU should promote exchange of experiences and best practices, especially among countries of the North and the South, in the promotion of responsible drinking patterns among young people.

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Hate crimes

Respondents were asked about any experiences with crimes motivated by hatred against minorities. Levels of such 'hate crimes' were most elevated in France, Denmark, the United Kingdom and the Benelux countries. Lowest levels were recorded in Italy, Portugal, Greece and Austria. The country rankings bear no relationship to the numbers of officially recorded incidents as reported to the EUMC in Vienna. On average, 10 % of immigrants and 15% of those immigrants who consider themselves to be religious in the European Union had been victimized once or more by a 'hate crime' in the course of 2004. These results point to a level of prevalence of such crimes that is unacceptably high and that cannot but have serious implications for the social integration of immigrants affected.

Recommendation 6 : The EUMC in Vienna and other EU entities should arrange for secondary analyses of the EU ICS 2004 data concerning hate crimes and consider the execution of follow up interviews with those who reported such incidents to interviewers. The EUMC should prepare and conduct special victimisation surveys among immigrant groups/ethnic minority groups using core questions of the EU ICS to maintain comparability of results. Best practices in preventing 'hate crimes' and victim assistance should be exchanged between member countries and the preparation of a Framework Decision on this issue should be taken into consideration.

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Sexual crimes

Experiences with sexual violence were reported most often by women in Ireland, Sweden, Germany and Austria and least often in Hungary, Spain, France and Portugal. These results may have been affected by underreporting of incidents in the latter countries due to higher thresholds for speaking about such issues to interviewers.

7 Recommendation 7: Further analyses should be made into the possible underreporting of sexual offences in some countries with comparatively low rates. ”

Corruption

The survey asked respondents whether they had been requested to pay bribes to public officials over the past twelve months. Positive answers were given most often by inhabitants of Greece, Poland, Hungary and Estonia. Bribe-seeking was least common in Finland, the UK, Sweden, the Netherlands and Ireland. Results are roughly in line with the rankings on the Corruption Perception Index of Transparency International in Berlin. These rankings are known to be correlated to other forms of non-conventional crime such as grand corruption and organized crime.

8 Recommendation 8. With a view to repeats of the EU ICS in the future an enquiry should be made into the feasibility of adding questions on non-conventional crimes such as on experiences with or perceptions of organized crime and grand corruption, e.g. those used in the Eurobarometer of Crime, 2002. ”

Victim protection

Those who had been victimized by any crime were asked whether they had reported the incident to the police. The rate of reporting varies by crime-type. Variation in reporting rates among the 18 EU countries was limited: roughly sixty percent of serious crimes were reported to the police.

Victims were asked how they rated their treatment by the police. The judgments of crime victims showed considerable disparity across the Union, with opinions being least favourable in Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Italy and Portugal and most favourable in Denmark, Ireland, Luxembourg, Austria, Sweden and Germany.

Main reasons for dissatisfaction was that the ‘police did not do enough’ or ‘were not interested’. In cases of violent crime, victims often complained about ‘impoliteness’. Forty percent of dissatisfied victims complained about insufficient information. The latter results are disappointing considering the specific instruction in the 2001 Council Framework Decision on the Standing of Victims in Criminal proceedings to respect the victims’ right to receive information as from their first contact with law enforcement agencies.

Recommendation 9: Secondary analyses of the EU ICS 2004 data on victim protection should be conducted to add direct victim experiences to the findings reported in the Report of the Commission of the European Communities on the basis of Article 18 of the Council Framework Decision of 15 March on the standing of victims in criminal proceedings (COM (2004, 54 final/2). In this context, arrangements should also be made for follow up interviews with persons identified as victims of serious crimes in the course of EU ICS 2004 about their subsequent experiences with police and judicial authorities. Such analyses and data gathering should form the basis for recommendation on how police responses can be made more victim-friendly in accordance with the Framework Decision.

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General police performance

All respondents were asked to rate the performance of their local police in controlling crime. In most countries public opinion on police performance showed slight improvements compared to results of previous polls. Opinions were most critical of the police in Poland and Estonia and most favourable in Finland, Denmark Austria and Ireland.

On the basis of reporting rates, opinions of victims and of the general public an index was constructed of perceived police performance. Countries with the best scores on this comprehensive index were Austria, Denmark, Belgium, Germany and Sweden. Scores were the least favourable in Poland, Greece, Estonia and Italy.

Recommendation 10. More studies should be conducted of the performance of police forces including their public relations policies with special attention for the situation in some new member states where further reforms towards service-oriented policing seem needed. Consideration should be given to the elaboration of a score-card based on the key indicators of crime , police performance and victim protection. The introduction of such system could give impetus to transparent and evidence-based crime prevention policies within the EU.

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Punitiveness

Respondents were lastly asked to express their opinions on the punishment most suitable for a recidivist burglar, e.g. imprisonment or a community service order. Those in Estonia, Hungary, the United Kingdom and Ireland were most likely to favour imprisonment. Support for imprisonment was least common among respondents from Portugal, France, Austria and Finland.

The trend observed in the ICVS 2000 towards more punitive attitudes towards offenders in some EU countries seems to have reached a plateau. A swing back towards favouring non-custodial sentences seems now in evidence, including among the public in the new member states.

Recommendation 11: Against the background of decreasing crime rates and somewhat less punitive attitudes towards offenders among the public in some EU countries, including new members, it would seem warranted to re-examine EU wide variation in prisoners rates and to promote exchanges of best practices in reducing such rates such as the successful policies implemented in Finland in the ninety nineties. Such policies seem particularly pertinent for the new members and applicant countries from Central and Eastern Europe where prisoner rates tend still to be significantly higher than the EU mean and prison overcrowding causes severe humanitarian problems, including HIV-related health issues.

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Mapping Crime and Safety

In the framework of the EU ICS project innovative work has been done on the visualization of the spatial distribution of crime and the attitudes related to crime ('crime mapping'). In the United States digital, map-based information has proved a great tool in supporting both local police forces and other organisations in presenting crime information and targeting and monitoring crime-prevention efforts. In Europe these tools are much less widely used and to our knowledge only internally by some police forces. No publicly available low-cost tool to help tracking victimization incidents has been available in Europe. The project has demonstrated how such tool could be delivered over the internet to both local NGO's and local crime prevention agencies. The development work done within the consortium is available on the web-pages and could be used as a training tool for crime prevention practitioners.

Recommendation 12: The use and further development of available simple geo-coding tools in the presentation and analysis of crime and victimisation information should be promoted by the European Union through technical innovation and training. Such tools allow local communities and NGO's, educational institutions etcetera to access crime information in their areas and will offer new opportunities for public-private cooperation. The promotion of such tools would enhance transparency on crime issues and offer tangible support to citizens to take action to improve safety in their immediate environment in close partnership with the police.

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The future of EU ICS

The data generated using computer-based survey technologies based on fixed line telephones and random sampling have produced the first Europe-wide truly comparative dataset on crime. Never before have victim surveys covered as many European countries at the same time. The dataset will be further analyzed in the coming months by researchers within the Consortium, and subsequently released to the wider research community as well.

Limitations have surfaced in the methodologies employed that should be avoided in the future. The project has generated unique information on the effects of penetrations of the mobile only phone population on the estimates. These effects proved to be manageable but future waves of the survey have to take into account the knowledge gained on this issue. Another constraint posed on the study by the original specification was the restriction to the old fifteen EU member countries. During the implementation the consortium was able to include comparative data from three additional, new member countries. The results obtained concerning these countries underline the importance of full coverage of member countries in such studies for the formulation of EU wide policy recommendations.

Recommendation 13 : Future rounds of the EU ICS should be provided with funding for adequate coverage of the non-fixed telephone line population groups. In addition, funding of future rounds should allow the inclusion of all member countries and candidate countries in order to broaden the policy impact of the study.

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