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Cross-National Research on Violent Victimization

Johan van Wilsem

Introduction

Cross-national studies of crime are an interesting line of research for several reasons. First, they offer an opportunity to assess the extent to which social, economic, and cultural differences among countries affect national crime rates. Second, and more specifically, the impact of varying socio-economic and punitive policies across countries may be evaluated by comparing differences in crime outcomes. However, although cross-national crime data are attractive as a means to test hypotheses on a level that is highly relevant in terms of policy and theory, they also have a general reputation of poor comparability and limited availability (Neapolitan, 1997; Van Wilsem, 2004). Furthermore, the absence of a wide number of comparable predictors across a large number of countries has restricted the ability to identify causes of crime at the level of countries.

As is evident in this chapter, this data problem has resulted in a research field that has traditionally been constrained by small samples of countries and an empirical focus on homicide, the single type of

crime for which international data are considered to be suited for comparative purposes. Nevertheless, recent developments in the area of international data collection on crime victimization offer new possibilities to address neglected research questions, which are also outlined in this chapter. Individual-level data on crime targets, collected via the International Crime Victims Survey, offer the opportunity for micro- and macro-level research on nonhomicide crimes.

Official Crime Data

Traditionally, most cross-national crime research has been based on data from official sources, which provide macro-level counts of crimes, suspects, or victims. The most widely used sources of comparative crime data are Interpol's *International Crime Statistics*, the United Nations' *UN Crime Survey*, and the World Health Organization's (WHO) *World Health Statistics Annual*. Both Interpol and the UN collect criminal justice data among member nations. The WHO provides national statistics on

homicide by reporting on causes of death, for which one of the categories is "any act performed with the purpose of taking human life, in whatever circumstances." These data are collected from public health agencies and are based on death certificates. An additional and relatively new source of international crime data is the *European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics*. The second, most recent edition of this source provides police, court, and corrections data for 39 European countries for the years 1995–2000 (Council of Europe, 2003).¹

Cross-national research on crime has been severely constrained by the flaws in the available data (Neapolitan, 1997). Because of inconsistencies in legal codes and differences in people's propensity to report crimes to the police – both across countries and over time – most cross-national studies on crime have focused on homicide (Gartner, 1990; Krahn, Hartnagel, & Gartrell, 1986; Messner, 1989; Neapolitan, 1998). Because of its fundamental nature, homicide is less sensitive than other offenses to definitional problems and reporting selectivity. National homicide rates are therefore considered to be the most reliable measure for cross-national studies of crime (Neapolitan, 1997). In contrast, definitions of theft (and other nonhomicide crimes) vary across countries, inconsistently excluding certain subcategories of theft (e.g., car theft) or even lacking detail on which subcategories make up the overall theft category. Also, the extent to which non-homicide crimes are reported to the police varies significantly across countries (Van Kesteren, Mayhew, & Nieuwbeerta, 2000). For the purpose of cross-national comparison, official data on nonhomicide crimes therefore seem to suffer from insurmountable quality deficiencies.

The available sources on homicide rates are also subject to quality differences. The WHO data are consistent in their exclusion of homicide attempts, unlike homicide data provided by the United Nations and Interpol. As a result, the volume of homicide can vary considerably according to the data source used, with UN and

Interpol data sometimes offering substantially higher homicide rates than WHO data. Therefore, WHO data are generally considered the most valid source of cross-national comparative homicide data (Kalish, 1988; LaFree & Drass, 2002). As compared to Interpol data however, the WHO delivers data for a smaller number of countries. In a recent overview, WHO homicide data were available for 74 countries for the period 1990–2000 (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002), whereas Interpol have reported crime statistics for a total number of 154 countries (LaFree, 2003).

Cross-National Differences in the Volume and Trends of Homicide Victimization

Across countries, large differences in homicide rates have been documented. For instance, comparing WHO homicide rates for 70 countries in the period 1990–2000, LaFree (2003) found that six countries (Colombia, El Salvador, Brazil, Russian Federation, Albania, and Puerto Rico) had average homicide victimization rates over 20 per 100,000 population, whereas eight countries (Israel, Japan, United Kingdom, France, Spain, Ireland, Norway, and Germany) had rates under 1 per 100,000. In addition, there appears to be a strong relation between socioeconomic development and homicide. Nearly 83% of the 29 industrialized countries in this sample had homicide rates of 2 or less per 100,000.² In contrast, over 56% of the Latin American and Caribbean countries and nearly 32% of the Eastern European and Central Asian countries had homicide rates that exceeded 10 per 100,000 (LaFree, 2003).

Many studies have been concerned with cross-sectional differences in national homicide rates, but relatively little research has been conducted on the comparison of homicide trends over time (e.g. Eisner, 2001; Gurr, 1977). As one of the exceptions, LaFree and Drass (2002) conducted a systematic cross-national analysis of change and stability in homicide victimization over the period 1956–1998. Their results using WHO data show clear differences in the development of

homicide, with some countries being characterized by stability or slow growth and others by radical changes in upward directions.³ Of the 34 countries in this study, 12 were confronted with such “crime booms” – rapid accelerations in homicide for several consecutive years that were followed by stability at the higher homicide level. Interestingly, industrializing countries appeared to have higher incidence of crime booms (70%) compared to modern Western countries (21%).⁴ These findings on homicide dynamics may be interpreted as supportive of modernization theory (LaFree & Drass, 2002). According to this perspective, the transition of countries from traditional to modern societies results in social and economic changes – industrialization, urbanization, and political reform – that disrupt established normative guidelines. In turn, such developments may weaken social control mechanisms and increase the potential for anomie, which ultimately lead to crime increases (Shelley, 1981).

Structural Correlates of Homicide Rates

In addition to examining the volume of national homicide rates, many researchers have studied their structural correlates. Before turning to a discussion of some of their major results, it is important to mention some of the difficulties facing cross-national comparative research, a field that is, by definition, constrained in its number of units of analysis. Furthermore, contrary to much individual-, neighborhood-, or city-level research, the units of analysis in cross-national research are not selected randomly, but rather on the basis of availability. This factor has had some important consequences for the results of multivariate analyses on international homicide patterns (LaFree, 2003; Neapolitan, 1997).

Because of the scarcity of both crime counts and explanatory variables, cross-national crime research has more commonly included Western, developed countries and has less commonly included developing countries. The overrepresentation of developed countries puts clear restrictions on

the generalizability of empirical outcomes, because countries in other parts of the world (which are underrepresented) generally have a different economic and social context. Furthermore, the sample sizes analyzed in cross-national research are small and therefore offer limited statistical power. The results of some studies are dependent on only one or a few outliers. The small sample size also limits the use of statistical techniques, resulting in most cases in relatively straightforward direct effects models (but see Pampel & Gartner, 1995; Pratt & Godsey, 2003; Savolainen, 2000). To conclude, small sample sizes limit the range of variables that can be included in explanatory models to between 4 and 10 in most cross-national crime research, depending on sample size. To overcome this problem, in some studies, more than one observation per country was used by introducing year-specific values of crime and explanatory variables (e.g. Bennett, 1991; Gartner, 1990; Pampel & Gartner, 1995). This multiplies the number of observations by the number of years that are included for each country, therefore increasing statistical power.⁵

Despite these limitations, previous research has yielded a considerable list of predictors of national homicide rates. One of the most robust documented relations is the one between income inequality and homicide rates. Many studies have found that the higher the level of economic inequality, the higher the homicide rate (e.g. Gartner, 1990; Kick & LaFree, 1985; Krahn et al., 1986; Messner, 1982; Neapolitan, 1998). Other indicators of economic stress have also been found to be positively related to national homicide rates, such as economic discrimination (Messner, 1989), low governmental expenditures on social security⁶ (Gartner, 1990; Savolainen, 2000), and measures of decommodification, which indicate the extent to which the state offers its citizens protection against economic market dynamics by offering them social rights and entitlements (Messner & Rosenfeld, 1997).

These findings are generally interpreted to be supportive of strain theory (Merton,

1957). According to this line of reasoning, inequality stimulates feelings of relative deprivation among the disadvantaged, while few institutional arrangements for basic income provision increase chances of absolute income deprivation. In turn, these factors may lead to greater probabilities of criminal activity, if delinquent actions are aimed at the reduction of deprivation by illegally obtaining material goods, or at the expression of frustration caused by the inaccessibility of material resources by committing violent crime. Interestingly, according to findings from two studies, social welfare arrangements moderate the effect of other economic stress indicators on crime. Savolainen (2000) found that the positive effect of income inequality on national homicide rates is limited to countries with weak collective institutions for social welfare. In addition, Pratt and Godsey (2003) conclude that income inequality has less serious consequences for homicide rates in countries with high government expenditures on health care. Both findings imply that crime-inducing effects of economic stress conditions may be limited to countries that fall short on providing institutional arrangements for economic or social support.⁷

National homicide rates have also been related to social indicators of disorganization, criminal opportunity, and cultural orientation. However, outcomes for these factors vary depending on the countries and time periods included in the samples used. For instance, divorce rates – indicating the possible effect of a lack of social integration – and homicide rates have been found to be positively associated in research on modern societies (Gartner, 1990; Van Wilsem, 2004). However, analyses including countries with lower levels of development failed to show this association (Krahn et al., 1986). Similarly, some studies found higher levels of homicide in highly urbanized countries (Bennett, 1991; Van Wilsem, 2004), whereas others did not (Kick & LaFree, 1985; Messner, 1989; Neapolitan, 1998). Routine activity theorists have argued that criminal opportunities increase crime rates, for instance through the exposure to offenders

by high numbers of out-of-home populations (Cohen & Felson, 1979). As a proxy measure, the extent of female labor force participation has been used in cross-national homicide research. Gartner (1990) found higher levels of female and child homicide in countries with large proportions of female workers, whereas Bennett (1991) did not find such a relation for general homicide. Furthermore, although more potential offenders are expected among countries with large shares of youth populations (considering the strong relation between age and delinquency on the individual level; see, for example, Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983; Sampson & Laub, 1993), cross-national research findings are quite consistent on their observed lack of association between the proportion of youths and homicides (Bennett, 1991; Gartner, 1990; Krahn et al., 1986; Messner, 1989; Neapolitan, 1998). However, a more detailed analysis by Pampel and Gartner (1995) supported the hypothesis that having a large proportion of youths only exerts crime-inducing effects if institutions for collective social protection are weak.

Differences among countries' cultural values regarding violence may also play a role in shaping homicide rates. For example, Gartner's (1990) results suggest a positive association between homicide and the involvement of countries in warfare. She also found higher homicide rates in countries that exercised capital punishment. The former finding possibly points to a habituation to violent acts for historical reasons, whereas the latter result may indicate a general tolerance to violence due to the existence of officially approved homicide (Gartner, 1990; Thomson, 1999).

Taking a broad overview of these results, it can be argued that the hypotheses of several criminological theories have been thoroughly tested with respect to their predictions on national homicide rates, albeit with the use of indirect indicators for theoretical concepts. At the same time, however, the empirical focus on homicide – caused by the quality restrictions on available data on other crimes – has narrowed the research field. It has resulted in a situation in which

it is difficult to determine with official data if national homicide rates resemble the rates of other crimes. As a consequence, it remains unclear whether the structural correlates of national homicide rates relate to other types of crime. Thus, despite the merits of previous research, the body of knowledge on cross-national crime patterns therefore has considerable gaps.

However, there have been recent developments in the collection of internationally comparable victimization data, which offer the possibility of addressing some of the neglected research issues. The next section first discusses the advantages and limitations of these data and, subsequently, several results of research based on comparative survey data.

International Victim Survey Data on Violent and Property Crime

Several Western countries initiated victimization surveys in the late 1960s and 1970s (e.g. Ennis, 1967), partly because police-registered data were generally acknowledged to suffer from comparative problems. Although this first wave of victim surveys offered an alternative for estimates of national crime rates, they did not solve the problem of cross-national comparability. National surveys in different countries used differing research designs, fieldwork procedures, and interviewing questions, thereby limiting the comparability of victimization estimates across nations (Block, 1993). Furthermore, compared to official data, the number of countries that conducted such victimization surveys was very limited. To overcome these obstacles to cross-national comparison, the Dutch Ministry of Justice, along with the British Home Office, initiated the International Crime Victims Survey (ICVS) in 1989. In the ICVS, respondents are asked standardized questions on recent victimization experiences for various types of theft, violence, and vandalism. Victims are also asked about the circumstances of the offense and whether the police were involved. Questions also include the respon-

dent's background and lifestyle characteristics.

The first ICVS wave in 1989 was conducted in 14 Western countries. Additional survey waves were conducted in 1992, 1996, and 2000 with the involvement of the UN Interregional Crime and Justice Institute (UNICRI). In these new waves, non-Western countries were also included. Currently, 27 countries have conducted ICVS surveys with samples for the general population aged 16 years or older. ICVS city surveys have also been conducted for an additional 45 countries, mainly developing ones. These surveys were restricted to the inhabitants of a large city in these countries. In 2004, a new wave of ICVS surveys has been conducted across a (provisional) total number of 32 countries.

Advantages of ICVS Data

Compared to official crime data, the ICVS data have three main advantages. First, through identical questionnaires the ICVS uses fully standardized victimization definitions. Second, it includes incidents not reported to the police by asking respondents to mention all victimizations they experienced in the past year. Consequently, the ICVS data mitigate the two main sources of measurement error across nations in cross-national police data: varying crime definitions and differences in rates of crimes not reported to the police (dark numbers). Third, as the ICVS data consist of survey answers of respondents, they can be disaggregated to the individual level for many individual characteristics, such as age, gender, educational level, and labor status. As such, they provide opportunities to calculate victimization risks for different social categories. Even more, with the use of multivariate techniques, it is possible to assess the generalizability of independent risk factors across countries. Because the ICVS contains questions on multiple types of victimization experiences, it has become an important data source for estimating country rates of (nonlethal) assault, car vandalism and several types of theft (Mayhew &

Van Dijk, 1997; Van Dijk & Mayhew, 1992; Van Dijk, Mayhew, & Kiliyas, 1990; Van Kesteren et al., 2000).

Limitations of ICVS Data

Although the use of victimization survey data offers new opportunities for cross-national comparison, the ICVS data also have several limitations, which must be carefully taken into account (Neapolitan, 1997). Six limitations most often mentioned with regard to ICVS data are discussed below, along with arguments on the extent to which each presents comparative problems. Some of these points have a bearing on general victimization, whereas others are especially relevant for the measurement of violent victimization.

First, the number of countries that have participated in the ICVS with nation-wide samples is currently still small and selective. ICVS country estimates of property and nonlethal violent victimization are available for 27 countries, which are either highly industrialized or in Eastern Europe. Clearly, future efforts should be made to enlarge the ICVS country sample by including other countries with nation-wide surveys, especially developing ones.

Second, data collection procedures are not identical for each country participating in the ICVS. In Western countries, surveys were conducted through telephone interviewing, whereas in developing countries, face-to-face interviews were held because of low levels of telephone ownership. This difference may bias results when survey data collected through varying modes are compared. Nevertheless, the comparability of results from surveys with different interview modes has been acknowledged (Dillman & Tarnai, 1989), especially when the same types of fieldwork are used, as is the case in the ICVS (Van Kesteren et al., 2000).

Third, unequal measurement error may be introduced by the differential response rates across nations, which vary from a minimum of 30% for the West German 1989 survey to a maximum of 86% for the 1992

and 1996 surveys of Finland. Evidence from previous research indicates that those who are victimized are most likely to respond (Block, 1993), which would result in an overestimation of crime rates in countries where response rates are low. On the other hand, low response rates may be associated with an underrepresentation of victims, because victims might be away from home more often than nonvictims. Van Kesteren et al. (2000) could not substantiate these claims with empirical evidence, as they found no relation between ICVS response rates and victimization rates. Similarly, Van Wilsem (2003) also found no association between ICVS response rates and rates of violent and property victimization, after adjusting for other explanatory variables. Nevertheless, because of the small size of the current ICVS country sample, care is required in interpreting these results. Therefore, future analyses of larger ICVS country samples should continue to evaluate the effect of response rates on outcomes.

Fourth, ICVS sample sizes are relatively small, mostly between 1,000 and 2,000 respondents per survey. Considering that crime incidents – especially violent victimizations – are rare events, a small amount of sampling error can result in large effects on victimization rates. Several strategies can be undertaken to deal with this problem. The ICVS data can be weighted to ensure that the sample is representative of the population aged 16 or older, in terms of gender, age, household composition, and regional population distribution (Van Kesteren et al., 2000). In addition, in countries in which the ICVS has been conducted more than once, the data can be pooled to increase sample size and obtain more reliable victimization estimates (Lynch, 1993). Furthermore, country-level estimates can be obtained by employing multilevel models on cross-nationally pooled individual-level data (Snijders & Bosker, 1999). With this procedure, estimates of country victimization rates are treated as deviations from a “grand mean,” which is the average risk across all countries. These deviations or, in multilevel terms, random intercepts are weighted as

a function of the sample size. Thus, larger country samples have a greater influence on these estimates than the smaller samples. Finally, for crime types with similar properties, overarching categories can be constructed. By doing so, the proportion of people who experienced an incident within a category becomes larger, which makes the victimization estimate less sensitive to sampling errors. For example, a joint category for nonlethal violent victimization can be constructed by combining survey responses on assault and robbery.

Fifth, differences in the cultural interpretation of victimization experiences may affect the results. Thus, although survey questions may be identical, people from different cultures may define various types of victimization differently. Critics have argued that survey responses on violent and sexual victimization may especially be vulnerable to this type of inconsistency (Neapolitan, 1997). However, with respect to victimization experiences that are reported in the ICVS, Van Dijk and Van Kesteren (1996) showed that the perceived seriousness of victimization types is similar across cultures. In particular, for violent victimization they found no relation between GDP per capita and perceived seriousness of the incident across 51 countries, which offers some indication of the universality of meaning assigned to violent encounters by victims. Nevertheless, the empirical assessment of cross-national consistency in (violent) crime definitions among survey respondents remains a difficult issue.

In addition to defining victimization experiences differently, a sixth and final point is that particular crimes may be reported differently for *intentional* reasons because of respondents' refusal to answer questions. The ICVS, like many victimization surveys, seems susceptible to this criticism, especially with regard to domestic violence, sexual crimes, and other serious violent crimes. Obtaining accurate survey responses on these incidents is difficult in general (Mirrlees-Black, 1999), and seems especially hard in developing countries (Zvejkic & Alvazzi Del Frate, 1995). Because

these crimes tend to be of a personal nature, victims may be reluctant to reveal them to interviewers, especially if cultural rules prohibit speaking about these matters at all. In general, self-completion formats of survey questions (via mail or computer assisted self interview) on serious victimization incidents are preferred as they emphasize anonymity and confidentiality (Mirrlees-Black, 1999). However, the ICVS uses either telephonic or regular face-to-face interviewing methods. It is therefore doubtful if the survey is suitable for appropriately estimating the national volume of domestic and sexual victimization.

Alternative strategies may be undertaken to achieve this goal. The first is to construct an index on serious violent victimization by combining data from various sources, such as a combination of official and survey data. Such a multisource approach has also been undertaken for the International Homicide Index (Haen & Block, 2004). A second means for estimating the incidence of domestic and sexual crime against women is offered by the recently initiated International Violence Against Women Survey (IVAWS). Data collection is currently in progress in 20 developing and modern countries. Of these, Australia and Switzerland were the first countries to finalize their fieldwork and did so in 2003. Mouzos and Makkai (2004) have reported the Australian findings of the IVAWS. Similarly to the ICVS, the Australian sweep of the IVAWS also uses a telephonic survey as the mode of interview, but differs on two main points: the sample population receives a pre-survey letter, only female interviewers are used.

Tackling New Research Problems with ICVS Data

As the ICVS contains individual-level data on crime targets and victimization, it can address comparative research problems for both individual (micro-level) and country (macro-level) issues of victimization. For instance, it can be used to create estimates of national volumes of victimization that are

not hampered by definitional inconsistency or reporting selectivity. On the individual level, one of the research possibilities is the comparison of characteristics of victims and nonvictims, which allows for the assessment of victimization risk factors. Furthermore, though on both levels of analysis separate cross-national research is possible, micro- and macro-level issues of victimization are to some extent intertwined. As such, they need to be integrated in empirical comparative research. To clarify, micro-level risk factors of victimization may have consequences for cross-national differences in crime rates if countries vary significantly in these individual traits. In reverse, macro-level conditions could relate to individual victimization (apart from individual, neighborhood, or other factors), if they independently influence the spatial and temporal convergence of targets and offenders. Therefore, in the next section, separate overviews of the macro- and micro-level results of ICVS analyses are followed by a discussion of empirical results on these micro-macro links.

Macro-Level ICVS Findings

As previously stated in this chapter, cross-national crime research has predominantly focused on homicide variation because of limitations on the quality of data on other crimes. Thus, although empirical tests of criminological theories have been performed at a cross-national level, few studies have examined country-to-country variation in crime rates for multiple types of offenses. Exceptions are studies performed by Bennett (1991), Kick and LaFree (1985), and LaFree and Kick (1986), which compared the determinants of theft and violence using a cross-national perspective. Their findings suggest that theft and violence have different structural correlates. For instance, Bennett (1991) found that theft rates are positively related to GDP per capita, whereas rates of violent crime are not.⁸ Nevertheless, because of comparison problems associated with official police statistics on theft, it remains uncertain whether these results do point to different determinants for different

crime types or rather are due to systematic measurement errors.

To address this issue, Van Wilsem (2004) related WHO homicide rates to national levels of nonviolent victimization and theft for those countries that participated in ICVS country-wide surveys. He also compared structural correlates for homicide with those for other crimes. The selection of 27 countries contained 20 Western countries, including the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom; 6 East European countries; and Japan. For this sample, homicide rates tended to be positively related to rates of nonlethal violence and theft, indicating that the rate of the most frequently examined offense type in national profiles of crime is generally not atypical. Thus, countries with high homicide rates tend to have high levels of nonlethal assault and theft as well.

Furthermore, some overlap was found for the predictors of victimization rates across offense types. Having high proportions of large-city inhabitants (populations of more than 100,000) was related to high levels of homicide, theft, and nonlethal victimization.⁹ Furthermore, high levels of these three crime types were generally found more often in countries with low levels of GDP per capita, indicating a negative relation between development and crime. Income inequality was positively related to rates of theft and nonlethal violence, but unexpectedly not to homicide for the selected countries.

In addition, because ICVS data offer information on whether the victimization incident was reported to the police, they enable comparisons to be made between national rates of *self-reported* victimization and *police-reported* victimization. In this respect, it is interesting to note that some of the relations between victimization and national context changed once the impact of the differential police-reporting behavior of crime victims was taken into account. For instance, although GDP per capita was negatively related to rates of self-reported victimization, no relation was found for rates of police-reported victimization. Thus, the fact

that victims of crime in developing countries report the incidents they experience less often to the police leads to the erroneous suggestion that crime and socioeconomic development are not related if data on police reports are used (Van Wilsem, 2004).

Micro-Level ICVS Findings

On the individual level, the ICVS offers possibilities to explore determinants of victimization across countries, and several researchers have done so for violent victimization. In an analysis of ICVS 1992 data for 15 Western and East European countries, Lee (2000) found that community cohesion is a consistent predictor of low victimization risk for neighborhood assault and neighborhood robbery. Combining insights from opportunity and social disorganization explanations of crime, Lee (2000) argues that community cohesion offers guardianship to neighborhood inhabitants because informal social control is realized more effectively than in communities in which social ties among inhabitants are absent (see also Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Additional analyses of ICVS city data across 12 developing countries yielded comparable findings, which lends support to the assumption that community context is important in explaining victimization across different social contexts. As such, Lee's (2000) findings underscore the generalizability of the relation between social disorganization and crime, which is a valuable addition to the research field, as the available empirical results of other studies have been derived predominantly from the United States (e.g. Bellair, 1997; Sampson et al., 1997).

Focusing on another relation that has been frequently documented in U.S. and English research (e.g., Dodd, Nicholas, Povey, & Walker, 2004; Hindelang, Gottfredson, & Garolalo, 1978; Tseloni, 2000), Carcach (2002) argues that the inverse relation between age and victimization is found in many countries, based on analyses of ICVS data from 1989 to 2000. Although the age-

victimization curve is not totally equal across countries, the basic pattern is the same. Similarly to life-course changes in delinquency (Sampson & Laub, 1993), the risk of violent victimization seems to decline for young males after marriage.

Van Wilsem, De Graaf, and Wittebrood (2003) analyzed ICVS data for 18 Western and East European countries and distinguished between violent victimization incidents that occurred inside and outside the victim's neighborhood. Common determinants for both types of violence were young age, being single, and living in a large city. Furthermore, violent victimization within the victim's neighborhood was more likely for people who do not perform paid labor nor follow a fulltime education (e.g. housewives, unemployed) and inhabitants of socially disorganized communities, whereas violent victimization outside the neighbourhood occurred more frequently among paid workers and people with high night-time activity.¹⁰

Linking Micro- and Macro-Perspectives of Victimization

For the explanation of cross-national crime differences, contextual as well as compositional explanations can be used. Contextual explanations center on the idea that aspects of the national social, economic, or cultural structure determine the likelihood of crime (or victimization) in themselves. For instance, strain/anomie theorists argue that inequalities in the distribution of material resources induce offender motivation among the deprived. Therefore, crime rates will be higher with increasing inequality (Blau & Blau, 1982; Merton, 1957). In contrast, compositional explanations of cross-national crime differences argue that countries differ systematically with respect to crime-related characteristics at *within-country* levels of analysis, such as regions, neighborhoods, or individuals. For instance, some countries may have higher victimization rates than others, because at the individual level they consist of more suitable targets (e.g., because of higher levels

of exposure through routine activities). As such, Cohen and Felson's (1979) routine activity theory offers an example of a compositional explanation for victimization. To explain temporal changes in U.S. crime rates since World War II, they argued that the displacement of daily activities from the home to the public domain (e.g., through women's increased participation in the labor force), combined with increased possession of portable luxury goods, led to increased criminal activity and victimization because of the greater criminal opportunities associated with these shifts. Thus, they used individual-level mechanisms to account for aggregate crime differences over time.

Although contextual and compositional explanations have been offered to account for cross-national differences in victimization (Gartner, 1990; Krahn et al., 1986; Messner & Rosenfeld, 1997; Neapolitan, 1998), a serious drawback is that the empirical tests performed have used country-level data because of the absence of comparable individual-level crime data across countries. Because it is problematic to infer micro-level mechanisms from macro-level findings (Robinson, 1950), it remains uncertain how to interpret the observed effects of population composition in these studies. In addition, it is questionable whether effects of national context on crime indicate the crime-inducing impact of social structure or whether they are the outcome of unmeasured, systematic lower level heterogeneity. For instance, does a relation between income inequality and homicide indicate that the country's material context stimulates the activity of offenders? Or, is the relation found because countries with high income inequality systematically have more people prone to victimization because their characteristics as a target?

The sole availability of crime data at the macro-level has made it difficult to answer two basic, yet important questions for the cross-national study of victimization: (1) To what extent does cross-national variation in victimization result from compositional differences? and (2) To what extent

do country characteristics predict victimization rates, after compositional differences are taken into account? These two questions illustrate that micro-level and macro-level research questions on crime and victimization are interdependent. Therefore, a combination of micro-level and macro-level data on victimization, crime targets, subnational areas (e.g. cities), and country characteristics is required to address these questions properly.

Using such a combined set of ICVS data and country data from the World Bank and the International Labour Organization, Van Wilsem et al. (2003) show that national levels of income inequality remain related to the individual risk of both violent and theft victimization, after controlling for various individual, neighborhood, city, and region characteristics with the use of a multilevel model.¹¹ Although the country sample in this research was limited to 18 countries – mainly Western and some East European – the observed contextual effect of inequality on victimization was, for the first time, simultaneously adjusted for compositional heterogeneity between countries. As such, hypotheses from strain theory were subjected to stronger tests than previous cross-national studies, which were based on country-level data due to the lack of alternatives. However, replications of the analyses across a larger sample of countries are needed to evaluate the external validity of these findings.

In this study, the reverse link between micro- and macro-outcomes was also demonstrated because cross-national differences for violent victimization were reduced notably after controlling for compositional heterogeneity (Van Wilsem et al., 2003). More specifically, the most relevant compositional factor was found to be the extent to which countries consisted of large-city residents, accounting for 10 to 15% of cross-national victimization differences. This finding supports the claim of compositional theories that cross-national variations in the distribution of lower level units (individuals, neighborhoods, cities) have consequences for macro-level crime outcomes.

Conclusions

Many cross-national analyses of crime have concentrated on homicide because of data restrictions associated with other crimes. Despite the fact that this is a fruitful line of research, which has offered much insight on differences in the volume, temporal development, and structural correlates of homicide, a great deal has remained unclear about cross-national variation in other crimes. For this reason, much is to be gained by furthering the analysis of international victimization survey data, as offered by the ICVS since 1989. Although this data source has limitations of its own, it also offers the possibility of giving estimates of nonhomicide crimes in a more reliable manner because it attenuates the two major problems of official crime data: varying rates of unreported crime (dark numbers) and different crime definitions. As a consequence of better data quality, multivariate analyses on ICVS data are also likely to yield more valid predictors of macro-level victimization rates as compared to Interpol and UN police registrations on nonhomicide crimes.

However, a serious current limitation to ICVS data is its availability for only a relatively small number of countries, mainly Western and several East European ones. Although ICVS data are also available for other countries, they are limited to the inhabitants of a major city and can therefore not be included in comparisons of national crime rates. Criminological hypotheses on cross-national crime differences have been tested across the current selection of countries participating in national samples of the ICVS (Van Wilsem, 2004), but in the future they should also be done on larger country samples, especially including more non-Western countries. This will offer insights into whether the crime-inducing factors for Western countries can be generalized to other countries as well. ICVS findings on Japan's victimization rates suggest that this may not be the case. Despite its high level of urbanization, which is a crime-inducing factor in Western countries, Japan has very low levels of crime (Van Wilsem, 2004).¹²

Furthermore, conducting more future ICVS waves for the current selection of participating countries enables researchers to identify temporal developments for non-homicide crimes. Such trend analyses have offered interesting results for homicide victimization, indicating that rapid increases of crime have been most prevalent in developing countries (LaFree & Drass, 2002). Despite shorter time series for a smaller (and more select) group of countries, ICVS analyses of sudden crime changes for non-homicide crimes are interesting to explore as well. Previous research by Lamon (2002) has shown that ICVS rates of property victimization and nonlethal violent victimization also follow varying trajectories of change and stability across countries. Moreover, it is interesting to compare these developments to national homicide changes in order to explore the generality of crime rate dynamics across offense types.

Methodological studies on the ICVS results are also needed. Especially if data are collected among developing countries, careful inspection is needed to evaluate (a) possible quality differences among national survey organizations (e.g., by continuing to explore the relation between response rates and victimization rates), and (b) the magnitude of interpretation and reporting differences for similar questions (e.g., on violent or sexual victimization). Furthermore, additional aspects of the survey should be reviewed for their effect on victimization-related survey answers and their potential consequences for national victimization estimates via compositional differences (Lynch, 2002). For example, if gender combinations of interviewer and respondent affect survey answers on victimization (e.g., victimization is reported more often when the interviewer is female) and these gender combinations vary across countries, they may have consequences for national victimization outcomes and should be taken into account.

On the micro-level, better measures of opportunity and social disorganization indicators offer another way to improve the prediction of victimization across countries. Direct indicators for the target's lifestyle and

attractiveness and community cohesion are scarce in ICVS data collection, and measures on these topics are even absent for some countries. Inclusion and expansion of lifestyle and social disorganization indicators for every participating country in the ICVS will help systematize findings on predictors of victimization and allow for the improved disentangling of contextual and compositional effects (Van Wilsem et al., 2003) across a larger sample of countries. Moreover, aggregation to the national level of individual survey answers from the ICVS on issues like out-of-home activities, community cohesion, and income dissatisfaction offers the opportunity to evaluate if these aggregated measures are related to often-used social and economic national indicators of criminal opportunity (e.g., female labor force participation), social disorganization (e.g., divorce rate), and strain (e.g., income inequality).

Finally, gaining knowledge on cross-national patterns of violent crime involves the analysis not only of national *volumes* of violence but also of the *nature* of violent incidents. The small amount of situational analyses on violent crime, especially in cross-national research (LaFree & Birkbeck, 1991), has left scholars with little knowledge on how violence is exercised across different contexts. However, an application of Black's (1976, 1983, 1993) theories of law, self-help, and partisanship to this matter would predict that violent crime in developing countries relatively more often involves multiple and unknown offenders as compared to violence in modern societies (Cooney, 2003). According to this line of reasoning, processes of individualization that accompany socioeconomic development increase social distance between citizens, which in turn decreases the chance that third parties will become involved in conflicts, as they are more often neutral to both sides involved. Thus, due to lower levels of partisanship, violent crimes are predicted to become less collective and more one-on-one. Furthermore, as development and individualization go together with decreased informal control and enhanced possibilities to set-

tle disputes by law, honor conflicts between strangers become less prominent, leaving residual violence to be of a more intimate nature. An interesting line of future research would therefore be to compare these characteristics of violent incidents across countries at different stages of social and economic development. Possibilities to do so exist by studying the context of violent victimizations that are reported by urban inhabitants in city samples of countries participating in the ICVS. This offers opportunities to explore and systemize the "neglected situation" (LaFree & Birkbeck, 1991) in cross-national crime research.

Notes

1. Additionally, Archer and Gartner's (1984) Comparative Crime Data File (CCDF) offers crime data for 110 countries and 44 cities, for the years between 1900 and 1970. However, these data have not been updated and are almost 30 years old. Furthermore, the CCDF does not use standardized definitions of homicide nor other types of crime, which reduces cross-national comparability.
2. The United States is one of the remaining industrialized countries with higher homicide rates, ranging between approximately 6 and 10 homicide victims per 100,000 population during this period.
3. As an exception, Japan was the only country that was characterized by a decline in homicide over this period. Roberts and LaFree (2004) relate this change to reductions in economic stress, declining youth populations, and the increasing certainty of punishment.
4. The United States and Canada were among the five modern countries that did experience crime booms.
5. In these cases, ordinary-least-squares regression models should be replaced by more appropriate methods (e.g., GLS or multilevel models), in order to adjust for dependency of errors in within-country time-series.
6. Including a variety of expenditures, such as on pensions, unemployment benefit, family allowance programs, and public health.
7. See Hannon and DeFronzo (1998) for a similar argument on the distribution of crime within a single country (i.e., the United States).

8. In addition, Bennett (1991) found a negative squared effect, which indicated that, at very high GDP levels, theft rates declined.
9. This relation was found after a dummy variable was introduced for Japan, because of its outlier position in the relation between urbanism and crime.
10. It may be hypothesized that individual risk factors, such as exposure of targets through nighttime outdoor activity, enhances victimization risk more strongly in countries with active and large offender populations. Interestingly however, no significant differences were found across countries in the effect sizes of various predictors of victimization (Van Wilsem, 2003). For example, nighttime outdoor activity exerts consistent positive effects on violent victimization outside the neighborhood and thus appears to be equally important across countries in explaining victimization risk. Possibly, significant interaction results between ecological characteristics and behavior are found more often if spatial units are homogeneous (Smith, Frazee, & Davison, 2000), which is often not the case with countries in which there often is large within-unit variation.
11. The multilevel model takes account of the layered character of the data by separately employing submodels for each level distinguished (e.g. country, subnational region, and individual). It adjusts for the correlation between the error components of the separate levels that results from the hierarchical data structure (Snijders & Bosker, 1999). Furthermore, it corrects for the fact that, at higher levels of aggregation, fewer observations are available.
12. Previous work by Komiya (1999) and Roberts and LaFree (2004) offers more insight on Japan's low crime rate.

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