

General Social Survey on Victimization
Questionnaire Annotation

Housing, Family and Social Statistics Division
Statistics Canada

OVERVIEW

BACKGROUND

The General Social Survey (GSS) provides policy makers and analysts with statistical information on the living conditions and well being of Canadians. The GSS has two principal objectives: first, to gather data on trends in Canadian society over time, and second, to provide information on specific policy issues of current or emerging interest. To meet these objectives, the GSS was established as a continuing program with a single survey cycle each year.

The GSS gathers a wide variety of data to meet different kinds of needs involving a broad spectrum of users. To achieve the objectives outlined above, the GSS has three components: Core, Focus and Classification.

Core content is directed primarily at monitoring long term social trends by measurement of temporal changes in living conditions and well-being. Main topics within Core content include education, social support, family, time use and criminal victimization. The Core content for the 1999 GSS, the thirteenth cycle, is criminal victimization.

Focus content is aimed at meeting the second objective of the GSS, namely, to provide information touching directly on a specific policy issue or social problem. In comparison to Core content, Focus content is more specific to immediate policy issues. For example, Focus content for the two previous cycles on victimization included victim's services (1988, sponsored by the Department of Justice) and drugs and alcohol (1993, sponsored by Health Canada). For the 1999 GSS on victimization, the Interdepartmental Working Group on Family Violence has sponsored modules on spousal violence and senior abuse and the department of the Solicitor General Canada has funded questions measuring public perception toward alternatives to imprisonment.

The final component of the GSS consists of classification which provides a means of delineating population groups and is used in the analysis of the core and focus data. Examples of classification variables are age, sex, education and income.

VICTIMIZATION SURVEY RATIONALE

This is the third cycle of the GSS that collects information on the nature and extent of criminal victimization in Canada. The two previous cycles included questions on non-intentional accidents. Since the National Health Population Survey collects information on accidents, these questions have been dropped from cycle 13.

One of the most important applications of the data is to measure the nature and extent of criminal victimization in order to complement the officially reported data for these incidents as derived from administrative sources, for example police recorded incidents.

Population surveys such as the GSS which focus on the characteristics of the victim, the incident and the perpetrator, provide an important complement to officially recorded crime rates as they measure both crime incidents that come to the attention of the police and those that are unreported. Through this survey information is also collected on its impact and consequences to the victim, the reasons why the victim reported or did not report the incident to the police, satisfaction with the police, as well as public perception of crime and the administration of justice. This survey, therefore, provides criminal justice planners, policy makers, legislators, community groups and researchers with reliable information on the nature and extent of criminal victimization in Canada to develop related policies, programs and services.

SURVEY CONTENT

This survey uses computer assisted telephone interviewing. Readers are advised to take notice of the *CATI edits* in the questionnaire for a fuller understanding of the flow of the questions.

The content of the questionnaire is outlined below. Items appearing on the questionnaire in bold type are read out to the respondents.

Control Form

This survey uses the Random Digit Dialing approach to selecting households. The Control Form gathers information about the household composition, including age, sex, and marital status of members. A respondent is randomly selected from among the eligible persons (people 15 years of age or older) in the household. The relationship of each household member to one another is determined and the main questionnaire is completed for the respondent. Proxy interviews are not accepted. Also included in this section is a series of telephone questions used for weighting that ask respondents about the number of telephones numbers in their home and how many are for business, computer or fax use only.

Section A: Perceptions, History and Risk

This section introduces respondents to the survey and the issues to follow. This section is designed to measure the extent to which people worry about their personal safety in everyday situations, the extent to which fear imposes limits on their opportunities and freedom of movement, and how they manage threats to their safety in their daily lives.

Specifically, in this section information is collected on a variety of issues dealing with perceptions of crime and the justice system, contact and satisfaction with various aspects of the criminal justice system, crime prevention measures, frequency of evening activities, and fear of crime. Through funding from the department of the Solicitor General Canada, a new set of questions on public perceptions toward alternatives to

imprisonment have been added. In addition, questions related to public perceptions of the prison and parole systems have been included to complement the questions dealing with public perceptions of the police and courts.

One open-ended question asks the respondent whether there is anything else they do to increase their personal safety that has not been mentioned. This question is the first opportunity for the respondents to speak in their own words and serves to build rapport with the interviewer.

Section B: Criminal Victimization Screening Section

This section collects information on the type and number of times the respondent has been a victim of crime over the past 12 months. Each time a crime is reported in this section a Crime Incident Report (Section V) is completed. Questions in this section are, for the most part, a repeat of the 1993 GSS questions. Again respondents are asked to include incidents committed by family and non-family. Due to the addition of the spousal violence and senior abuse questions (Sections C through K), respondents are asked to exclude physical and sexual assaults committed by current and previous spouses or common-law partners. In addition, respondents' 65 years of age and older are asked to exclude physical assaults by children and caregivers, and sexual assaults by caregivers.

Section C and E: Emotional and Financial Abuse by Current and Previous Spouse/ Partner

Questions related to controlling and emotionally abusive behaviour on the part of a marital partner have been taken from the 1993 Violence Against Women Survey. The intent of these questions is to test theories about links between spousal power and control and spousal violence. In addition, these measures help us better understand the dynamics of an abusive and violent relationship by providing context to reports of violence by spouses. There is substantial evidence to suggest that emotional abuse can be as devastating as actual physical assault. Two additional items have been added to the original scale used in the Violence Against Women Survey. These include threatening to harm, or harming, someone close and deliberately damaging or destroying property.

Sections D and F: Violence in Current and Previous Marriage/Common-law Relationships

Measures of violence by current or previous marital partners are obtained through a number of categories of violent acts ranging from threats of violence to threats or use of guns or other weapons, and sexual assault. The scale of items used is taken from the Violence Against Women Survey. Research suggests that questions itemizing violent incidents into discrete categories of behaviour are necessary in order to counteract denial and unwillingness to identify experiences as assault or violence.

The method in which the scale is applied, however, differs from the approach used in the Violence Against Women Survey, such that respondents are asked all of the items in the scale. In addition, while the first two items are always presented as the first two items in the scale, the remaining eight questions are randomized. In the Violence Against Women Survey respondents who did not disclose incidents of abuse skipped out of the sequence after every three items with the question “Has he ever been violent toward you in any other way?”

Emphasis in this section is on violence within the relationship and not on quantifying individual acts or events. Respondents are asked how many different occasions their spouse has been violent toward them. In the case of marriages less than 5 years, respondents are asked whether the violence occurred before they were married or living together, during the marriage or during a temporary separation. In the case of previous partners, respondents are asked whether the violence happened after separation, and if so, did it increase after separation. Respondents who report one or more acts of violence by a spouse or partner are asked to respond to questions in an Abuse Report (Sections L and M).

Section G and J: Emotional and Financial Abuse of Seniors by Children and Caregivers

Similar to the questions related to controlling and emotionally abusive behaviour on the part of a marital partner, these questions also build on the 1993 Violence Against Women Survey. Two questions are used to screen respondents 65 years of age and older into the section related to children, including whether they have ever had any children and how frequently they have had contact with their children. In addition, in this section the sex of the child who has been emotionally or financially abusive is determined. In the case of senior abuse by caregivers, one screening question is used concerning the use of paid or unpaid caregivers.

While items concerning sexual jealousy and demanding on knowing where they are at all times are not included in these sections, three additional items are added. These items are related to financial abuse. In the case of caregivers, respondents are not asked about limiting contacts with family or friends, nor are they asked about control over family finances.

Sections H and K: Violence Against Seniors by Children and Caregivers

These sections use the same approach and scale of questions that is used in the sections concerning spousal violence. The item on sexual violence, however, is not asked of respondents in the case of children. Respondents who report one or more acts of violence

by a child or caregiver are asked to respond to questions in an Abuse Report (Section N and P).

Section K ends with a question about lifetime experiences of victimization. This question is asked of all survey respondents. The intent of this question is to look at lifetime experiences of victimization and to offer respondents an opportunity to indicate incidents of crime that happened outside the 12 month and 5 year timeframe.

Section Q: Classification

Section Q provides background characteristics of respondents regardless of whether they have been a victim of crime. This section contains a variety of socio-demographic and health measures that contribute to the analysis of risk factors and other correlates of people's fear and victimization.

Most classification questions have evolved with each cycle of the GSS. For example, questions concerning mother and father's place of birth were not asked in Cycle 8, but are now asked in each GSS cycle. This cycle also includes questions related to mother and father's education. Questions about current spouse's use of alcohol, their education, and whether their current spouse has been out of work and looking for work are also included, as these are important for identifying correlates of spousal violence and high risk offenders.

Section V: Crime Incident Report

A Crime Incident Report is completed for every crime reported in Section B of the Victimization Questionnaire. The Crime Incident Report collects information on characteristics of victimization incidents (e.g. month, place), physical, financial and emotional consequences of victimization, offender characteristics (e.g. age, gender), whether medical attention was sought, and whether the police were contacted and their satisfaction with the police.

A large part of the 1999 Crime Incident Report is similar to the 1993 Crime Incident Report. However a few changes have been made. Inquiries as to whether the incident was related to the use of alcohol or drugs by the perpetrator or the victim are asked of all victims; no longer are victims of sexual assault excluded. Furthermore, all victims are asked about attempting to or obtaining civil or criminal compensation; no longer are victims of violent crimes excluded. In addition, while the question concerning the time of the incident has been dropped, some questions have been added. These include, two questions concerning hate crime; questions related to who the respondent may have spoken to about the incident or the services they may have contacted or used; two questions on the age and sex of the perpetrator(s); one question about victim/offender mediation; and, a question to assess how the respondent was affected by the incident.

Finally, categories of possible actions the police took have been expanded, and one item has been added to the list of reasons why a respondent may not have contacted the police.

Section L, M, N and P: Abuse Reports

The Abuse Reports collect detailed information about violence in current or previous marriages/common-law relationships, and violence against seniors by children or caregivers. Each report contains questions about: the impact of the experience for the victim (physical injury and emotional trauma); whether anyone else was threatened or harmed in the incident(s); use of criminal compensation; who they turned to for help; involvement and satisfaction with the police; actions taken by the police; reasons for contacting or not contacting the police; and, interest in participating in victim/offender mediation programs.

In the spousal violence Abuse Report respondents are also asked about the impact that police intervention has had on their partner's behaviour; if they ever feared that their life was in danger; and, whether their children ever witnessed the violence.

An open-ended question allowing victims of spousal violence or senior abuse to speak in their own words includes asking if there is any advice they would give another person in a similar situation.

Closing

The survey ends by the interviewer thanking the respondent for their participation; emphasizing that it is only from hearing from Canadians themselves that we can understand the nature and extent of victimization.