

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

Victim surveys are by no means a perfect tool for understanding crime. As the discussions throughout this monograph have shown, the surveys do not make provision for recording certain types of crime (such as child abuse), and often fail to record the true extent of others (such as sexual offences or less serious assaults). Like police crime statistics, the data generated by victim surveys have their limitations. Nevertheless, no analysis of crime trends can be considered thorough without consideration of both sets of information.

The police's crime database is the only source that provides a picture of crime, collected in a systematic way over an extended period of time, thus allowing for trend analysis. It also provides information on the country as a whole, which allows for discussions of the national crime situation, and crucially, comparisons with crime trends in cities and towns. It is only by comparing localised trends over time, that crime and its causes can truly be explained.

However the main drawback of the police statistics is that so few victims report their experiences to the authorities. The survey results show that less than half of all crime committed in South Africa is reported to the police. This means that the official police statistics do not reflect the true crime picture, and should not be used exclusively in any decision-making or evaluative process.

Victim surveys provide an ideal supplement to the police statistics—their greatest strength lies in the very area where the official data are weakest. By drawing on a representative sample of the population and systematically covering a range of crime types, the surveys provide data across a specified geographic area that fills the gap in the official database left by victims who do not report crime to the police.

The crime statistics provided by the police and by victim surveys are clearly complementary. Both sets of data are essential for understanding crime and tracking trends over time. It is for this reason that governments like that in the

United Kingdom, for example, now conduct annual national victim surveys to supplement their police crime data. It is an exercise that has worked in the police's favour. In the UK, the surveys have shown that some increases in crime levels as recorded by the police are, according to the national survey, nothing more than an increase in the tendency of victims to report. In South Africa, the results of the 2003 National Victims of Crime survey support the South African Police Service's claims that crime has stabilised since 1998.

National victim surveys are therefore a tool that the police, and other departments responsible for justice and crime prevention, ought to rely on in the formulation and monitoring of their policies and programmes. For this to occur however, it is essential that the surveys are conducted regularly (every two years would be ideal), and that each survey is directly comparable to the last. Although the 1998 and 2003 Victims of Crime surveys were conducted by different organisations, the ISS made every effort to ensure that the 2003 study was comparable with the 1998 one. To ensure that future surveys can be compared with these two, the process needs to be institutionalised to some degree.

While the surveys need not be conducted by government, a department responsible for criminal justice does need to be a key partner in the project, not only to facilitate the use of the results in government, but also to secure funding. National victim surveys are an expensive undertaking and both the 1998 and 2003 studies were restricted in their scope by the limited funds available. Ideally a national victim survey should have a large enough sample that allows for much more detailed analyses of individual crime types as well as provincial crime trends, than was possible in the 2003 survey. Both the 1998 and 2003 studies were conducted using donor funds. While this arrangement currently works well, it is by no means secure. Considering that the true benefits of victim surveys can only be realised if they are repeated at regular intervals, a guaranteed long-term source of funding is important. Again, government need not be responsible for the entire budget. A good approach would be a partnership that requires matching funding to be provided by non-state sources.

Apart from offering a budget that would allow for a more detailed survey, this approach would also help to ensure the credibility of the results. This is an important consideration given the doubts that were cast over the reliability of the police crime statistics since the moratorium on their public release, and the handling of subsequent debates by government. State support for regular

victim surveys to supplement police statistics would not only ensure the delivery of a useful product—it would boost public confidence in government's commitment to dealing with the crime problem.