

CRIME VICTIMS AMONG POPULATION AND BUSINESSMEN IN BULGARIA

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1. In 2000 Bulgaria conducted a survey of crime victims among the population and business people on the initiative of the Turin-based UN Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), using its methods (the ICVS 2000 and ICBS 2000 questionnaires, face-to-face interviews). The survey was carried out in Sofia. Overall, 1,505 people were willing to participate out of a sample of 1,700, and 532 business people out of a sample of 550. Data collection and processing was assigned to Vitosha Research, a joint contractor of Gallup Hungary. Dr Boyan Stankov was national coordinator of the survey.

UNICRI's initiative answered a public need to continue the research process after the ICVS '97 and study a specific area, namely, victimisation in the economy. It can be concluded that empirical surveys of crime victims are the most reliable means of revealing the crime and victimisation situation. As the crime rate soared in 1997 in the extreme political and social conditions existing at the time, the opportunities for statistical study of the phenomenon decreased. The recorded crime figures for 1998 and 1999 lead one to believe that crime dropped by more than 60 per cent in a couple of years. In fact, there has been no regular study of crime victims since 1997. The analysis of the actual processes does not corroborate this conclusion. Experts warn of a possible distortion of the picture of crime.

2. Victimisation by conventional offences has dropped from the period 1993-97. This was normal and expected in view of the extremely high level of crime in 1997. The drop by about 5.4 per cent is due to the political and financial stabilisation resulting from the introduction of a currency board on July 1, 1997. The process has been impeded by the increasingly victimogenic role of poverty.

3. The complexity of victimisation is evident from the cyclical manifestation of the wave of property crime: thefts from homes (burglaries and attempted burglaries) have decreased, while thefts in the streets have increased.

4. The dark figure for conventional offences remains high. There are signs of a drop in hidden crime due to reporting to the police, but valid conclusions can be drawn after control surveys are conducted. The percentage of those who don't know or refuse to answer has more than doubled, which suggests that there may be links between the victims and non-governmental agencies - a phenomenon to which the public attitude is negative.

5. The level of profiteering and corruption is alarmingly high. The situation changed dramatically as corruption spread among doctors. This is a sign of the crisis in society and stems from the ineffective reform of health care.

6. Fear of crime has not decreased. On the contrary, it is a powerful factor undermining social solidarity.

7. Confidence in the police has dropped sharply since the ICVS '97. There is a wide gap between public statements of approval of the police by governmental bodies and public

opinion. People affected by victimisation do not report the offences committed against them because they are convinced of the ineffectiveness of the police.

8. The ICBS 2000 for the first time identified empirically the factors which are obstacles to business. Undoubtedly, crime and corruption pose a real threat to the economy in general and smaller businesses in particular. Another group of factors have to do with the regulation of economic relations in an environment which does not answer the description of a free market.

9. Strong-arm methods - extortion, threats and racketeering - are employed in business to impose restrictions on business people. Although they are not reflected in statistics, they have become part of the "normal" way of doing business in a disorganised society.

10. Usually, it is not company policy to seek assistance from the police, either because it is involved sometimes, or because of expectations for an ineffective response.

11. Bulgaria still lacks a concept of a modern anti-victimogenic strategy. The National Strategy for the Combating of Crime adopted by the Council of Ministers in 1998 should be updated in line with the requirement to prevent victimisation and protect crime victims.

12. The ICVS '97 evoked a broad response from the Bulgarian public. There are grounds to believe that the findings of the ICVS '00 and ICBS '00 will help improve the strategies for curbing of victimisation and more effective protection of crime victims.