

# THE OFFENDING, CRIME AND JUSTICE SURVEY (OCJS)

CONDUCTED BY THE NATIONAL CENTRE  
FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH AND THE BRITISH  
MARKET RESEARCH BUREAU (BMRB), 2005

**CONTEXT** How much crime is there and who commits it? Official police statistics can only tell part of the story because they only include crimes that have been reported to, and recorded by, the police.

This leaves a 'dark figure' of unknown crimes which the police have not recorded. The alternatives to official police and court statistics include victimisation and self-report studies. The validity of self-report studies is always questionable: asking someone what crimes they have committed has been seen as unlikely to produce truthful responses. Self-report studies have often been used with those who have little choice about participation, for example prisoners or children in school.

In terms of their findings, self-report studies have tended to show that the gap between male and female offenders is narrower than official statistics indicate. However, it is uncertain whether such research can produce a more accurate picture of offending than official police figures. The Offending, Crime and Justice Survey (OCJS) revives self-report studies, using new technologies to try to improve validity.

Statistics show that most offences are committed by young people. The OCJS used a sample across the

age range 10 to 65 to determine how much crime was committed by respondents of different ages, but focused closely on young people.

## FIND OUT MORE

[www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/offending\\_survey.html](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/offending_survey.html)

The National Centre for Social Research ([www.natcen.ac.uk](http://www.natcen.ac.uk))

British Market Research Bureau ([www.bmrb.co.uk](http://www.bmrb.co.uk))

# METHODS

This national longitudinal survey was first carried out in 2003 with follow up surveys in each of the next three years. The study involved a panel of 5,000 young people and covered some of the same ground as the British Crime Survey (see pp96-97), asking about victimisation, but it also aimed to find out what crimes had been committed.

The 2003 survey used a sample of 10,079 people aged 10 to 65 living in private households in England and Wales. The number of young people (aged 10 to 25) was boosted to just under half the sample and there was also a booster sample for minority ethnic groups. This was to ensure that there were sufficient young people and people from minorities in the sample to enable conclusions to be drawn. The response rate was 74%.

The survey used three kinds of computer-assisted interviewing:

**Computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI):** the interviewer reads the questions from a laptop and enters the respondents' answers. This was used to obtain information about the respondent, their household and neighbourhood, their attitudes towards the criminal justice system and any experiences of victimisation.

**Computer-assisted self interviewing (CASI):** the respondent reads the questions themselves from a laptop and enters their own answers without assistance from the interviewer. This was used for questions about

crimes and anti-social acts committed by respondents such as drug and alcohol use and for those concerning contact with the criminal justice system.

**Audio computer assisted self-interviewing (A-CASI):** like CASI, but the respondent can listen to the questions on headphones. This allows respondents with reading difficulties to take part without interviewer involvement. This survey is thought to be the first use of A-CASI in a large-scale European survey.

Self-report studies are often assumed to provide data lacking in validity because respondents may conceal the extent of their deviant actions. They may not trust the interviewer and the stated purpose of the survey, believing that the admission of crime will lead to arrest or other punishment. The feasibility study for this research found that the use of CASI and A-CASI made it more likely that valid responses could be obtained. 97% of respondents in the feasibility study said they had answered honestly. This was because they felt more confident about confidentiality. The feasibility survey also revealed that many respondents had literacy difficulties but did not admit to these; A-CASI was therefore used for the most sensitive sections because it could be used with ease by all respondents. Questions had to be very carefully designed to ensure they could be understood by respondents as young as ten.

# KEY FINDINGS

About 10% of the general population had offended in the last year. The most common types of offence were assault (5%) and non-vehicle related thefts (5%). Robbery and burglary were very rare. Males were almost twice as likely as females to have committed an offence in the last year (13% to 7%) but there was no significant difference in the types of offences committed.

25% of offenders (about 2% of the whole sample) were frequent offenders who had offended six or more times in the last year. 40% of offenders had committed a serious offence, the most common being assault with injury. Frequent offenders accounted for 82% of crime. 38% of frequent and serious offenders had been arrested.

The findings about age confirm the patterns found in official statistics. The peak ages for offending are the teenage years: around 40% of 14-17 year old males had committed an offence in the last year. This was also the peak age for female offending although only around 20% of girls of this age had committed an offence.

The factors associated with offending and anti-social behaviour among 10 to 25 year olds were as follows: having delinquent friends, being male, being a victim of violence, using drugs in the last year and possessing certain personality traits. In addition poor parenting quality was a factor for 10 to 16 year olds, and being frequently drunk for 15 to 17 year olds.

The OCJS also covers victimisation, focusing on personal crimes such as theft from the person, robbery, other theft of personal property and assault. It gathered data for children, unlike the British Crime Survey which uses a sample of adults only. The OCJS found that overall levels of victimisation were similar for children (aged 10 to 15) as for young adults (16 to 23), and that these were far higher than for older adults. 35% of children had been victims of a crime, 32% of young adults and 14% of older adults. The factors associated with victimisation among children included: being male, using drugs, drinking, having delinquent friends, living in areas with high levels of disorder, experiencing poor parenting and being in trouble at school or truanting.

The survey found clear links between victimisation and offending. Many offenders were also victims of personal crime. 35% of children had been a victim of crime but 56% of those who had offended were also victims.

# EVALUATION

Self-report studies are by their nature questionable: there are strong reasons why respondents might conceal the nature and extent of their offences. This project goes some way towards dealing with these problems, with A-CASI providing some assurance about confidentiality and anonymity. However, it remains likely that not all responses were truthful; we have only the word of respondents that they were telling the truth. The research is able to identify the factors associated with victimisation and offending, but cannot show the nature of this relationship. What is more, children under 10 remain excluded from this study and from most other research on crime.

# LINKS TO KEY DEBATES

This research contributes some answers to questions about the extent of crime, those responsible for crime and their victims. It confirms that most offences are committed by teenage boys and young men. Perhaps its most valuable finding is the confirmation that many offenders are also victims. It also gives some information about how likely children are to be victims of crime, an area not covered by much official data.