

Crime and safety in the Pacific Islands: the use of victimisation surveys

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Port Vila vegetable market, Vanuatu
Photo Credit: *Rob Maccoll/DFAT*

While much of the recent focus in the Pacific region has been on the security implications of growing geopolitical competition, less attention has been paid to crime and personal safety and how these more parochial, everyday issues impact on the stability of Pacific Island countries and the wellbeing of their populations.

Crime victimisation surveys are an important research tool for ascertaining perceptions of personal and community safety, including experiences of crime and violence. Although such surveys have been previously used as part of a coordinated international effort, their usage has dwindled over the past decade to a few countries, where the results act as a resource for policymakers, government officials and community leaders seeking to enhance stability and safety in particular countries or areas.

Given that human security is inextricably tied to fear and risk of crime victimisation, it is timely to consider supporting more widespread adoption of such surveys and demonstrating how useful they can be.

In 2022, we were involved in a [policing and justice study in Vanuatu](#) that included a telephone survey of 1,016 adults. This experience provided an opportunity to reflect on what we had learnt and whether there should be a more standardised tool that would be suited to widespread and regular use in the region.

Crime victimisation surveys date back to the 1970s, when they were first undertaken in high-income countries like the United States and Australia. The surveys asked a representative sample of adults about whether they had experienced crime, what type of crime, and the harms that were caused. Such surveys were seen as an important way to find out about what was called the 'dark figure' of crime – that which was not captured by official records kept by police and courts. They also provided insights into the impacts of crime.

Over time, many countries have participated in the [International Crime Victimization Survey](#) (ICVS), including low-income countries. The ICVS allows for comparisons between countries and cities, as well as informing national assessments and debates about levels of crime and responses to it. (The last ICVS survey appears to have been in 2021 in Uzbekistan.)

In the Pacific region, surveys on crime and safety are currently conducted at a national level in [Australia](#) and [New Zealand](#) and released publicly. In contrast, surveys in Pacific Island countries are typically commissioned by the aid sector to assess and plan law and justice, and policing, programs. In Papua New Guinea, for example, surveys were done for the Australian-funded law and justice program in 2015, 2018 and 2022. Although providing useful snapshots for particular times, the survey data and results have usually not been publicly released, and analysing broader trends and patterns is complicated by differences in the questionnaire and sampling frames used in the different surveys.

There would be advantages to looking at core elements to track changes over time, but such analysis is impeded by two critical factors. First, the widespread practice of outsourcing survey work to private contractors means that the data sets produced appear to remain the intellectual property of the company rather than the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade or the PNG law and justice sector. Second, it is not at all clear who can make the decision to release the data publicly, nor does there appear to be much appetite to do so among those involved.

Our experience in Vanuatu took an alternate approach with an altogether more satisfactory outcome. The questionnaire design drew on examples of past surveys in Vanuatu and neighbouring countries, including PNG. The survey was done in collaboration with the Australian and ni-Vanuatu stakeholders, and conducted by a phone company, which reduced the cost. The [results have now been released publicly](#), and another survey is planned for the end of the program cycle, to see what has changed and can be attributed to the efforts of the program.

The Vanuatu policing and justice study underlined the importance of undertaking qualitative research to complement the survey. The focus groups improved our understanding of the perceptions and experiences of specific groups in the community, such as young people and people living with disabilities, and more generally, informed the interpretation of the survey results. It was also critically important to be able to draw upon past in-depth research to help design the questionnaire and to improve our interpretation of the findings. Designing a questionnaire relevant to the local context, while also containing elements enabling comparison with past or other country surveys, is a careful balancing act.

The results from the survey were of interest to domestic stakeholders such as the justice and policing services, and the non-government services that support and advocate for victims of crime, in addition to the Australian aid program and other donors. In terms of the general public and local communities, it would be reassuring that the survey confirmed that, for the most part, Vanuatu is viewed as a low-crime and safe country. The study did however reveal anxieties about the future, and limited accessibility, exposure and knowledge of the formal justice sector in many areas.

We believe there is merit in promoting wide use of crime victimisation surveys across the region, using core questions that allow longitudinal and inter-country analysis, and a commitment to make the results and the data publicly available. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime has produced a [manual to assist in the development and deployment of crime victimisation surveys](#). As a starting point, the manual could assist in developing the objectives and core questions of a survey.

In Pacific Island countries with small populations there is an understandable weariness among those asked to participate in multiple surveys. Where large-scale surveys are already taking place – for example, household surveys – it makes sense to incorporate questions about safety and justice rather than burden potential participants with separate surveys. This would reduce the costs and ensure crime, justice and safety have the attention they deserve.

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