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The Prevention Monitor

Results of an Austria-wide survey on fear of crime and experiences of crime victims

The population's subjective sense of safety and fears of crime have become an increasingly hot topic in scientific circles and the wider public in recent years. Periodic surveys with consistent methodology had previously only been carried out in Austria. The Austrian Road Safety Board in conjunction with the Zurich University of Applied Sciences developed the "Prevention Monitor", a representative survey repeated at regular intervals. The first wave of the survey was carried out in 2011. In international comparison, Austria is in the lower midrange in terms of fear of crime. Around a quarter of those surveyed reported feeling "very" or "a bit" unsafe when out alone in their neighbourhood after dark. Avoidance behaviour in given situations, such as avoiding certain areas or avoiding public transport because of fear of crime, was chiefly observed among women. Despite an actual improvement in the crime statistics of crimes reported, Austrians tend to take a pessimistic view of crime trends, which indicates the need for further research into media influence. Victims of common offences (attempted or successful burglary, fraud, physical attacks) are most frequently young men living in urban areas.

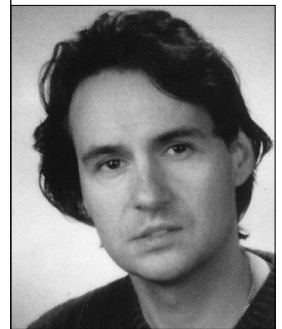
INTRODUCTION

Analysis and observation of crime trends is of great importance for the work of the police and the related statistics are also a regular subject of public discussion. The population's subjective sense of security and fears of crime have become an increasingly hot topic in scientific circles, the wider public and the political sphere in recent years. Fear of crime has a far greater significance than actually experiencing crime in terms of day-to-day life and the contentment of the population. Measures such as visibility of police on the streets are aimed at reducing the fear of crime rather than crime itself (cf. Reuband 2009).

Changes to the public's subjective sense of safety and fears of crime can also be

related to current and future social, economic and political developments. Attention was drawn to the crime policy significance of the public's sense of safety by Kerner (Kerner 1986, 155). Fear of crime can lead to certain groups of people adopting avoidance behaviour (avoidance of certain areas etc.), which means a reduction in their quality of life. A loss of confidence in the state and the police can also lead to unwillingness on the part of the public to cooperate with the police in clearing up or preventing crimes. In extreme cases, vigilante groups spring up because the public no longer trusts the state (Schwind et al. 2001, 217).

In light of such developments, the Austrian Road Safety Board decided to address the



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topic of subjective (un)safety by conceiving the Prevention Monitor.¹ This study is designed as a cross-sectional survey of the Austrian population to be repeated every two years. The aim of the Prevention Monitor is not only to establish a reliable database for the observation of long-term trends, but also to use these data for the development of prevention projects.

Since the Austrian Road Safety Board deals comprehensively with questions related to safety, questions concerning other risk areas that it addresses (transport, home, leisure and sport) were included in the Prevention Monitor in addition to questions about subjective safety in terms of crime. The present paper only deals with the crime-related findings.

METHOD

The list of questions for the Prevention Monitor was compiled by the Austrian Road Safety Board in conjunction with the Criminological Institute of the Zurich University of Applied Sciences (Manzoni/Schwarzenegger 2011). It is based on well-established question topics used in international surveys. The aim was to ensure the greatest possible degree of comparability in the European context. The questionnaire contains scientifically sound indicators of attitudes to safety in the fields of crime, transport, home and leisure.

The study was designed as a telephone survey with an interview duration of around 20 minutes. The random sample, pre-divided by region and size of town, comprised 1,000 people and is representative of the Austrian population aged over 18. The field work took place from 5 to 31 May 2011 and was performed by the Vienna-based opinion research institute Triconsult. In addition to questions of general perception of safety problems in Austria, transport safety and risks in the fields of home, leisure and sport, a large

part of the survey addressed the topic of crime and crime prevention. The results presented below concern the fear of crime, the subjective risk of becoming a victim, avoidance behaviour, the public's assessment of crime trends, avoidance behaviour and the public's own experiences of being victims of crime in the last five years. Further sections of the Prevention Monitor not presented here concern satisfaction with the work of the Austrian police.

The following results are also broken down by significant background variables of the respondents such as age, gender, level of education and number of residents of the town where they live.

RESULTS ON FEAR OF CRIME

Fear of crime is often defined in professional literature as a three-dimensional attitude construct (cf. Lüdemann 2006): the sense of safety as an affective component, the likelihood of becoming a victim as a cognitive component and avoidance behaviour as a conative, behaviour-related component. The three dimensions are related, but should be understood as independent constructs. All three dimensions were taken into account in the Prevention Monitor in order to map as many facets of the "fear of crime" as possible.

The dimension of the sense of safety was addressed using several questions, beginning with what is known as the "standard question": "How safe do you feel walking alone in your neighbourhood after dark?" This question (which is formulated slightly differently in German) is a standard indicator that has been used in numerous studies on fear of crime to date. One criticism of the question is that it records not only the actual fear of crime, but also diffuse fears of the respondents that are projected onto the field of crime such as rubbish lying around, graffiti and signs of drug consumption (cf. Kury et al. 2005).

Despite such reservations, the standard indicator is indispensable for comparisons with other studies (Manzoni/Schwarzenegger 2011, 19)

26 % of Austrians report feeling either “very unsafe” (10 %) or “a bit unsafe” (16 %) when walking in their neighbourhood after dark. Women and older people aged above 65 have above-average feelings of being unsafe (38 % feel “very unsafe” or “a bit unsafe” in each case), as do residents of cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants (34 %) and people who have been victims of crime in the past five years (31 %) (cf. Figure 1).

These findings can be compared with a Europe-wide study performed in 2005, the EU ICS (European Survey on Crime and Safety), a European study on the level of crime in the EU based on the methodology of the ICVS (International Crime Victims Survey) of the UN. The proportion of those reporting feeling “very unsafe” or “a bit unsafe” (26 %) in the 2011 survey is 7 % higher than in the EU ICS, where 19 % of the Austrians reported such feelings.

In international comparison, which is not possible using a more recent study than the EU ICS from 2005, Austria is in the low midrange. The fear of crime was highest in Bulgaria (53 %) and lowest in the North European countries, led by Iceland (where 6 % feel at least a bit unsafe) (cf. van Dijk et al. 2007). Bulgaria is below the European average in terms of its actual crime rate (according to crime recorded by the police) (van Dijk et al. 2007, 44), which shows that the subjective fear of crime does not necessarily reflect the objective crime rate (cf. Figure 2, page 66).

In connection with the findings, the fear-of-crime paradox should be mentioned, which says that the sense of safety perceived by groups of the population only partly depends on their risk of becoming victims of crime. Women and older people,

Source: Austrian Road Safety Board, Prevention Monitor 2011

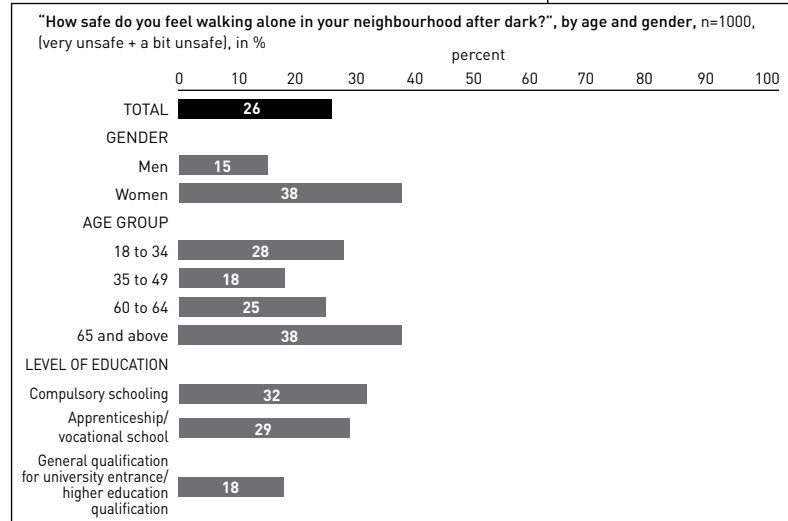


Figure 1: Standard indicator for fear of crime

for example, who in reality are at lower risk of becoming victims of crime, are more likely to feel unsafe.² This is usually explained in literature on the subject by the greater perception of vulnerability of these groups of people (cf. Gerber et al. 2010 and Killias/Clerici 2000).

The reason for the rise in fear of crime regardless of the objective crime risk is the influence on the sense of safety of other factors such as the rise in social insecurity or general social uncertainty. For example, a higher unemployment rate and a rise in precarious employment relations can lead to the crime situation being perceived as posing a greater risk. Media reporting on phenomena like crime, which receives prominent coverage in the daily news and therefore reflects the social reality in a distorted way, could be an influencing factor. There is debate, however, about the role played by the media in the emergence of the fear of crime (cf. Wiebke 2012).

A number of further questions concerning the affective components of the fear of crime were also asked in addition to the “standard question”. These concerned the fear of burglary, car theft, vandalism, violent attacks and fraud (Internet, credit card fraud).

Source: EU ICS 2005

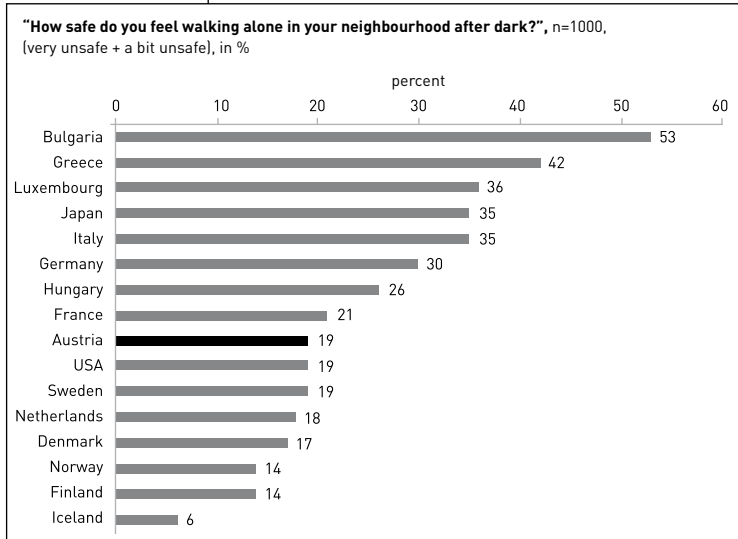


Figure 2: Fear of crime in international comparison

Fears concerning thefts were particularly marked. 41 % feel at least slightly unsafe with regard to their property (general theft), and 34 % of car owners and 32 % of all those surveyed have such feelings with regard to their car (car burglary) and their flat (burglary), respectively, if they are left unattended. The feeling of being unsafe with regard to fraud offences is considerably less marked: 31 % of those surveyed fear becoming the victims of crime when using the Internet and 26 % feel very/a bit

Source: Austrian Road Safety Board, Prevention Monitor 2011

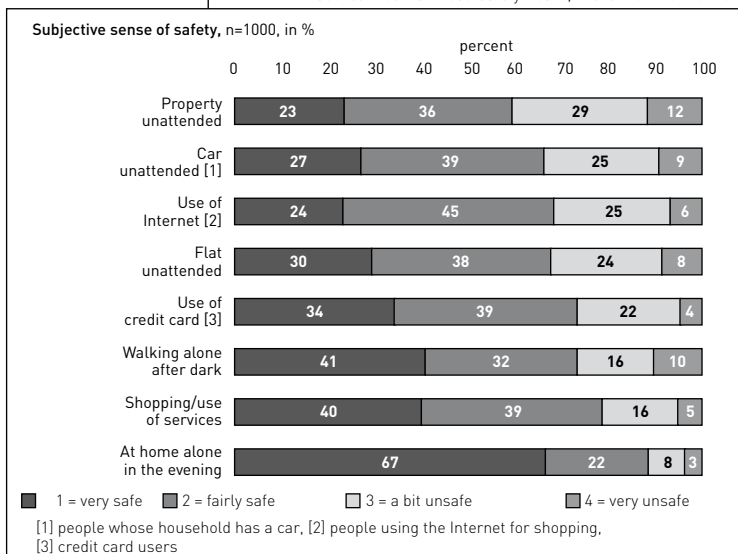


Figure 3: Subjective sense of safety

unsafe when using a credit card. 21 % feel unsafe when it comes to shopping or using services. In terms of potential physical attacks, a certain proportion of respondents reported feeling unsafe when outside the home (“walking alone after dark”: 26 %), but the feeling of being unsafe at home was considerably less pronounced (“at home alone in the evening”: 11 %) (cf. Figure 3).

Comparison between subgroups shows that women in particular are afraid of violent attacks and threats, as are older people. Young people, by contrast, are more likely to feel unsafe with regard to the loss of their valuables. In terms of level of education, it can be observed that people who have only completed mandatory schooling are considerably more likely to feel unsafe than those who have obtained the general qualification for university entrance or gained a higher education qualification, especially in terms of fear of physical attacks. Finally, it can also be seen that those living in urban areas feel particularly unsafe when walking outside after dark.

The subjective risk of becoming a victim was surveyed as a cognitive component of the fear of crime. That refers to the personal assessment or rational consideration of the likelihood of becoming a victim of various crimes in the future.

The results on the subjectively perceived risk of becoming a victim show that Austrians believe they are most likely to be affected by cybercrime, theft or car burglary (around a third of those surveyed in each case). Around every one in four people believes that they could become the victim of harassment, burglary or vandalism, but over 80 % do not believe that they are likely to become the victim of a robbery or a violent or sexual attack (cf. Figure 4, page 67).

Subjective risk assessment (of becoming victim of a crime) does not necessarily coincide with the relevant sense of safety:

it can be observed that as the degree of physical threat increases, the subjective risk of becoming a victim is disproportionately smaller than the subjective lack of safety (cf. also Table 1, page 68). 32 % of those surveyed reported feeling (subjectively) very or a bit unsafe concerning the possibility of becoming a victim of mugging. The perceived risk of becoming a victim (“I consider it very/fairly likely that I will become a victim”), however, is just 18 %. Broken down by gender, it can be observed that women tend to fear violence more, while men tend to fear theft more.

AVOIDACE BEHAVIOUR

Avoidance behaviour means changes in behaviour based on fear of crime. These are forms of behaviour adopted to ward off crime or protect oneself against it. That includes avoiding certain streets or neighbourhoods, taking a taxi instead of public transport, carrying a pepper spray or weapon, as well as security measures at home, such as having an alarm system fitted. Avoidance behaviour was included in the Prevention Monitor to show the extent to which the public limits its freedom of movement because of fear of crime, meaning that it accepts a reduction in quality of life.

Avoidance behaviour was seen to consist mainly of passive strategies: avoidance of certain groups of people (72 %), avoidance of certain places (57 %), avoidance of public transport (18 %), purchase of an alarm system for the car (18 %), and not allowing children out on their own in the evenings (67 %). Participation in self-defence courses was the most frequent form of pro-active measure (22 %). 13 % of the population and as many as 16 % of women carry a device with which they can defend themselves when they go out, such as a knife, stick, tear gas or pepper spray (cf. Figure 5, page 68).

12 % of men and 22 % of women avoid using public transport in the evenings. With regard to age, contrary to expectations, no difference was observed in terms of avoiding public transport. Younger people also seek to avoid using public transport in the evenings.

A gender-specific difference can be observed in all surveyed forms of avoidance behavior (except in planning to move to another area). Women more frequently adopt avoidance behaviour, not only when it comes to the use of public transport in the evenings, but also in terms of avoiding certain groups of people, streets and squares, as well as with regard to leaving their home in the evening.

Groups of certain people (such as groups of youths or homeless people) awaken fear in large sections of the population. Avoidance behaviour in that regard is very marked. 72 % of the respondents reported that they avoid certain groups of people in public, and 77 % of women reported doing so.

There is a very pronounced gender difference when it comes to avoiding certain streets or squares, and such avoidance is

Source: Austrian Road Safety Board, Prevention Monitor 2011

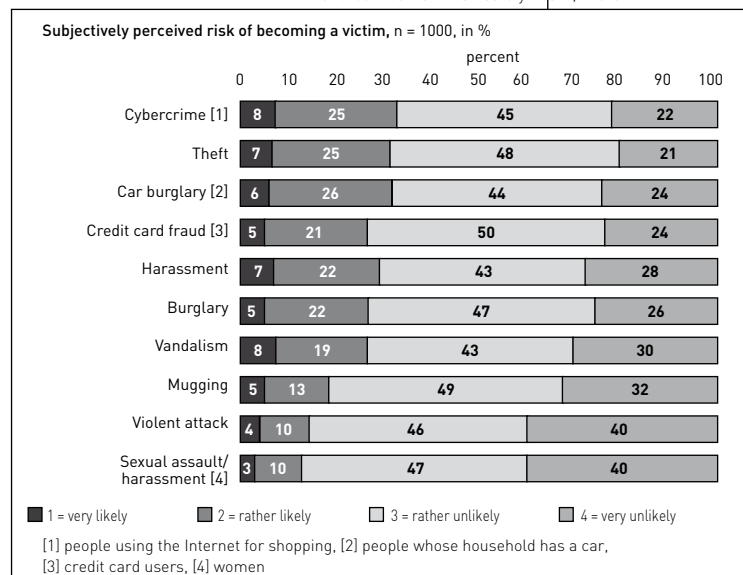


Figure 4: Subjectively perceived risk of becoming a victim

Source: Austrian Road Safety Board, Prevention Monitor 2011

Subjective sense of safety versus subjectively perceived risk of becoming a victim, n=1000, in %		
	Subjective sense of safety	Subjectively perceived risk of becoming a victim
	Feel (very) unsafe	Think it (very) likely that they will become a victim
Credit card fraud	26 %	26 %
Harassment	29 %	29 %
Mugging	32 %	18 %
Sexual assault*	31 %	13 %
*only women		

Table 1: Subjective sense of safety versus subjectively perceived risk of becoming a victim

very marked overall. 57 % of all those surveyed reported avoiding certain streets or squares. Among women the figure was as high as 65 %, i.e. almost two-thirds of women reported doing so. No significant difference can be observed with regard to age. Staying at home in the evening is a form of avoidance behaviour that around 15 % respondents reported adopting. That is a problematic finding, since freedom is strongly limited if one does not dare leave the house in the evening because of fear of crime. Again, there is a marked difference between the sexes here: 10 % of men and 18 % of women reported no longer going out in the evening in order to protect themselves from crime. In terms of age, all groups are equally affected. Nor does such behaviour depend on the size of the town.

Source: Austrian Road Safety Board, Prevention Monitor 2011

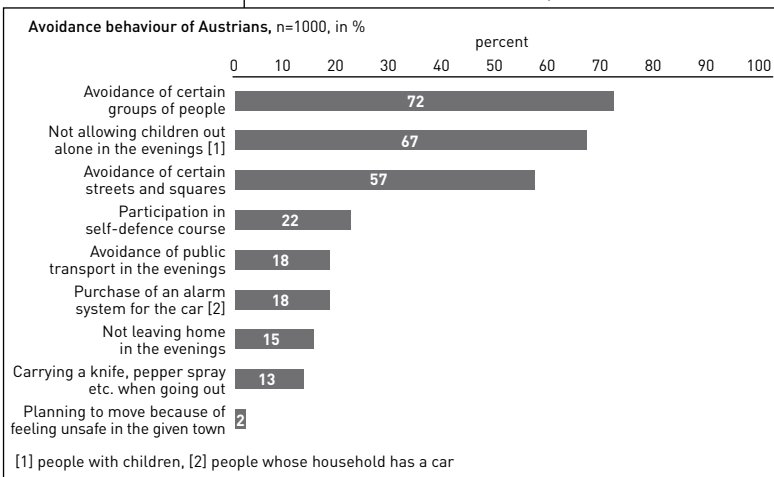


Figure 5: Avoidance behaviour of Austrians

Residents of smaller towns or villages are just as affected as those living in cities, which implies it is diffuse fears that tend to lead to such avoidance behaviour, rather than specific experiences of crime.

ASSESSMENT OF CRIME TRENDS

A further focus of the survey was the public’s assessment of crime trends. Assessment of past crime trends and prediction of likely future crime trends both at the local level and country level were surveyed.³

Subjective assessments of crime trends at the local level are highly likely to be influenced by coverage in the local media as well the experiences of crime of the respondents and experiences in their circle of acquaintances that have been conveyed to them, while assessments concerning the national level are largely based on media reports since there is far less possibility for such assessments to be based on the personal experiences of the respondents or on experiences conveyed to them (cf. Manzoni/Schwarzenegger 2011).

The question concerning likely future crime trends represents a projection that can be marked by predominantly negative media reports and also by the fears of those surveyed. The prospective assessment also contains an emotional component, which renders this assessment closer to a recording of the sense of safety than a more rational assessment.

Although the crime rate fell slightly in the last five years according to the crime statistics (cf. Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior 2006 to 2011), the results of the Prevention Monitor paint a different picture in terms of public perception. Almost half of Austrians (44 %) believe that crime has increased in their local area/town in the last five years (as opposed to only 9 % believing that it has decreased).

With regard to Austria as a whole, almost two-thirds (65 %) have this impression, which is contrary to the crime statistics (cf. Figure 6). That is in line with findings to date from international studies showing that the extent of the problem of crime is judged as being greater on the national level than on the local level (cf. Schwarzenegger 1992, 185).

Crime trends on the local level were experienced particularly negatively in cities with over 50,000 residents (56 %) and in Vienna (59 %). People who were a victim of crime in the past five years (burglary, attempted burglary, attack/violent threat or fraud) likewise take a significantly more pessimistic view of past crime trends in their own local area (57 %).

On a national level, crime trends in the past five years are judged particularly negatively by women and residents of villages with up to 2,000 inhabitants (69 % in each case) and by those who were victims of crime in the past five years (73 %).

Assessments of future crime trends are also pessimistic. While 39 % of those surveyed predict a rise in crime in their local area and 53 % at the national level, only 7 % and 6 %, respectively, believe that there will be a decline in the crime rate in the next five years (cf. Figure 7, page 70).

Groups with a negative assessment on the local and/or national level are also more negative than average with regard to their prediction of future crime trends.

VICTIMS OF CRIME

Studies of crime not covered in the official statistics have been carried out regularly since the 1960s. A significant proportion of crime is systematically excluded from police records of crime. For that reason, there was a move to gain a more comprehensive picture of the crime rate through victim surveys (van Dijk et al. 2007; Greve et al. 1994).

The Prevention Monitor likewise deals with becoming a victim of crime, but due to time constraints and the size of the random sample, it is limited to a few crimes that occur in large numbers, namely attempted burglary, successful burglary, physical attack and consumer fraud.

In the last five years, almost a third of the Austrian population in total has been the victim of at least one of the crimes included in the survey (burglary or attempted burglary, physical attack, fraud), with extremely large differences between individual population groups: the likelihood of becoming a victim in an urban area (41 %) is more than 60 % higher than in rural areas (villages with up to 2,000 residents: 26 %). Accordingly, the number of victims of crime in Vienna (46 %) is significantly higher than in the other federal states of Austria.

If these values are compared with the official crime statistics, a similar crime rate can be observed. In 2011, around 37 % of all reports of crime were filed in Vienna and 46.5 % of offences classified as crimes took place there. In terms of burglaries (both in flats and inhabited houses), around 60 % of reports were in Vienna (Bundesministerium für Inneres 2011).

Nevertheless, that comparison is of limited informative value since victim surveys, owing to the difference in the underlying definition processes, cannot be compared directly with the official crime statistics.

Source: Austrian Road Safety Board, Prevention Monitor 2011

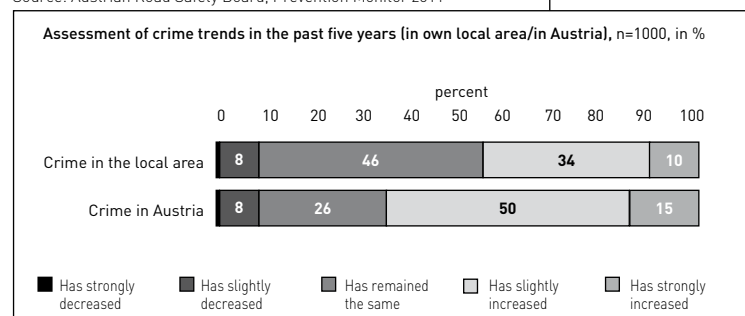


Figure 6: Assessment of crime trends in the past five years

Source: Austrian Road Safety Board, Prevention Monitor 2011

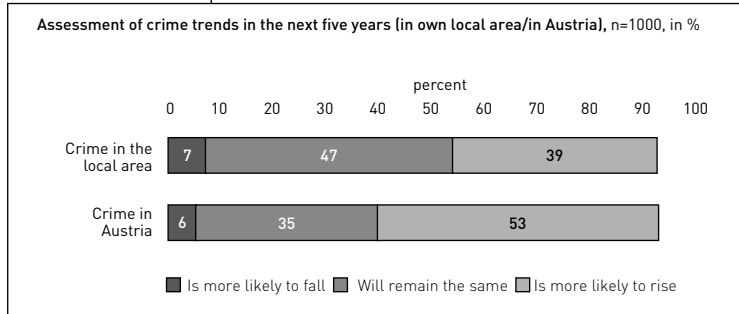


Figure 7: Assessment of crime trends in the next five years

For example, the subjective perception of having been the victim of a certain crime does not necessarily correspond to the legal definition of the crime (particularly in relation to violent crime, though less so in relation to property-related crime).

A significant finding of the Prevention Monitor were the marked differences between young (aged 18 to 34) and older people (aged over 65) with regard to victimisation. Younger people, who make up 41% of victims, are almost twice as likely to become victims of crime than older people, who make up 22% of victims. The difference between these two groups in the proportion of victims is almost 90%.

When looking at individual crime groups, it can be observed that the proportions of victims are approximately the same in the three crime groups. Around one in seven to one in eight Austrians are victims of consumer fraud (15%), a successful or attempted burglary (14%) or a physical attack or violent threat (13%). While consumer fraud is a crime that affects all population groups to roughly the same extent, burglaries and in particular physical attacks are extremely strongly determined by age, population density and also gender (cf. Figure 8, page 71).

The strong correlation between the individual groups of victims was also striking: there is a significantly higher likelihood of the victim of the crime becoming the victim of one of the other two types of

crime. In other words, there is no crime-related victim profile. Instead, there is a general profile for all crime groups, with young men living in urban areas being the most likely to become victims of crime.

This observation chimes with numerous other criminological studies on the victims of crime (cf. Truman 2011; Stafford et al. 2006) and raises the question of why older people tend to be victims of crime less frequently than younger people. One hypothesis is that crime opportunity structures change because of the lesser mobility of older people (cf. Hindelang et al. 1978). It is suggested that crimes at home are less likely since older people are more often at home, which significantly increases, for example, the risk of detection of the burglars. The thinning out of social relationships can, however, lead to more serious consequences of becoming a victim of crime.

LINK BETWEEN BECOMING A VICTIM OF CRIME AND FEAR OF CRIME

In crime research, the question of the extent to which becoming a victim leads to an increase in fear of crime, i.e. that victims of a crime have a greater fear of crime than non-victims, is still hotly debated. The findings indicate that there is only marginal correlation between the two (Gerber et al. 2010).

Crimes relating to property (such as theft) that occur in large numbers and do not have significant direct physical or psychological impact do not seem to have a particular influence on the degree of fear of crime. Those crimes that represent a serious assault on the person (e.g. physical attacks, bodily harm) and crimes occurring repeatedly over a short period can also lead to an increase in the fear of crime. (cf. Kury et al. 2005).

Contact crimes (such as mugging), where there is personal contact between the of-

fender and victim, have a significantly greater influence on the fear of crime than non-contact crimes (Kury et al. 2005, 14).

The results of the Prevention Monitor paint a similar picture: a single experience of being the victim of crime does not influence the fear of crime, but those people who were victims of several of the crimes surveyed showed a significantly lower subjective sense of safety. Becoming a victim of multiple crimes can also lead to coping mechanisms no longer working, which results in an increased fear of crime.

SUMMARY

In international comparison, Austria is in the lower midrange in terms of fear of crime. In 2011, 26 % of those surveyed reported feeling “very unsafe” or “a bit unsafe”. While that value has slightly worsened in comparison to earlier studies, Austria cannot be categorised as a country with a particularly pronounced fear of crime. With regard to the likelihood of becoming a victim of burglary, Austria shows lower values than the international average (van Dijk et al. 2007). The Prevention Monitor of the Austrian Road Safety Board provides an important database in terms of fear of crime, becoming a victim, avoidance behaviour and preventive measures. This study is intended to be performed regularly in the coming years, to investigate significant parameters concerning the Austrian public’s attitudes to crime and experiences of crime. The aim of the Prevention Monitor, however, is not just to provide such a data set, but to use it to determine action that needs to be taken.

Preventive measures are needed in particular for specific groups of the population, both for young people, who are more frequently victims of crime, and for older people, who show greater avoidance behaviour. Preventive measures should in particular counteract avoidance beha-

Source: Austrian Road Safety Board, Prevention Monitor 2011

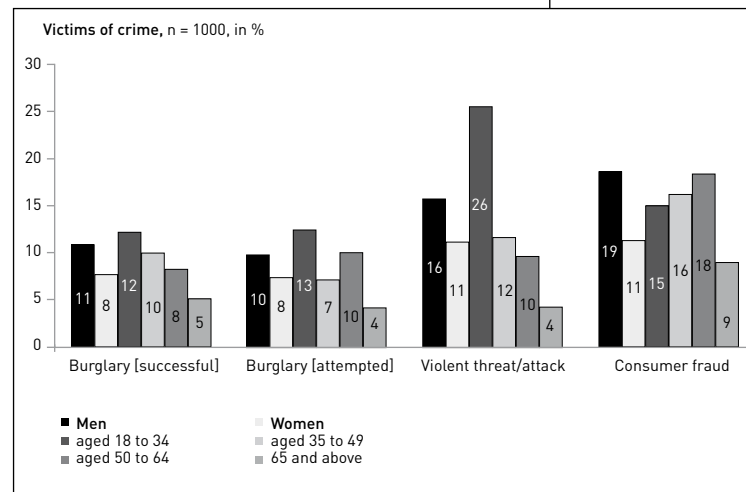


Figure 8: Victims of crime

viour, since social life is strongly limited by such behaviour, e.g. by making public transport more attractive, public lighting concepts, vitalizing ground floor zones in cities, enabling functioning social monitoring through increased attention to security considerations during planning, such as in the case of larger construction projects and in city planning. The avoidance behaviour observed in the Prevention Monitor was particularly marked among women, regardless of age or place of residence. Women are significantly more likely to avoid certain streets or squares and public transport or to remain alone at home in the evening because of their fears. Since such avoidance behaviour strongly reduces quality of life, the development of preventive measures for women is of particular importance. Such measures should deal with both individual empowerment (self assertion, self-defence), and with spatial-situational conditions.

A large proportion of the Austrian population still feels “very safe” or “rather safe” when walking alone in their neighbourhood after dark. However, there is the risk that focusing on this one value (the proportion of people feeling subjectively unsafe) can politicise and instrumentalise the fear of crime. It can serve, for example,

as an argument for greater manning levels in the police or for tougher sanctions. There is also the risk that police priorities will be increasingly placed on increasing the “subjective sense of safety”, rather than on measures that would improve the crime situation itself.

Media consumption can have an influence on the perception and assessment of crime, although the degree of this influence is still debated in professional literature. According to Walter (Walter 2000), a purely negative depiction of crime can, however, trigger emotional reactions in media consumers, such as an increase in the fear of crime. Media literacy is therefore a significant factor when it comes to dealing with crime reporting. The changes in the

media landscape and the habits of consuming media mean that greater emphasis needs to be placed on teaching a critical approach to the media, which is of particular importance in schools.

It has been shown that victim surveys or studies of self-reported crime should be performed at regular intervals in addition to official crime statistics in order to be able to form a reliable view of the real level of crime. The British Crime Survey can be regarded as a reference survey for victim surveys. Such studies need, however, to be sufficiently well-anchored institutionally in order to ensure that they are carried out over a long period of time and should have an appropriate sample size in order to include less frequent crimes as well.

¹ *The Prevention Monitor was not named “Safety Monitor”, since the Austrian police already has such a monitor. This, however, is a working instrument of the police used to create daily crime overviews (including hotspots) for Austria or certain regions, rather than a regular survey.*

² *Albrecht (Albrecht 2011, 118 f) notes the discrepancy between objective safety and sense of safety in international comparison with reference to the findings of the European Crime Survey 2005 (cf. van Dijk et al. 2007): fear of crime was most pronounced in precisely those countries with the lowest victim rates.*

³ *The wording of the question is based on the victim survey carried out in the Canton of Zurich in 1992.*

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