

The low-crime thesis examined in Iceland: Criminal victimization in comparative perspective

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Abstract

Iceland has typically been portrayed as a low crime country. This observation of Iceland as a low crime country has however been confounded by limited official records of crime data. Police statistics have not been easily accessible in Iceland because of irregular record keeping by local officials over the years. A crucial feature of the ICVS (International Crime Victimization Survey) was always the use of a fully standardized questionnaire, with controlled data management and analysis procedures. Bearing in mind this background of ICVS, and relative lack of crime data in Iceland, it is important and timely to compare Iceland with other Nordic and European Union (EU) member countries taking part in the ICVS survey. Iceland participated in the ICVS survey for the first time in 2005. The findings show that Iceland ranked high compared to other Nordic nations, both in terms of overall victimization for the ten crimes measured, and for assaults or threats, and theft. Overall crime victimization was also higher in the Nordic countries than the average in the EU countries, except for Finland. A few factors are evaluated in the paper to shed light on this surprising finding for Iceland. These factors involve methodological issues, social and cultural aspects, in addition to demographic characteristics of the Icelandic population.

Keywords: Iceland, Nordic nations, European Union, criminal victimization, comparative perspective, low crime thesis

Introduction

Iceland has typically been portrayed as a low crime country (Gunnlaugsson and Galliher, 2000; Ólafsdóttir, 1985; Ólafsdóttir and Bragadóttir, 2006). Many features of Icelandic society have been found to contribute to its low level of crime. Iceland's small and relatively homogenous population is claimed to help facilitating primary group relations, social integration, and informal social control. These social characteristics are often found lacking in other industrialized nations, which are characterized more by secondary social relations and social isolation – and more crime (Adler, 1983; Christie, 2000). Other features of Icelandic society have also been contributed to its low crime rate. Iceland has possessed a relatively egalitarian and cohesive social structure which has been shown to keep crime levels down (Blau and Blau, 1982; van Willsem, de Graaf and Wittebrood, 2003). Baumer et. al. (2002) have also found Iceland to be a prime example of Braithwaite's (1989) description of the good society, one that is committed to both collective duties and individual rights. Despite a well documented cultural ideal of individualism in Iceland (Durrenberger, 1996), Iceland is depicted as being deeply committed to communitarian social values, with effective informal social control, which help keeping crime down.

In their pioneering work, Shaw and McKay (1942) traced the origins of juvenile delinquency to a breakdown of values in communities affected by socially harmful effects of unregulated urban growth. Areas with large concentrations of juvenile delinquents were found to be strongly related to various community problems, such as low social and economic status, and high rates of immigration. Growth of juvenile delinquency ultimately was a result of social disorganization of neighborhoods and lack of community controls. Iceland, with its small and relatively homogenous ethnic stock, despite rapid social changes, has supposedly been able to maintain many of the preventive

social characteristics when it comes to urban crime, and therefore avoided some of the problems associated with rapid urban growth.

This observation of Iceland as a low crime country has however been confounded by limited official records of crime data. Police statistics have not been easily accessible because of irregular or nonexistent record keeping by local officials over the years. Consequently, it has been difficult to obtain a detailed historical picture of crime in Iceland, making criminological research difficult or even impossible. In most recent years, record keeping of crime in Iceland has improved, as crime concern in society has deepened.

Police and justice statistics

Contemporary police statistics show that the total number of crimes known to the police is indeed markedly lower in Iceland than found in other countries. For example, the total number of penal code cases in Iceland, including contact crimes such as assault and robbery, was about 6,000 per capita during 2000-2003, while the number was 9,000 in Denmark, 10,000 in Finland and just below 14,000 in Sweden (Aebi et al., 2006). Earlier Interpol records of crimes known to the police also show that Reykjavik remained lower than other Nordic capitals for all serious forms of crime (Gunnlaugsson, 2000). In addition, per capita imprisonment rates show Iceland below almost all other European nations, further supporting the notion of Iceland as a low crime country (Prison statistics, 2010).

Yet well known problems exist in international crime comparisons of official crime data, in particular police data. Legal definitions of crime are not the same from one nation state to another. Reporting practices also vary between different countries, as well as law enforcement practices, the way police departments record and report criminal and delinquent activity, making comparative crime research difficult.

To address the problem of different police practices of crime data, homicide is some times used as a comparison unit, with recording practices not being radically different between countries. If the homicide rate in Iceland for the time period 2000-2009 is examined the rate was below one homicide per 100,000, or close to, if not a little less than the average in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Finland was higher with a homicide rate of about two per 100,000 in the same time period. In a Nordic comparative perspective, many signs therefore show Iceland to be a low crime country, if we use official crime statistics of the police and prisons.

Theoretical understanding and concern with substance use

Yet, as Durkheim (1964) pointed out at the turn of the 20th century, not only is crime inevitable in any society, but it is also useful and even necessary in maintaining social order. Moreover, an act is not criminal because of its intrinsic character, rather, it is criminal because it offends collective sentiments. The precise nature of criminal behavior varies however according to the type of society and the type of collective sentiments (Lauderdale, 1976). A crime-free society does therefore not exist according to Durkheim, every society has its own quota of crime, with the content varying between different types of countries. These assertions of Durkheim about the nature of crime in society, are however, difficult to prove or disprove. Yet, Durkheim's observations penetrate us to ask what types of misbehavior have been found to be frequent, or using Durkheim's terminology, what behavior has offended the collective conscience of Icelanders.

In this regard, Gunnlaugsson (2004) has pointed out that many forms of minor offenses have been quite frequent in Iceland, with serious offenses being relatively low. Moreover, substance abuse has been seen as one of the primary causes of misbehavior, and it is widely agreed that substance abuse must be punished (Gunnlaugsson, 2008). Reflective of Icelanders' collective identity

and long-term concern with substance abuse, this small nation maintained a highly unusual beer prohibition for most of the 20th century (Gunnlaugsson and Galliher, 2000). This law was justified as a means of protecting the nation's youth. Moreover, alcohol related arrests have been in the thousands each year. For example, in Reykjavik, a city of about 120,000, about 3,000 arrests were routinely made each year in the 1990's for public drunkenness, and about 2,000 were jailed. Also, thousands have been arrested each year for driving while intoxicated, and the rate has been higher than found in the Nordic countries (Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs, 2008) and higher than in the United States (Cole and Smith, 2001). The surprisingly high levels of alcohol related offenses lead one to expect that alcohol consumption in Iceland must be enormous. Yet, if we compare the consumption of alcoholic beverages, with that in other European nations, we find per capita consumption in Iceland increasing in recent years, but still lower than in most other nations (World Drink Trends, 2005).

Considerable attention has also been given to youth and substance use. Studies have shown that use of cannabis among youth is markedly lower than found in other European countries (Hibell et. al., 2009). Yet, among Nordic countries the rate in Iceland was somewhat higher than those of youth in Norway, Sweden and Finland, but lower than those of Denmark. Lifetime prevalence of cannabis use in the general population has also been shown to be higher in Iceland than in the other Nordic nations, except for Denmark (Gunnlaugsson and Þórisdóttir, 1999). If, however, we look at drug use in the last six months Iceland was very similar to other Nordic nations, with a rate markedly lower than lifetime prevalences. Even though these findings may seem trivial to outsiders, they are not seen as minor by Icelanders. Research such as this has fuelled the concern about drugs in Iceland and the impact of drugs on other misbehavior in society and on the social fabric in general.

In sum, Iceland has been depicted as a low crime country possessing many of the social features characterizing such nations. Yet Iceland has a long tradition of concern with substance abuse with an increasing public alarm in recent years. Many signs show drug use among adolescents not to be radically different from youth in other Nordic nations with some alcohol related offenses even higher than found elsewhere. How does the notion of Iceland as a low crime country hold when different forms of crime data are used instead of official crime statistics? How do victimization levels affect sense of public safety of citizens in their residential communities?

Data and methods

Limited official records of crime in Iceland have made it difficult to test the low crime thesis for Iceland with any certainty. Even though recent crime statistics may suggest its validity, this thesis is still based on premature assumptions due to a relative absence of local criminological research. Moreover, comparison of crime across countries is always problematic, because of different reporting and legal definitions, methodological issues and culture. Thus it is questionable whether the low crime thesis can be supported or rejected by official crime statistics alone. In addition, official crime statistics do not measure all criminal activity in society, but only crimes known to the police.

To address the nonreporting issue, crime victimization surveys have been conducted in many different countries in recent years. One of the major objectives of the ICVS (International Crime Victimization Survey) at the outset, was to harness crime survey methodology for comparative purposes (van Kesteren, Mayhew and Nieuwbeerta, 2000). A crucial feature of the ICVS was always the use of a fully standardized questionnaire, with controlled data management and analysis procedures. Bearing in mind this background of ICVS, and relative lack of crime data in Iceland, it

is important and timely to compare Iceland with other Nordic and European Union member countries taking part in the ICVS survey.

Iceland participated in the ICVS survey for the first time in 2005. The data were collected by Gallup Reykjavik in January and February of 2005, with a random sampling of 3,000 individuals 16 years of age and older from the National Census. The net response rate was about 67 per cent, and a satisfactory congruence between the sample and the nation by sex, age, and location of residence was achieved. It is therefore reasoned that the sample adequately reflected the adult population as a whole. Phone interviews were used by trained interviewers.

Results

If the overall measure of victimization (Table 1), which is the percentage of people victimized once or more in the previous year (2004), is analysed by any of the ten crimes, covered in the survey, we see the prevalence level was highest in Iceland (21,8%) and Denmark (19,3%), followed by Sweden (16,2%) and Norway (15,6%), with Finland ranking lowest (12,7%). It is also interesting to note, that the overall victimization rate in 2004, was lower in the EU-countries (14,9%), than in the Nordic countries, except for Finland, which was lower. The overall victimization level of Iceland for 2004 was similar to Sweden in 2000 and the EU countries in 1992 and 1996. On the whole, victimization rates for Iceland in 2004 were close to those in the United Kingdom, Estonia and New-Zealand.

Table 1. Overall victimization for the ten offenses in the ICVS questionnaire by country:

	Average EU	Denmark	Finland	Sweden	Iceland	Norway
1989	16,9		13			
1992	21,6		17,2	18,7		
1996	21,6		16,2	22		
2000	19,3	20,6	16,6	22,6		
2004/2005	14,9	19,3	12,7	16,2	21,8	15,6

Source: Van Dijk, Manchini, VanKesteren and Hideg (2007)

If we look at victimization experiences by type of crime, we see that Iceland ranks highest among the Nordic countries for crimes of violence and theft (Table 2). The proportion of those having personal property stolen from was 7% in Iceland, but only less than 4% in Denmark, and about 2% in Finland and Sweden. A similar picture appears for crimes of violence. About 7% in Iceland admitted to have been victims of assaults or threats in 2004, but less than 4% in Sweden, just above 3% in Denmark and 2% in Finland. Iceland only ranked lower than the other Nordic nations for bicycle theft, except for Norway which was lower. Thefts from cars was highest in Iceland among the Nordic nations, and only Denmark was higher than Iceland for car thefts. Motorcycle theft is the only crime type where Iceland has lower victimization rates than the other Nordic nations with a similar level as Finland.

Table 2. Percent of population which had been victimized once or more during the last 12 months in 2004 by country and type of offence:

	Iceland	Denmark	Finland	Sweden	Norway	Average EU
Overall					15,8	
victimization	21,8	19,3	12,7	16,2		14,9
Theft of a car	0,9	1,5	0,4	0,5	0,7	0,7
Theft from a car	3,8	3	2,2	4,2	2,6	3,5
Motorcycle theft	0,1	0,5	0,1	0,6	0,3	0,3
Bicycle theft	4,6	6,2	5,2	5	4,2	3
Burglary	1,6	2,8	0,8	0,7	1,2	1,6
Attempted burglary	1,6	2	0,5	0,1	0,9	1,4
Robbery	0,7	1	0,3	1,1	0,8	1
Theft of a personal property	7	3,5	2,3	2,4	4,8	3,6
Assaults and threats	6,6	3,4	2,2	3,5	2,9	2,8

Source: Van Dijk, Manchini, VanKesteren and Hideg (2007)

As for comparison to the average victimization in the EU countries Iceland has higher levels for all crime categories, except for motorcycle thefts and robbery, where EU was higher and for burglaries which was similar. If capital cities among Nordic countries are compared, the overall victimization rate was highest in Reykjavik and Copenhagen, and lower in the other capital cities.

Measure of personal Safety

How do high victimization levels in Iceland affect safety among the public? The ICVS questionnaire measured vulnerability to street crime by asking how safe respondents feel while walking alone in their residential area after dark. We might expect high levels for contact crimes, such as assaults and threats, to be positively associated with high levels of insecurity. Yet the vast majority of Icelanders felt safe and more so than found in most other countries taking part in the survey (Table 3). Even though the question is hypothetical for those who rarely find themselves alone outside after dark and does not necessarily only measure fear of crime, the findings show that Icelanders perceive themselves to a large degree safe in their residential area. Thus despite high levels of victimization for violence and thefts in Iceland, Icelanders feel safe in their residential community, and even safer than citizens in other countries.

Table 3. Percent of population feeling unsafe or very unsafe on the street after dark in 2004/2005 by countries and main cities:

	2004/2005		2004/2005
Iceland	6	Reykjavík	9
Finland	14	Helsinki	25
Norway	14	Oslo	19
Denmark	14	Copenhagen	21
Sweden	19	Stockholm	21
Average EU	27	Average EU	32

Source: Van Dijk, Manchini, VanKesteren and Hideg (2007)

Concluding remarks

The ICVS results for Iceland come as a surprise. Iceland ranks high compared to other Nordic nations, both in terms of overall

victimization for the ten crimes measured, and for assaults or threats, and theft. Overall crime victimization is also higher in the Nordic countries than the average in the EU-countries. This is also somewhat unexpected, as crime in the Nordic countries has usually been close, or lower, than what we find elsewhere in Western-Europe (e.g. von Hofer, 2004). Official crime statistics do not appear to support the ICVS findings, at least for Iceland. A few factors will be evaluated here to shed light on this finding. Yet it is clear that not any one of them alone can explain this outcome. Most likely do we have a combination of several factors contributing to the results.

Methodological problems might play a part in the high ranking of Iceland. The response rate in Iceland was 67%, 60% in Finland, 55% in Sweden, 44% in Denmark (see van Dijk, Manchin and van Kesteren, 2007). The response rate in Norway was only 33% (Olaussen, 2006). An important question emerges concerning how far respondents in Iceland differ from those countries where the response rate was lower. In Iceland, respondents with mobile phones were included, but not in the other countries to the same degree. Mobile phones are more common among younger people, and as it turned out in Iceland, the ratio of younger people was satisfactorily achieved in Iceland – but not to the same extent in other countries using only landline phones. As is well known, victim data reveal that young people face a much greater victimization risk than do older people, with victim risk rapidly diminishing after age 25 and becoming negligible after age 65 (Catalano, 2006). Therefore, it is possible that a higher response rate in Iceland resulted in higher levels of victimization than in other countries with a lower response rate. Even though the data are weighted for age to make the samples as representative as possible, it still may cast some doubt on the validity of this comparatively high ranking of Iceland.

Moreover, it is possible that the surprisingly high figure in Iceland reflects that Icelandic respondents are simply more likely

to report victimization than their neighbors in other countries. The overall high victimization in Iceland derives in large part from violence. Beirne and Messerschmidt (2000) have argued, in explaining the high rate of Dutch violence victimization rates, compared to the United States, as stemming in large part from the Dutch population being more sensitive to violence, and far more likely to report it in surveys of this sort. The same may hold for Iceland, even though we do not have any empirical findings to back up this observation. Also, Icelanders perhaps do not feel any sense of stigmatization in admitting to victimization, making them more willing to report it in surveys of this type than others.

The measurement instrument and the questionnaire format might also have exaggerated the number of minor offenses, at least for Icelandic respondents. To illustrate this point, about 36% of Icelanders reported their victimization to the police for one, or more of the crime types, measured in the ICVS, but comparative rates were much higher among other Nordic countries. To further demonstrate this explanation, a high percentage of Icelanders admitted to have been victimized by consumer fraud, or about 13%, which was higher than found in most other countries. In this respect, it is noteworthy, that many Icelandic respondents mentioned illegal price fixing amongst oil companies, a high profile case at the time the survey was conducted (Þórisdóttir and Gunnlaugsson, 2008). This high level of respondents mentioning the oil companies, might also suggest great willingness of Icelanders to admit being a crime victim. Moreover, many respondents in Iceland did not perceive the victimization incident as being a crime, nor as being very serious (Þórisdóttir et. al. 2005). Therefore, it is possible that the ICVS instrument exaggerated more the number of minor offenses in Iceland, compared to other countries. Higher safety levels found among Icelandic respondents in their residential communities compared to most other nations seems to further demonstrate this observation.

An additional explanation for Iceland's high ranking, not less plausible, is that Iceland is demographically a young nation, with a higher birth rate than found in most European nations (Dahlgard, 2006). Icelandic demographics might therefore suggest a higher victimization rate than typically experienced in societies, with a lower birth rate (Ouimet, 2002). Moreover, as was mentioned above, research has shown that younger people generally experience more crime than older people, which might help explain the high rate found in Iceland, compared to both Nordic and EU countries. Declining rates of violent crimes in recent years in the United States and Canada have in part been explained by such demographic changes; with the two nations simply growing older (Blumstein and Wallman, 2000). Similar tendencies have been detected in European countries taking part in all of the ICVS sweeps, where a victimization decrease occurred later than in the U.S. and Canada (van Dijk, Manchin and van Kesteren, 2007). Perhaps, this reduction of victimization experiences might take place later in Iceland, where the birth rate is still quite high. To support this observation, it is worth noting that overall victimization levels in Iceland are closer to the levels found in the other Nordic nations in 1995 and 2000, than in 2004.

Still, whatever can be put forward to explain higher rates in Iceland than found in both EU countries and in other Nordic countries, it is evident that crime, as reported in comparative victimizations surveys, seems not to be any less frequent in Iceland than in other countries. At a time of both internal and external change in Iceland, crime perceptions and crime experiences have indeed become more prominent in the public discourse and dialogue in Iceland. Iceland's population more than tripled between 1910 and 2009 – from 85,000 to more than 320,000. In 1910, the vast majority lived in rural areas, but in 2008, more than two-thirds of the population resided in the capital area. The occupational structure of Iceland has also radically changed. In 1910, most of the people was involved in either farming or fishing

whereas today these two occupations account for less than 10 percent of the population. At the same time these internal changes have been occurring, Iceland has become increasingly opened up to the outside world during most recent decades. The transformation of Icelandic society traces closely similar developments in W-Europe, only occurring later in Iceland, and, at a much higher speed. This being the case, Durkheim's observation of crime as being essential, especially during periods of instability and social change (Durkheim, 1964), makes the assertion of a low crime country seem less meaningful, if not all together meaningless – in particular for Iceland.

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Received: October 6, 2009

Accepted: December 19, 2009