

**NINA SINGH**



**DANIEL KENISTON**



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**T**HE time has arrived for India to have a crime survey conducted by an independent, third party agency. Until now, governments across the country have relied upon registration of crimes at police station to measure crime rates and do not have an effective method to measure victim satisfaction consequent upon police action. The present system is unlikely to yield accurate data; rather it rewards governments, policymakers and police for hiding the crime they are expected to prevent and investigate. The time is ripe to develop a new system that realistically measures both crime rates and victim satisfaction, an assessment that can objectively be made by an independent household crime survey.

A crime survey is a simple, intuitive concept: surveyors are sent to a nationally representative sample of households and ask whether anyone in the household has been a victim of any crime in the past year. If so, that crime is entered into the total count of crimes for the year. As such, it is far simpler than many surveys that the government already conducts, such as the economic National Sample Survey (NSS) and the National Family Health Survey (NFHS).

Many countries of the world have been engaged in independent crime surveys — the British Crime Survey, National Crime Victimization Survey of the US, and the International Crime Victim Survey (ICVS) for UN are few examples. These systematic victim studies yield more realistic data on crime levels than official police statistics because these include incidents that have never been reported to or recorded by the police. Their objective is not only to identify the problem areas but also assess policy effectiveness. Even in these countries, the difference between the number of cases registered by the police and the number

reported is significant: for example, in the US, only 49 per cent of violent crimes and 39 per cent of property crimes were reported to the police in 2004-2005.

In India, the difference could be similar or even bigger; a recent household crime survey of over 16,000 households in 11 districts conducted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for the Rajasthan Police revealed that only 29 per cent of crimes ever get reported to the police. Even out of the cases that are reported, the survey revealed that only 72 per cent ever get registered as First Information Reports (FIR) by the police; which set the ball of criminal justice system rolling. These results confirm what many in the police and civil society have long suspected; that official crime figures represent only the tip of the iceberg. If accurately measuring crime were the

only reason for a household crime survey, this alone would make a strong case. But the current system of police registration-based statistics has a more serious drawback: it perverts the incentives for both policemen

# Telling it like it is

**Police data on crime is structurally skewed. A household survey takes a different tack**



and those in the government to fight crime. For instance, the police have often been accused of non-registration of crimes, more commonly known as ‘burking’. Since the performance of the officer in charge of a police station is evaluated by the registration of crime in his police station, there is a natural tendency either to hide crime or not register cases under the appropriate sections of law in order to “reduce” crime rates. Similar incentives operate at all levels: increase in crime sets off alarms and are perceived to be reflective of bad governance and poor police leadership. Even the political party in power does not take it too kindly.

In this scenario, the biggest losers are the victims who remain helpless, dissatisfied, discouraged to seek justice; their incidents are never investigated and entered into official statistics. For instance, the Rajasthan Po-

lice-MIT crime survey revealed that the police refused to register 28 per cent of the cases brought before them. This “burking” not only hinders crime prevention, it also perpetuates the negative image of police in society. These sad realities are not due to some “corrupt” nature of policymakers or police — they are the logical results of a system that thrives on scoring quick brownie points rather than supporting long-term serious reform.

With the maturing of democracy, the public expects the police to be sensitive, service oriented and accountable. Unfortunately, no one can accurately say whether police across India are achieving these goals because there is simply no national data on the satisfaction of crime victims vis-à-vis police performance. Whatever small data exists is a cause for concern: the Rajasthan Police-MIT crime survey found that only 27 per cent of crime victims were satisfied with the police response. A victim satisfaction survey as part of the national crime survey could address these issues on a broader scale, and provide a path for improved police-public relations.

Too often police reforms have been stalled because of lack of political will and general resistance to change by vested interests. With a national household crime survey, everyone benefits: The government can take credit for actually reducing crime, the police can register crimes without worrying that they are making themselves look bad; and the public benefits from easier crime registration, a better motivated police, and policymakers whose efforts will be aimed in the right direction.

*Nina Singh is an IPS officer and the views expressed are personal. Daniel Keniston is doing a PhD in Economics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.*