



Institut pro kriminologii
a sociální prevenci

Jakub Holas

Security, Crime and Prevention

Summary

Research mapping people's views on crime in their place of residence began as early as the mid-1990s in the Czech Republic. These studies were initially part of comprehensive preventive plans by individual cities, and they were a condition for the receipt of grants for preventive projects at local level. From the very beginning, the Institute of Criminology and Social Prevention (IKSP) cooperated with the relevant department of the Ministry of the Interior on the methodology for this research. In 1995, it published a study of the security situation – the first under Czech conditions - in a pilot medium-sized city. In 2005, a similar study was conducted in twelve cities strongly affected by crime using a uniform methodology. Having gained experience with a number of these studies, a large opinion poll, representative of the Czech Republic was undertaken in 2012, including representativeness for individual regions. The sample included in excess of 3,000 respondents.

Respondents were asked questions in the following areas: the state's responsibility for selected areas of public life; their assessment of the courts, public prosecutor's offices, city halls, city police; their perception and assessment of the police force, its position and tasks; social factors affecting crime according to respondents; victimisation and the fear of crime; the citizen as a witness and victim of crime; measures employed to increase personal safety (i.e. preventive behaviour); people's confidence in specific preventive activities by municipalities and the state.

Five years later, in 2017, IKSP agreed to reproduce the 2012 survey using the maximum number of identical questions in cooperation with the Crime Prevention Department of the Ministry of the Interior. The plan was to carry out a public opinion survey repeatedly over a period of four years (2017-2020), with a „big“ survey to be carried out in 2017 and 2020 (3,000 respondents, extensive questionnaire), and an omnibus survey in the interim in 2018 and 2019 (1,000 respondents, questionnaire reduced to about ten items). The project was funded by the Crime Prevention Department, and all surveys would be conducted by the same agency, which emerged from a tender. Both types of questionnaire were developed by the Institute of Criminology and Social Prevention in cooperation with the Ministry of the Interior. The cleaned basic research sample was 3,019 respondents; the survey was conducted by face-to-face questioning using computer technology (CAPI). Interviewers were specially trained for this survey.

The aim of the whole cycle of researches was to ascertain public views and opinions on issues relating to crime and its prevention. In particular, the research focused on public awareness of preventive activities, an assessment of security forces, the public's views and opinions regarding influences on crime and the approach to other selected topics.

Special attention was focused on the activities of the Police of the Czech Republic, mapping respondents' views of police officers - their numbers, equipment, integrity, bravery, communication skills, as well as financial remuneration. Questions also touched on the extent to which police officers should engage in preventive work and to what extent it was appropriate to include the lay element of volunteers in professional police work.

The focus of the questionnaire was questions assessing crime prevention. Respondents commented on the importance of different types of preventive programmes in the public space. The second set of questions examined the preventive activities that people employed to protect their health and property.

The results indicating the degree of social distance between respondents and certain facilities serving the public interest (cultural centres for minorities, police stations, youth correction centres, contact centres for drug addicts, etc.) were also very interesting. The question of whether, in the opinion of respondents, some social groups are more involved in criminal activities than others falls in the same category.

IKSP also continually monitors people's fear or feeling of being threatened by selected criminal offences. Another interesting topic is the anticipated behaviour of respondents as the witness to a crime, both at the stage of directly encountering a crime and later testimony. However, the current study does no longer examine the impact of crime (victimisation), as in the previous periods - IKSP dedicated a separate study to this issue.

The publication „Security, Crime and Prevention“ is the output of the first two studies, i.e. the initial survey of a large sample in 2017 and the omnibus survey in 2018.

Basic research findings:

Public awareness of preventive activities is low, only 18% of respondents could recall an activity in the vicinity of their residence. Respondents most often employ organisational and logistical measures to increase their personal security - they don't let door-to-door salesmen or strangers into their home, they're aware of who to contact in case of a problem, and they protect their privacy and property on the Internet. Respondents don't take any stringent actions to physically protect their homes.

People consider the increase in number of police patrols on the streets, CCTV monitoring of public spaces and the improvement of public lighting, i.e., situational preventive projects, to be most important activities in the field of prevention. In terms of socially oriented projects, people most appreciate work with youth at-risk. In contrast, Czechs perceive an expansion of the number and capacity of prisons and the creation of neighbourhood watches as least important.

More than half the population is in favour of involving volunteers from the community in preventive activities. This most often concerns ensuring safety around schools.

People consider drug abuse and the existence of socially excluded localities – ghettos to have the strongest influence on crime. Alcoholism, homelessness and (hypothetically) the influx of foreigners also have a negative effect. According to almost two thirds of respondents, certain groups of the population are more involved in crime. Romani, drug addicts and foreigners are cited most often. Compared to the previous survey in 2012, there has been an increase in the number of people who claim that some groups are more involved in crime than others.

In terms of tolerance for the establishment of individual institutions, it was found that people were most opposed to the establishment of facilities for migrants (57% stated they would be very upset), accommodation for socially excluded groups or mosques. Compared to the previous survey, the level of tolerance towards individual institutions has generally declined and people would be significantly more upset by the establishment of a mosque near their home.

People felt most threatened by pickpocketing, burglary and vandalism. On comparison with the previous survey, there is a decrease in the feeling of being threatened by most criminal acts in the current research wave. Women and the elderly feel more at risk. We only observe an increase in concerns regarding the threat of a terrorist attack.

Two-thirds of respondents would call the police hotline if they were witness to a theft, and one in ten would even try to apprehend the perpetrator. Men and young people would be more active in this way. The vast majority of Czechs are then willing to testify in case of the investigation of the theft, but one third would only do so anonymously.

Attitudes on the topic of refugees / migrants are divided into three, more or less equally divided groups in Czech society. Less than one third would provide refugees with temporary refuge, another group would help in the country of unrest (without providing refuge in the Czech Republic) and the last third is fundamentally opposed to any help for people coming to Europe from troubled countries. Less than one tenth of respondents chose the option of providing refugees with facilities and the opportunity to settle in the Czech Republic.

In summary, there have been several positive shifts in the perception of the security situation in the Czech Republic over the last six years or so. People are more optimistic about the security situation, showing less or the same fear of crime. The assessment of the policing has improved and people are more prepared to testify in the event of a crime. Significantly less people assume the existence of corruption among officials, police officers and judges, although assessment of the judiciary is only improving slowly.

A negative aspect of the findings is an increased level of vigilantism, where some groups of people (especially minorities and foreigners) are a priori seen as a possible source of security risks. This is also reflected in the low support for the establishment of various facilities for such social groups and the reluctance to accept migrants in the Czech Republic.

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Autor: Jakub Holas
Vydavatel: Institut pro kriminologii a sociální prevenci
Nám. 14. října 12, 150 00 Praha 5
Určeno: Pro odbornou veřejnost
Design: addnoise.org
Sazba: Lukáš Pracný, sazbaknih.cz
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