



# Exploring the Availability and Potential of International Data for Criminological Study

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## Abstract

Despite advances in recent decades to internationalize criminology, one major roadblock that is often mentioned is the difficulty in collecting and obtaining high-quality international and cross-cultural data. More than ever, there is a growing amount of international data covering a wide variety of topics relevant to understanding crime. Visible and accessible international data can open up channels for dialogue and collaboration between cultures and regions, as well as opportunities to test, refine, and develop theoretical and empirical knowledge. This paper therefore aims to make the ‘world of data’ out there more visible not only to shed light on the potential for international research and collaboration, but to highlight the growing, rich body of international knowledge that already exists.

**Keywords** Cross-national data · Survey data · Victimization surveys · Cross-cultural research

In her 1995 presidential address to the American Society of Criminology [ASC], Freda Adler (1996: 7) laid out five challenges for criminologists to embrace internationalization. Adler challenged criminologists to “shrink the world” by working with institutions around the world, to “create change” by engaging with both local and international policymakers, to “think and teach globally” so students “expand their horizons,” to “seize the day and seize your neighbors” to build international collaborative networks, and to “read the world” by consuming international research literature (Adler, 1996: 7). Adler was adamant that internationalization was the key pathway for the advancement of criminological research and knowledge. She argued that international research provides an important arena for theory testing, identifying generalizable mechanisms and processes, and more generally just to learn from one another.

In the years since Adler’s address, many of these challenges have been met by researchers as criminological research continues to internationalize (Barberet, 2007; Smith et al., 2018). For example, research institutes such as the Netherlands Centre for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement [NSCR], the Griffith Criminology Institute in

Australia, the Leuven Institute of Criminology in Belgium, and the Centre for the Study of Violence at the University of São Paulo, to name only a few, have routinely “seized their neighbors” by connecting and hosting researchers from all over the world. Universities around the world are increasingly introducing courses on comparative and international criminology, study abroad programmes, and even international joint degree programmes (e.g., Doctorate in Cultural and Global Criminology).

Criminologists can more easily “read the world” with the emergence of new regional and international journals, such as the *Asian Journal of Criminology*, the *European Journal of Criminology*, and now *International Criminology*. There has been an incredible growth of international and comparative research for academic (e.g., Routledge Handbook of International Criminology, Smith et al., 2018; Comparative, International, and Global Justice, Banks & Baker, 2015) and practitioner audiences (Global Study on Homicide, UNODC 2019; Global Status Report on Violence Prevention, WHO, 2014). The Global Study on Homicide (UNODC, 2019), for example, brings together international data on different lethal violent outcomes (e.g., gang violence, gender-related killings, infanticide) to provide insights into potential theoretical explanations as well as practical solutions.

Comparative and international criminologists have both confirmed and challenged pre-existing knowledge, calling into question the generalizability of some well-established

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theories and empirical “facts” (e.g., Bruinsma et al., 2013; Cheung & Cheung, 2008; Messner, 2015; Sun et al., 2018; Villarreal & Silva, 2006). For example, Messner (2015) challenges the application of certain Western-developed theories such as situational action theory in East Asian society. He argues that the central theoretical constructs of situational cognition and moral reasoning may operate in fundamentally different ways across cultures, and calls for more systematic assessment about how these processes operate in East Asian societies (see also Kokkalera et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Song & Lee, 2019). As Gary LaFree (2007) noted in his ASC presidential address in 2006, it would be hard to find criminologists who disagree that international research is important for understanding crime and justice.

Despite these advances, one major roadblock that is often mentioned by those conducting (or wishing to conduct) international research is the difficulty in collecting and obtaining high-quality international and cross-cultural data (Bennett, 2009). Indeed, collecting data is often expensive and time-consuming, with sometimes high bureaucratic, political, or language barriers (Goldsmith, 2003; He & Zhou, 2016; Xu et al., 2013). However, more than ever, there is a growing amount of international data covering a wide variety of topics relevant to understanding crime. Increasingly, these data are stored in research archives such as the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [ICPSR] at the University of Michigan or the UK Data Archive [UKDA] for visibility, or made openly accessible to those interested in replication or further collaboration.

Visible and accessible international data can open up channels for dialogue and collaboration between cultures and regions, as well as opportunities to test, refine, and develop theoretical and empirical knowledge. This paper therefore aims to make the ‘world of data’ out there more visible not only to shed light on the potential for international research and collaboration, but to highlight the growing, rich body of international knowledge that already exists.

It is important to note that this review will focus on quantitative international data. This is primarily because I am most familiar with quantitative data. In addition due to various reasons, most notably concerns about privacy and secondary analysis, qualitative data are often not made publicly accessible (see Bishop & Kuuma-Luuvi, 2017; Chauvette et al., 2019; Corti, 2000; van den Berg, 2008). Nevertheless, the contribution that qualitative data and research makes to the development of criminological knowledge is invaluable (e.g., Fassin, 2013; Maruna, 2001; Willis, 2015).

## Types of International Data

This review covers two major forms of data: cross-national data spanning two or more countries and single-country data, such as cross-national surveys, repeated cross-sectional surveys, longitudinal cohort studies, and one-off data collections or studies.

### Cross-National Data

Cross-national and international data come in many forms, including crime and criminal justice data (e.g., United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime [UNODC] Statistics, WHO Mortality Data), open-source criminal and violent event data (e.g., Armed Conflict Location & Event Data [ACLED], the Global Terrorism Database [GTD], Uppsala Armed Conflict Database), aggregate indicator data (e.g., World Governance Indicators [WGI], Human Development Indices [HDI]), and cross-national survey data (e.g., World Values Survey [WVS]), to name a few.

As perhaps the most well-known and easily accessible international data, cross-national surveys increasingly cover a wide number of countries and criminologically relevant topics (see Table 1). The International Crime Victims Survey [ICVS] is one of the most prominent examples of a standardized survey covering detailed information about victimization experiences, reporting behaviors, and broader attitudes towards crime and justice (Van Dijk, 2007). Other standardized surveys include, for example, the World Values Survey (WVS, 2020), the various ‘barometer’ surveys (Euro-, Americas-, Latino-, Afro-, Asian-), the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP, 2020), and the European Social Survey (ESS, 2020). In addition, there are a number of large-scale public health surveys that include topics related to violent victimization and domestic abuse, such as the Demographic Health Surveys [DHS] (DHS, 2020), the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys [MICS] (UNICEF, 2020), and the Health behavior in School-aged Children [HBSC] (HBSC, nd). An increasing number of surveys are conducted using adolescent populations (e.g., International Self-report Delinquency Surveys [ISRDL] (Enzmann et al., 2018)) and in low- and middle-income countries (e.g., Global School-based Health Surveys [GSHS] (WHO, 2020)).

Some common items in large-scale surveys are victimization and feelings of safety. In order to get an idea about the geographical coverage and comparability of victimization items across these large-scale surveys, I examined the most recent waves of data collection for each of the surveys listed in Table 1. While the review of items suggests that the questions and response categories differ substantively across surveys, the breadth of geographical, topical, and demographic coverage is nevertheless exciting (see

**Table 1** Overview of cross-national survey data

Survey	Since (year)	N countries	Focal region(s)
World Values Survey [WVS]	1981	120	Global
European Social Survey [ESS]	2002	38	Europe
Eurobarometer	1974	35	Europe
Latinobarometer	1995	18	Latin America
AmericasBarometer	1973	34	North and South America
Afrobarometer	1999	37	Africa
Asianbarometer	2001	19	South and East Asia
International Social Survey Programme [ISSP]	1984	42	Global
International Crime Victims Survey [ICVS]	1989	78	Global
Demographic Health Survey [DHS]	1985	90	Global (LMICs)
UNICEF Multiple Indicator Health Surveys [MICS]	1995	118	Global (LMICs)
Global School-based Health Survey [GSHS]	2003	103	Global (LMICs)
Health Behavior in School-aged Children [HBSC]	1982	50	Europe
International Self-report Delinquency Study [IRSD]	1992	35	Global

*LMICs* low- and middle-income countries

Table 2). For example, the DHS and MICS offer opportunities to examine the individual, situational, and structural factors that are associated with variations in domestic and non-domestic violent victimization among women in low- and middle-income countries, whereas the ISRD, HBSC, and GSHS can be used to examine the prevalence and correlates of different types of bullying victimization among young people in more than 150 countries across the globe.

The breadth and diversity of these surveys provide opportunities for exploring criminological phenomena and theory testing (Schaible, 2012). Using these datasets, researchers have examined topics related to anomie (Hovermann et al., 2016; Zhao & Cao, 2010), victimization (Bateson, 2012; Sulemana, 2015), feelings of safety (Buil-Gil et al., 2019), trust in police (Cao & Dai, 2006; Corbacho et al., 2015; Jackson et al., 2011; Singer et al., 2019), intimate partner violence (Goodson & Hayes, 2018; Heise & Kotsadam, 2015), bullying (Chester et al., 2015; Smith-Khuri et al., 2004), vigilantism and punishment (Lehmann et al., 2020; Nivette, 2016), and delinquency and youth groups (Enzmann et al., 2010; Gatti et al., 2011, 2015).

One underutilized aspect of these cross-sectional surveys is that many items are repeated over time, meaning that interested researchers can exploit this to evaluate aggregate trends in attitudes and behaviors, such as victimization, punitiveness, and trust in police. Cross-national surveys are also useful for evaluating the mechanisms that link macro-social and political contextual factors to individual attitudes and criminal behaviors (Schaible, 2012).

Aside from cross-national surveys, the past decades have seen a growth in open-source, continuously updated databases that systematically collect and code different forms of event data. The GTD and ACLED provide up-to-date detailed information on circumstances of violent

events such as terrorism, assassinations, political conflict, and riots, alongside the characteristics of relevant actors, methods, and consequences (LaFree & Dugan, 2007; Raleigh et al., 2010). Perhaps lesser known to criminologists, GDELT is another example of an open-source event database that covers a wide range of machine-coded diplomatic, conflict, and violent events from across the world that updates every 15 min (The GDELT Project, 2020). While these databases reflect recent advancements in the use of open-source and machine-coded information, some researchers are more critical about the reliability of geo-coding events (Hammond & Weidmann, 2014) and the uneven quality and consistency of coding based on media sources (Eck, 2012).

Despite these limitations, the growth of these data sources and open accessibility has allowed international researchers to investigate a wide variety of criminological topics related to political violence and terrorist acts (Argomaniz & Vidal-Diez, 2015; Kamprad & Liem, 2019; LaFree et al., 2009). Interestingly, datasets such as ACLED are most often used by political scientists (e.g., Fjelde & Hultman, 2014; Raleigh, 2015), whereas criminologists have long been interested in questions related to political violence (Felices-Luna, 2010; Hagan et al., 2005; Karstedt, 2012, 2013; Karstedt et al., 2021; Rosenfeld, 2004; Ruggiero, 2010). There is therefore some potential to utilize the rich sources of data that political scientists have generated to examine political violence from a criminological perspective.

Overall, the wide availability and diversity of cross-national data are invaluable to international criminologists, as evidenced by the growing body of research utilizing these data to examine important questions about crime and justice. It is important to note that many of

**Table 2** Survey of victimization-related items in cross-national surveys

Survey	Victimization item(s)	Response categories	Details
World Values Survey	Have you been the victim of a crime during the past year?	Y/N	Personal and Family
European Social Survey	Have you or a member of your household been the victim of a burglary or assault in the last 5 years?	Y/N	
Eurobarometer	None		
Afrobarometer	During the past year, have you or anyone in your family: Had something stolen from your house? Been physically attacked?	Y/N	Once, twice, three or more times
Latinobarometer	Have you, or a relative been assaulted, attacked, or the victim of a crime in the last 12 months?	You/Relative/Both/No	
Americasbarometer	Have you been the victim of any type of crime in the past 12 months?	Y/N	
Asianbarometer	None		
International Crime Victims Survey	Over the past X years have you or other members of your household been a victim of...?	Y/N	Follow-up questions on frequency, location, situational factors, relationship, reporting behaviors
Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys	In the past 3 years, has anyone taken or tried taking something from you, by using force or threatening to use force? In the same period of the last 3 years, have you been physically attacked?	Y/N	Follow-up questions on frequency, situational factors, reporting behaviors
Demographic Health Surveys	Experience of physical and sexual violence in the past 12 months Experience of spousal violence (physical, sexual, emotional) in last 12 months	Y/N	Women only, questions also include lifetime prevalence
International Self-report Delinquency Study	Did any of the following things happen to you? Robbery, physical violence, theft, hate crime, cyberbullying, parental abuse	Y/N	Follow-up questions on reporting behaviors
Health Behavior in School-aged Children	How often have you been bullied at school in the past couple of months? How often have you been bullied in the following ways? Someone sent me mean messages, emails, websites Someone took inappropriate pictures of me and posted them online	Ordinal scale frequency Ordinal scale frequency	
Global School-based Health Survey	During the past 12 months, how many times were you physically attacked? During the past 30 days, how many days were you bullied?	Scale from 0 to 12 or more times Scale from 0 to all 30 days	Follow-up question on type of bullying

these datasets (e.g., the WVS and barometer surveys) are not designed to test criminological theories, and thus may be limited in capturing all relevant constructs and criminal behavioral outcomes. Yet the sheer breadth of geographical coverage and topics within cross-national data means that there is still huge potential to take advantage of the many open access policies to develop and answer new questions within criminology.

### Single-Country Data

In addition to cross-national comparable data, countries often produce a wide variety of crime statistics, surveys, and administrative data relevant for studying crime and criminal justice. Single-country data refer simply to data collected within a particular country that is not necessarily cross-nationally comparable. The most common and relevant for criminologists are national or local crime and justice statistics, social and health surveys (e.g., South Africa Social Attitudes Survey, Japan General Social Surveys, the Dutch Social Cohesion and Well-being Survey), crime and victimization surveys (e.g., Crime Survey for England and Wales, the Dutch SafetyMonitor, the Australian Multipurpose Household Survey, the Swedish Crime Survey), longitudinal studies (e.g., the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, Farrington et al., 2016; the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study, Poulton et al., 2016; the Zurich Project on Social Development from Childhood to Adulthood, Eisner & Ribeaud, 2007), randomized controlled trials (e.g., Culver et al., 2016; Henstock & Ariel, 2017; Murray, Santos, et al., 2019; Murray, Shenderovich, et al., 2019), as well as the wide range of one-off data collections that address specific research questions or topics.

In particular, there is a need for more prospective and retrospective longitudinal studies to evaluate the key questions about the social and developmental processes contributing to the onset and desistance of criminal behavior (Farrington, 2013). There are a number of longitudinal studies outside the United States that have contributed substantially to criminological theory and knowledge (Nguyen & Loughran, 2014). However, the vast majority of longitudinal cohort studies are conducted in high-income, western societies, whereas there is a substantial need for more data and theory testing in low- and middle-income countries [LMICs] (see Murray, Santos, et al., 2019; Murray, Shenderovich, et al., 2019; Sanchez de Ribera et al., 2019). There are notable developments in using existing longitudinal cohort data or collecting new data to evaluate a variety of criminological topics. For example, Murray et al. (2015) utilized the 1993 Pelotas Birth Cohort Study (Brazil) to examine the childhood predictors of violence in late adolescence, the São Paulo Legal Socialization Study was designed to measure and evaluate the development of attitudes towards the law and police among early

adolescents (Medina & Rodrigues, 2019; Trinkner et al. 2019), and the Evidence for Better Lives Study is a cross-cultural birth cohort study that aims to examine the effects of prenatal exposure to violence on mothers and childhood development (Valdebenito et al., 2020).

This growth in international longitudinal data suggests there are active and ongoing efforts by criminologists to advance our global knowledge on crime and justice. Nevertheless, previous reviews of research from LMICs call for further evaluation of criminological knowledge in LMICs using longitudinal and experimental designs (Bourey et al., 2015; Higginson et al., 2015; Murray, Santos, et al., 2019; Murray, Shenderovich, et al., 2019; Sivaraman et al., 2019).

### Conclusions

The sheer geographical and topical coverage of data in this paper demonstrate that criminology has internationalized substantially since Adler's address. However, there are still a number of important limitations to international criminological research that current and future scholars must overcome. Issues remain surrounding global representation on editorial boards and in authorship (Faraldo-Cabana & Lamela, 2019), the continual dominance of Western, and especially Anglo-Saxon, perspectives, theories, and methods in criminological research (e.g., Aas, 2012; Lee & Laidler, 2013; Liu, 2009), and the relatively limited dialogue between and within regional criminologies (Moosavi, 2019). Addressing these issues can contribute to a truly inclusive international criminology that spans the entire globe.

This review suggests that there have been substantial advances in the availability and coverage of international data. Yet the data reviewed in this paper reflect only a tiny proportion of potentially relevant data across the world. International researchers will be most familiar with their local data archives and resources, as well as the data's limitations and potential for assessing a given theoretical and methodological question. Building cross-national connections and collaborations with social scientists around the world can therefore open doors to access new data and advance criminological knowledge. Opening up these dialogues and sharing data between and within regions may also help improve representation and integration of more non-Western theoretical perspectives within international criminology. Aside from embarking on Google 'deep dives,' one relatively easy first step to discovering new data and collaborators is to take up Adler's challenge to "read the world." Academic journals with international goals and audiences such as *International Criminology* can provide an important platform for meeting these challenges.

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