

## **To measure or not to measure. The Mexican Case**

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### **Abstract**

All societies require to measure crime in order to implement effective public policies to fight it. No efficient government can ignore this fact and National Statistical Offices (NSO's) being by definition the state agencies in charge of producing statistics on relevant social phenomena cannot eschew this responsibility. Crime can be no exception to their endeavours and the discussion on this topic should concentrate on the most effective methods to approach the subject. The role of NSO's cannot be overstated, as direct producers of information and as coordinators and the source of standards for other state producers of information on crime. The measurement of crime is a complex matter that requires not only the highest standards in statistical production but the use of a varied array of statistical (and geographic) tools. For this information to be useful in the implementation of public policies it must include besides the data on crime itself, that related to the resources and performance of the state institutions charged with the responsibility to combat it as well as to the public perception of their results. Prosecution and Justice Statistics must also be part of this equation. INEGI the Mexican Institute of Statistics and Geography has faced in recent years the challenge to provide Mexican society with relevant information on this topic that may provide a useful frame of reference for the discussion of the role NSO's should assume in the measurement of crime.

Key Words: Crime, Public policies, role of NSO's, statistical tools

### **Introduction**

Crime is a social phenomenon that is present in all societies however it differs in its intensity and varieties. Globalization and technology bring new challenges to all countries in this respect as crime becomes transnational and novel and/or complicated to measure forms of crime emerge: trafficking of persons and drugs, money laundering, cybercrime, organized crime, corruption and many others fit these last descriptions.

The gist of the dilemma expressed in the title of this paper is not so much if a society should measure this phenomenon or not as it would be obvious to state its need to do it in the affirmative in order to implement policies to combat it, but how it should be done and I must add, done efficiently, should be the key to resolve this question. This brings us necessarily to the role of national statistical offices as they are the government agencies supposed to provide countries with reliable information on the main social issues.

On this paper I will be following the experience of the Mexican Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) as we have dealt in recent years with the challenge to provide Mexican society with relevant information on this topic.

### **Basic factors**

According to INEGI's experience, I will list several important factors one has to consider before developing a strategy to better approach the production of crime statistics.

First factor:

In order to provide society with a comprehensive understanding of crime issues, there are several intricately related subjects that have to be contemplated in any public policy analysis of the subject.

These topics are so interrelated to crime and the ways through which society deals with it that cannot be separated from it in the process of producing information. These are the subjects of legal prosecution and justice proper. Furthermore, how society and in particular the government agencies responsible for fighting crime perform should also be part of the process for collecting information and offering it to the general public and especially to the people in charge of formulating and implementing public policies in these matters.

In this sense society needs information not only on the number and kind of crimes committed, but also on the resources available to the agencies combating it, their performance and results. This information will not be complete if it does not include the results of the state prosecution of delinquency and what happens at the courts of law.

Second factor:

Statistical agencies cannot produce all statistics related to these matters. In particular most administrative records can only be produced or generated by the same agencies responsible for attending crime and its related subjects. Police and court records report what is happening in their sphere of jurisdiction. In practical terms it is unavoidable this apparent conflict of interest. Also it should be mentioned that in reality statistics is not necessarily the top priority for these institutions.

Third factor:

Statistical offices can produce directly statistics in these areas through surveys and government censuses. They are endowed with the statistical responsibility and they have the statistical expertise that can play a significant contribution to the statistical work of other government agencies dealing with crime in general.

Fourth factor:

There are very different types of people working in both spheres. Statisticians, economists and related professions on the one side; policemen, prosecutors, lawyers, judges, politicians, on the other one. It is no surprise that they may be reluctant to work with each other. Their priorities and risks may not coincide but also their intellectual frames of reference may differ.

These four factors are determinant for the comprehensive and successful production of statistics on crime. The effort is not worthwhile if it does not cover the whole legal process for the attention of crime by the state and it needs to involve the government agencies charged with combating crime giving special consideration to their objectives and needs.

The main ingredient however would be the role of the National Statistical Office (NSO).

This role should be analyzed in the context of the national statistical system in which the National Statistical Office has a key position to play not only as a producer of information

but as the coordinator of the activities of the whole system. The statistical office has to adhere to the highest technical standards in its own work but also has an obligation as the guardian of those standards in the work of the whole national system. Furthermore I would like to postulate that the statistical agency should take the initiative on at least the main aspects of the national statistical system, to its role as the repository of official statistical knowledge corresponds an obligation to exercise and promote the vision for the national statistical system.

The NSO's role is particularly important in such sensitive areas as crime, where public trust in the quality of statistics is easily compromised and any vacuum left by the NSO can be filled by anecdotal information or by information not necessarily based on the highest statistical principles and methodologies.

How to do it efficiently will be the challenge. To have the law on your side helps of course. If there is a law explicitly stating these roles and if it also establishes the autonomy of the institution as is the case in Mexico<sup>1</sup> it will be all for the best but still laws have to be implemented in real life and for that to happen NSO's have to become skilled at convincing of the implicit and technical merits of good statistics and at working together with institutions not necessarily used to coordinate themselves with others.

### **The Mexican case**<sup>2</sup>

As it has been said, INEGI the country's national statistical office, is by law not only autonomous but also charged with both producing information directly and coordinating the efforts of all other stakeholders in the national statistical system.

INEGI had not considered a priority to measure crime before 2008, when it became apparent the country was facing a crime crisis and there were not the necessary statistical tools to measure this problem.

Among many policy decisions taken on this respect two stand out: Firstly, it was decided to measure these phenomenon as comprehensively as possible to provide society and policymakers with a clear picture of its dimension and secondly, based on the instruments provided by the law, INEGI undertook the initiative to identify, approach and eventually work closely with the main stakeholders in the production of crime statistics.

On the first point, it was decided to use all statistical tools available to approach the subject: victimization surveys are considered possibly the most important of them as they provide data on the dark figure of crime, the unreported side of it which is not recorded in administrative records, and with it a more clear knowledge of the size and characteristics of crime in a given society. In this respect, INEGI now conducts an annual household victimization survey and a biannual survey of crime against businesses.<sup>3</sup> Both surveys estimate number of crimes, types of crime, dark figures, perception and evaluation of authorities.

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<sup>1</sup> By constitutional law the National Institute of Statistics and Geography of Mexico is an autonomous agency, independent of all branches of government.

<sup>2</sup> For a more comprehensive revision of the Mexican case, see Palma (2012).

<sup>3</sup> The results, questionnaires and other methodological documents related to these surveys are available in: [www.inegi.org.mx](http://www.inegi.org.mx)

In order to address the need for information on the capacity and performance of the different states agencies (at federal, state and municipal levels) to respond to crime INEGI developed a series of government censuses that cover resources, personnel, functions and results. Even though the original motive for these censuses was to know more about the state response to crime, soon it was realized that these censuses should go beyond its original purpose and cover the whole administrative spectrum, taking advantage of the field operation by extending its questionnaire.

They are: the biannual municipal census that covers the 2457 municipalities of the country and three different annual state censuses that cover the 32 states on state government infrastructure including prisons management; state prosecution; and state judicial statistics.<sup>4</sup>

Besides the huge consensus effort for each census that will be explained below, the effect of collecting information from different entities at precise dates, from questionnaires previously analysed not only by experts but (in the case of the 32 states) by all authorities involved in the exercise has had a tremendous effect in terms of participation and quality of the collected data.

Administrative records are by its very nature produced originally at least by other agencies than the NSO, though the latter may collect them from their different sources and may publish them. Nevertheless it is crucial for the statistical system that the NSO's gets involved in all the steps for producing and/or collecting them. The most important example is perhaps the homicide data that being reported by the police or the health system constitutes one of the main components of any statistics on crime. The quality of the data and very particularly in this case, the opportunity (speed) at which it is made available are crucial for its usefulness. The role of the NSO's in ensuring the fulfilment of these two principles cannot be overstated.

All mentioned statistical tools can be greatly enhanced by the use of geographic technologies in order to present information georeferenced to its location.

The second point is closely related to the last considerations. Arguably in no other area of statistics there is so entailed a need for NSO's to work together with other agencies which produce information. Some of the barriers to do so effectively have been described above and they stem from the fact that institutions with quite different objectives and outlooks must coordinate themselves towards a common objective i.e.: the quality production of a set of statistics. At INEGI once we started prioritizing this subject, we were aware that as the institution charged in the country with the responsibility of producing statistical and geographic information, in consequence it corresponded to INEGI a duty to take the initiative to convoke the other stakeholders in this endeavour and to provide a vision of what a system (or subsystem in our case) of statistical information on crime should be.

To translate this objective into practice four so called technical committees were established for government, crime, prosecution and justice statistics. They are chaired by the federal institution considered the main producer or user of each kind of information.

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<sup>4</sup> The results, questionnaires and other methodological documents of these censuses are available in: [www.inegi.org.mx](http://www.inegi.org.mx)

In this way, the Budget Unit Head of the Ministry of Finance chairs the Government Committee; the Commissioner of the Federal Police the Crime one, the General Director of Planning of the General Attorney's Office chairs Prosecution and the General Director of Statistics of the National Judicial Council the one on Justice. INEGI functions as technical secretary of each of them and besides other representatives from federal agencies a very strong representation from the states and municipalities was ensured in particular through the national conferences of state prosecutors and state courts of justice which have adopted as part of their own agendas the same subjects included in the technical committees.

The technical committees have become the fora for the discussion of all statistical projects related to their particular subjects. New projects or changes to previous ones are originally analyzed there. The questionnaires of surveys and censuses are discussed and revised together by all institutions involved.

I would among many examples just refer to the experience we had with the state censuses on prosecution and justice. To start with there were no previous attempts to organize them and when they were suggested inside these committees there was understandably a lot of reluctance about their convenience. As it was an INEGI's initiative we undertook to explain the importance of this type of information but also crucially how this information could help their own work and also the effect of the lack of information on the public that can lead to institutions being criticized from non-reliable data. As a result, INEGI is undertaking in 2013 the 3<sup>d</sup> Censuses on these two subjects with the support of the 32 states with a questionnaire that has been improved through their joint efforts the last few years.

#### **The importance of international cooperation on crime statistics.**

International technical cooperation can be of particular relevance due to the complicated and evolving nature of crime as many countries lack the knowledge, experience and/or resources for measuring this phenomenon. The United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has been at the forefront in many initiatives on this respect, among them, the publication of the Manual on Victimization Surveys, just to cite one of the most relevant. INEGI with UNODC undertook the creation of a joint Centre of Excellence for Statistical Information on Governance, Victimization, Public Security and Justice, in Mexico in 2011 with the objective of working regionally for the development of crime surveys, undertaking research about different types of difficult to measure crimes and training and exchanging information on related subjects.

The UNODC-INEGI Centre of Excellence organized the First International Conference on Government, Victimization and Justice Statistics in Aguascalientes, Mexico in May 2012 with the attendance of 400 experts from 28 countries. A second conference is planned in Rome under the auspices of the Italian National Institute of Statistics ISTAT in 2014. These conferences as well as the work of the Centre of Excellence focus on the issues of producing statistics on crime and related subjects at the national and international levels.

Besides technical expertise, international cooperation can support NSO's efforts to promote and develop better statistics in areas considered too sensitive in many countries. International requests for information and the comparability it implies between countries can be used to reinforce the need for the qualitative production of statistics supported by international organizations and the international community at large.

In particular the consensus reached by countries on the need for quality statistics on crime through the work of international organizations and United Nations Commissions can be of great help for individual countries' efforts. Both the United Nations Statistical Commission and the United Nations Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice have approved several proposals presented jointly by INEGI and UNODC to implement a road map for improving crime statistics establishing a group of experts from the statistical and criminal justice fields to monitor its implementation. The road map includes a plan to finalize by 2015 an International Classification of Crime for Statistical Purposes and pledges technical support to countries for improving crime statistics.<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusions

To summarize, for crime statistics to be meaningful and useful to public policy-makers they should cover the whole legal process related to crime comprising government, security, prosecution and justice information. Government agencies and other stakeholders must be actively involved in statistical projects and NSO's besides their remit to produce statistics, must play a key role as coordinators and should we say, instigators of a national system of crime statistics.

International cooperation can be very helpful for country's efforts to measure crime, as it provides technical support to produce quality statistics and international leverage to undertake projects on sensitive subjects.

To the question should crime be measured or not, based on the previous considerations the resounding response should be YES, but more important as it has been said should be the positive response to the need for NSO's to take and lead a most active initiative for the quality measurement of crime in any given society.

Finally a brief reference to the title of this panel: is it dangerous to liaise statistics and crime? There is at least a case to be made that the worst danger to a country's internal security in the widest of senses would be not to be able to measure the extent of its crime situation due to the lack of will or to deficient numbers (or both of them) leaving its policy makers and implementers unarmed for this very real fight.<sup>6</sup>

## References

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<sup>5</sup> The report is available in: <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/doc13/2013-11-CrimeStats-E.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately there are practical and very real personal risks in countries with a high incidence of crime that have to be addressed carefully on these matters. It is important that NSO's develop protocols to protect survey-takers in dangerous neighbourhoods and at the same time assure the public that the person interviewing them represents the NSO and that the information provided will be treated confidentially and anonymously. INEGI has launched several publicity campaigns informing the public that its personnel would wear certain uniforms and ID's when visiting households, providing telephone numbers to verify ID's, etc. Field operations are organized in such a way that census and survey takers work in groups and are instructed how to proceed in difficult circumstances.