

## THE CULTURE OF REPORTING CRIMES IN MEXICO

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### ABSTRACT

*Available data show that a great number of crimes are not reported in Mexico: most people think that reporting a crime is a waste of time, and moreover victims do not trust the judicial system. As a consequence, we do not really know the crime and the victims. Through the method of the main components, in this study we built, at state level, two variables which we aim at explaining the determining factors of the crime reporting. Results can be used to improve the estimate of the number of reported crimes in Mexico pondering the current official data with the index obtained here.*

**Keywords:** *Crimes, Citizen Crime Reporting, Crime Statistics, Mexico.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the stated functions of the Mexican public security system is that of preserving public freedom, order and peace, as well as safeguarding the integrity and rights of the people through the prevention of crime. However, its efficacy and effectiveness are questioned by the people. Citizens do not trust those institutions entrusted with protecting their tranquility, and therefore they do not require the aid of the public security services. For instance, 39% of the citizens think that reporting a crime is just a waste of time, whereas 16% do not report a crime since they do not trust the authorities, and more than 50% state that they do not report a crime due to the lack of effectiveness of the judicial system, since their reports are rejected or have no effect. (INEGI, 2012).

Criminality is perceived as a personal problem, and every person has to cope with it day by day, as Cornelli suggests: in general, institutions lose their symbolic value as bulwarks against violence and disorder, and this causes disappointment, mistrust and insecurity (Cornelli, 335).

There is an increase in uncertainty and fear among the population, as well as risk and individualism,

which are typical of the modern world, and this makes individuals feel as if they are left to their own devices: people even resort to illegal means to solve their insecurity problems.

### 2. CRIMINOLOGY AND CRIME REPORTING

Counting only on information from police and judicial files meant to have information limited to reported crimes, and therefore victimization surveys were submitted to the general public, with the aim of knowing the total amount of crimes, and the percentage of unreported crimes.

It is common knowledge that there is an enormous number of cases unknown to the police, marking the difference between real and apparent criminality. In order to discover and partly to clarify a crime, police depend on the victims: most cases are revealed when suspects are questioned, and one third of cases are solved when discovered. Contrary to the detective myth, only a limited number of cases require a specialized or technical investigation. Generally, victims know the perpetrator (Torrente, 2001). Therefore, the key for making the legal system work is in the victims'

hands. Research aims at investigating the keys to the victims' behavior: the reasons for their well-known passivity or lack of cooperation with the legal system, and the consequences for the system itself.

Furthermore, according to García-Pablos (1996), the disaffection and distrust of victims with regard to the system, and the feelings of defenselessness and helplessness they usually show can probably explain the scant cooperation of victims with institutions as well as the extremely low index of crimes reported (García-Pablos, 1996:59).

The victims' reluctance to report crimes brings with it significant repercussions on the effectiveness of the system and is rightly alarming, actually, only reported crimes are investigated. In its turn, the attitude of victims imbalances all official statistics and hinders any realist and quantitative assessment of actual criminality.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Some societies report more crimes than others: according to some experts, it may depend on the level of trust in institutions, whereas other experts point at the type of crime. Only serious crimes are reported, with the exception of those implying insurance damages payments. Among the other elements which can lead to crime reporting one can find high educational levels, access to more information, living in a developed country, having a job, and even gender.

Criminology has portrayed profiles of those people more prone to report crimes, taking into account sex, age, the kind of crime suffered and so on. In a broader sense, other sociological variables exist, such as living standards and the level of development of a given society.

In this paper we included variables showing the living standards and the level of development of a society, such as access to media and information, beyond considering those variables which resulted from the victimization surveys and which are related to subjective aspects of the victims.

Along these lines, we analyzed the following variables:

- 1) Availability of communication media and access to information (computer, internet, television and telephone).
- 2) Feeling of insecurity
- 3) Damage resulting from specific crimes (physical, economic and emotional).

#### 3.1. Communication Media And Crime Reporting

Communication media have become more and more important since the 80's, as they change continuously, following technological breakthroughs. According to Castells (1999), these changes are characterized by:

- a) Rapidity of worldwide circulation.
- b) Penetration capability in all domains of human activities.
- c) Exponential growth of interactive computerized networks, creating new forms and channels of communication.
- d) Use of knowledge in a cumulative feedback circle, in which people can be users and creators at the same time.

Castells intends to show us that we witness a historical change where different modes of communication are integrated in an interactive network, thereby modifying communication and culture and creating a new symbolic environment which makes of "virtual reality, our reality" (Castells, 1999).

Moreover, we have to take into account that information and knowledge have been key elements for economic growth, and consequently, growth measurements usually include communication tools and information media available to the population of a given country.

Undoubtedly, information and knowledge are crucial elements in humankind development: production processes are always based on certain knowledge and on information processing. At this point, it is important to clarify the concepts of knowledge and information.

Castells takes up Daniel Bell's concepts (1973:175) in order to define *knowledge* as: a series of organized statements about facts or ideas, which show a reasoned opinion or an experimental result systematically transmitted to other people through any kind of communication media. Therefore, there is a distinction between knowing the news and entertainment. As for *information*, Castells defines it by taking up Porat's definition: information is made up of those data which have been organized and communicated (1977:2) (Castells, 1999:19).

However, in order to be able to speak of a new culture and sense of communication, an interaction should exist between sender and recipient, so as to create this information processing. In practice, these are unidirectional media in a communication system, moving only from sender to recipient, without interaction between them in order to interpret the message. "Globalization...is not evolving evenly, and in no way is it totally benign in its consequences" (Giddens, 2003:27).

On the one hand, the emergence of a global information society represents a powerful democratizing force. On the other hand, television and other media tend to destroy the dialogical space they have opened up, due to an inexorable trivialization and personalization of political matters (Giddens, 2003:91).

There is also the need to point out that information technologies do not uniformly reach every region of the world: their diffusion is selective, and those societies where development is imbalanced can neither count on the necessary technological basis, nor on the related infrastructure which are needed in order to progress in this revolution. The same also happens within any given country where inequality is rampant and technological advancement is not within everyone's reach.

Let us take the example of the internet, which represents the core of global computerized communications. Internet coverage is concentrated in developed countries, whereas in many areas of the planet only a minority of the population has access to this computerized network. It will expand through time, although individuals are neither socialized, nor instructed about how to massively use this new technology, and they are even less ready to mold their lives around it (Castells, 1999).

However, it is necessary to point out that internet users are not only users, but also producers, since they can insert contents and configure the net, even though this communication is still mostly spontaneous and unorganized, as it occurs among very different kinds of people.

So, it is undeniable that communication media provide people with information, notwithstanding the criticism against their use by politically motivated groups, in an attempt to mold people's minds.

Communication enhances social evolution, can bring about alternative and autonomous changes, greater abilities for those who keep themselves out

of the system, and can build brand-new political entities for progress.

So, in those societies with greater access to communication and information media, people are more likely to participate in public events and to express themselves according to their own interests.

As regards crime reporting by citizens, its indexes are higher in developed countries than in emerging ones, since people are conscious and informed about their rights and the duties of public institutions. Nowadays, internet-based social networks play a significant role in reporting crimes affecting individuals or groups and, at the same time, bring pressure to bear upon authorities to take care of the victims.

### **3.2 Insecurity Perception And Crime Reporting**

Furthermore, if we consider the subjective variables motivating crime reporting, we can point out that modernity brings with it an increase in individual, social and environmental risks. We are living in a risk-riddled society, characterized by chaos, uncertainty and ambivalence. People feel themselves threatened and fear that: "...this can boost the building of new walls against the understanding of their own complexity and lead to widespread mistrust among its members" (Sánchez, 2009:135).

Control systems have tightened, justified by the need to provide security, as Cornelli states, and fear of criminality represents the main symbolic resource used to legitimize institutions in a crisis situation (Cornelli, 336). However, knowing that the state increases the numbers of the police force, militarizes public security and sends more people to jail causes more fear, mistrust and insecurity in the population. On top of this, more news about crime and violence are broadcast: "Fear is created and produced, as well as managed and directed, by actors who minimize or maximize it, according to the needs of the historical and political agenda" (Sánchez, 2009:133). So, institutions are feared, but are considered as necessary to guarantee order, which is a prerequisite for peace and security, through fear (Cornelli, 2012:334).

In this way, subjective insecurity is the perception or personal feeling of the possibility of becoming a victim of a crime and can be really linked to

situations of less objective security, or it can exist independently of it.

Kessler claims that, contrary to expectations, international evidence shows that being a victim of a crime does not really affect fear, and that fear can be a feeling prior to victimization, and not one of its consequences.

According to some scholars, being a victim of a crime and surviving it seems to reduce anxiety about the consequences of other attacks (Kessler, 2009:173).

**4. DAMAGE PROVOKED BY DIFFERENT KINDS OF CRIME AND MOTIVATION FOR REPORTING THEM**

Several motivations prevail in the decision to report a crime: the desire of vengeance, the purpose of obtaining a certain economic compensation or to retrieve stolen properties, the idea of preventing further victimizations, or a mere moral imperative to cooperate with justice (García-Pablos, 1996:61).

The most recurring reasons to report a crime depend on the type and gravity of the crime, as well as on pragmatic reasons, such as the value of the stolen property or the need to obtain an insurance payment, as is shown by empirical researches.

In general, the most important reasons not to report a crime are its not being serious enough or the absence of a loss. Those countries where the crime suffered is not considered as serious enough tend to report less. The most reported crimes are car thefts and burglaries. (Inácio, 2004).

According to García-Pablos (1996:60-61), many factors contribute to the victim’s decision of not reporting a crime, among which are:

- 1) The psychological impact of the crime on the victims: fear, downheartedness, depression. Sometimes, inner self-reproach or self-accusation mechanisms enter into play as possible answers to an event the victim is not able to make sense of.
- 2) The feeling of powerlessness or personal defenselessness experienced by the victim (nothing can be done now), together with mistrust toward third parties: the victim believes the judicial system is useless and ineffective.
- 3) The justified purpose of avoiding further additional harm to the denouncer

(secondary victimization). The investigation and the judicial process triggered by the crime report imply a lot of inconveniences, frustrations and sufferings to the denouncer-victim.

As regards specific crimes, there are reasons not to denounce them, such as the fear of possible retaliations on the part of the denounced person. Kessler states that mistrust clearly enters a victim’s daily life, in the form of an attitude of suspicion toward strangers and an increase in the attempts to decode threatening signs around him, according to later assessments by those who have suffered from a crime they considered as serious. The relevant crime often leads to a redefinition of the surrounding or general reality, and represents the turning point into adopting the idea of insecurity as a describer of reality: this is a random danger everywhere (Kessler,2009:174).

**5. VARIABLES DETERMINING CRIME REPORTING IN MEXICO IN 2012**

In order to carry out our analysis, at first we worked out a correlation matrix which could allow us to understand the sense and grade of relation existing between the variables we thought could explain the reasons why a victim decides to report a crime, and the actual crime reporting. Results are shown in table 1.

**Table 1. Type of relation with the willingness to report a crime**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Willingness to report the crime</b>
Physical damage	0.225
Economic damage	0.274
Emotional damage	-0.345
Percentage of people with a computer	0.503
Average educational level	0.367
Percentage of people with a phone	0.394
Percentage of people with a TV set	0.243
Percentage of people with internet access	0.498

Feeling of insecurity	-0.476
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Source: the authors, data from INEGI (2000); (2008); (2010a); (2010b); (2011a); (2011b)

In Table 1 we can see that the willingness of the victims to report a crime is more related to those variables which imply a higher standard of living and access to technological means of communication [telephone, computer and internet] and to information, as well as higher educational levels. Other variables positively related to the willingness to report a crime are the level of economic and physical damage suffered, though they are less significant.

An interesting result is that, the greater the emotional damage and the feeling of insecurity suffered by the victims of a crime, the less frequent is the willingness to report a crime, as is displayed in Table I, which shows a negative relation.

As is demonstrated by other empirical studies, serious thefts are the most reported crimes. The most important reason not to report a crime is that the deed is not serious enough, or that losses are not considerable. In case of an assault, a subjective reason has been mentioned, namely “so that it will not happen again” (Inácio, 2004:341).

It has also been demonstrated that variables such as distrust towards the police and the judicial system and fear of crime are strongly correlated with the willingness to report a crime. Locally, the feeling of insecurity, the crime itself and the distrust towards the police feedback reciprocally (Kessler, 2009:95).

In this study we found out that fear and the perception of insecurity by the citizens are two of the main reasons for not reporting a crime in Mexico.

As violence by organized crime increased, so had the percentage of unreported crimes, though in some cases it remained the same (INEGI, 2012), which adds up to the distrust towards the police and the people’s fear of possible retaliations by the denounced person.

The amount of reported crimes is also determined by the social and demographic characteristics of society. It is hard to define a profile of the denouncer, though some specific traits can be found. For instance, women tend to inform more

about deeds related to violence and small-scale robberies. In Mexico, women tend to report burglaries more than men.

Within our study, through the method of main components we created two variables which we called: “crime-reporting culture index” and “victims’ emotional damage index”. These indexes include the previously described variables, specifying those related to the economy, to access to communication and information technologies, to the damage suffered by the victim, as well as subjective variables.

The mathematical structure of our indexes is:

$$X_{ij} = a_{ik} \cdot Z_{ij} + \dots a_{ik} \cdot Z_{kj} = \sum_{s=1}^k a_{is} \cdot Z_{sk} \quad (\text{Eq.1})$$

Where **a**’s are coefficients and **Z**’s are the standardized values of the variables in each subject of the sample.

The method of main components allowed us to build a hypothetical variable which absorbs a part of the variance of the variables included in the study. In our case, we found two components: the first absorbs 48.3% of the variance of the original data, and the second 19.9%. The two components amount to 68.3% of the total variance of the original data. The punctuation of each variable integrating every component shows the relation of each component with each variable.

The two components are:

**Table 2. Type of relation with the willingness to report a crime**

Variable	Crime-reporting culture index	Emotional damage index
Reports	0.545	-0.495
Physical damage	-0.098	-0.663
Economic damage	0.525	-0.533
Emotional damage	-0.466	0.686
Percentage of population with computers	0.935	0.111
Average educational level	0.912	0.181
Percentage of population with telephones	0.924	0.222



Percentage of population with television	0.782	0.350
Percentage of population with internet access	0.928	0.042
Feeling of insecurity	0.031	0.585

Source: the authors, data from INEGI (2000); (2008); (2010a); (2010b); (2011a); (2011b)

We can see in table II that the percentage of population with computers, telephones and internet access represent those variables more correlated with the first component, as well as the average educational levels and, to a lesser extent, the economic damage suffered by the victims. This is the reason why we called the first component “crime-reporting culture index”, since if people are more educated, have access to technology and are more informed, they will be more willing to report a crime. It is also important to take into account the influence of the possible economic damage to the victims.

As concerns the values of the second component, we can see that those variables with greater correlation are those referring to emotional damage, feelings of insecurity and, to a lesser extent, those referring to having a TV set and a phone: for this reason we called this component “emotional damage index”.

Finally, we analyzed the distribution of our crime-reporting culture index in Mexico, as is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 near here

In Figure 1, we can notice that there is a relation between the more developed states and the crime-reporting culture index. It is clear that in those states with higher per capita income levels such as Nuevo León, Quintana Roo, the Federal District, Jalisco and Baja California, the crime-reporting culture index is higher, whereas those states with a higher percentage of the population living in extreme poverty show a lower crime-reporting culture index.

According to the National Council for the Assessment of Social Development Policies (CONEVAL), in 2012 the State of Chiapas ranked first in Mexico as far as the percentage of the population living in poverty was concerned (74.7%), followed by the state of Guerrero with 69.7%, the state of Puebla with 64.5% and the state

of Oaxaca with 61.9%. Apparently there is an inverse proportion between poverty and the crime-reporting culture.

Finally, it is important to mention that those variables related to educational backwardness, access to basic services, incomes below well-being levels and quality of living spaces were considered in measuring poverty indexes. In our study, the variable referring to average education as well as those related to education such as access to technology and information are tightly linked with the willingness to report a crime on the part of those who have been victims of a crime. Moreover, these variables rank high in our crime-reporting culture index.

**CONCLUSIONS**

According to our crime-reporting culture index, when facing a crime we can notice the following:

- a) Those people with access to information and communication technology are more willing to report a crime. Namely, if victims use the internet, computers and television, they will be more likely to report a crime.
- b) We also found out that people with higher educational levels will be more willing to report a crime.
- c) Economic loss or physical damage are overcome, as motivations to report a crime, by variables such as education and access to information technology.
- d) Emotional damage and feelings of insecurity have a negative influence on the victims’ willingness to report a crime.
- e) After analyzing the distribution of the crime-reporting culture index in the different states, we observed that the more developed states – that is, those with less poverty – show a higher crime-reporting culture index, whereas the less developed, poorer states, show a lower crime-reporting culture index.

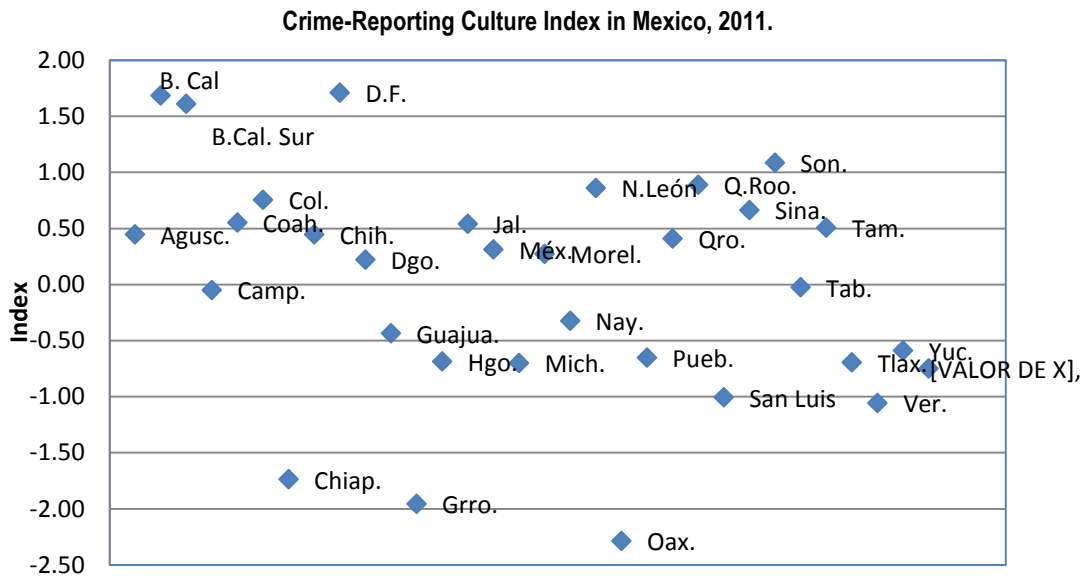
Finally, this study allows us to point out that, by devising public policies aiming at increasing the educational levels of the population and providing them with greater access to information and communication technologies, it could be possible to lead the victims to report more crimes, thereby bringing about improvements in those institutions responsible for public security.

<http://www.inegi.org.mx/est/contenidos/proyectos/ccpv/cpv2010/Default.aspx>

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Figure 1. Distribution of the Crime-Reporting Culture Index in Mexico



Source: the authors, data from INEGI. (2000); (2008); (2010a); (2010b); (2011a); (2011b)