Behind the Numbers:
Decoding the Victimization Rate in Albania and Advocating for a Data Revolution

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an effort to explore three important dimensions of victimological research in Albania. Firstly, it investigates the conceptualization of the victim within the Albanian legal system and its evolution. Secondly, the paper critically examines the availability and reliability of victimization statistics in Albania, assessing current data completeness and areas for improvement. Lastly, it conducts an in-depth analysis of relevant statistics to detect victimization patterns and associated risks, providing meaningful insights into the dynamics of victimization in the Albanian context. The combined analysis of these aspects highlights the challenges posed by the scarcity of victimization data. Territorial disparities, demographic influences, and a detailed analysis of crime categories contribute to unveiling what is known about victimhood in Albania, making this the first research of this kind to be conducted in Albania. The paper advocates for a data revolution, underscoring the importance of improved data collection and reporting practices to inform effective interventions and policies in Albania's dynamic landscape. Thus, the paper offers a comprehensive perspective on victimological research in Albania, laying the groundwork for informed policies in the evolving landscape of crime and victimhood in the country.

Keywords: victimization, criminal victimization, victimization survey, crime statistics, Albania.

1. INTRODUCTION

For centuries, the scientific examination of crime has centered on the offender, often neglecting the victim who has traditionally been perceived as an unfortunate bystander. It was only in the early 20th century that scholars started to pay attention to the neglect of victims within the criminal justice system, leading to the emergence of victimology as a separate discipline [6].

Significant progress in victimology occurred with large-scale victimization surveys, starting with the U.S. National Crime Victimization Survey in 1972. These surveys showed the essential role played by comprehensive victimization statistics in guiding research and policy development. Nowadays, they serve to supplement official crime statistics in testing empirical victimization theories and exploring victims' lifestyles, risks, and relationships with perpetrators. By allowing us to understand the 'dark figure of crime' – incidents not reported to authorities, these statistics contribute to a more accurate assessment of victimization rates and help research victim needs, crime impact, and dissatisfaction with victim services.

In the second half of the 20th century, influenced by this research, the criminal justice system shifted from a defendant-centric model to one prioritizing the rights and needs of crime victims. However, this transformation is ongoing, with scholars like Strang [9] suggesting that the current state of the criminal justice system falls short of meeting victims' expectations.

Building on this foundation, this paper explores three dimensions of victimological research in Albania. Firstly, it investigates the conceptualization of the victim within the Albanian legal system and its evolution. Secondly, the paper critically examines the availability and reliability of victimization statistics in Albania, assessing current data completeness and areas for improvement. Lastly, it conducts an in-depth analysis of relevant statistics to detect victimization patterns and associated risks, providing meaningful insights into the dynamics of victimization in the Albanian context.

In summary, this paper combines these insights to offer a comprehensive perspective on victimological research in Albania, laying the groundwork for informed policies in the evolving landscape of crime and victimhood in the country.

2. THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE VICTIM IN THE ALBANIAN LEGAL SYSTEM

In Europe, three distinct models for conceptualizing victims within the criminal process are recognized. Summarily, these models are based on these conceptualizations of the victim: 1) the victim is viewed as an individual whose rights have been violated by a criminal offense, thereby granting them the right to demand justice and actively participate in criminal proceedings; 2) victims primarily function as witnesses, contributing information to clarify cases, and participating in criminal proceedings only when called by the court as witnesses; 3) victims play a role analogous to the civil party in the criminal process, and the emphasis is on the harm suffered by victims and their right to seek compensation directly within the criminal process [7].

Traditionally following the victim-as-civil-party model, Albania underwent significant changes in 2017 with the amendment of

the Criminal Procedure Code (CPC). The revised code recognizes a general right for victims to participate in proceedings. Victims are entitled to extensive rights, and relevant authorities must inform them about these rights and available support. Despite embracing aspects of the first model, Albania's legal framework remains somewhat ambivalent and hybrid.

In Albania, some victim rights are contingent upon them appearing as civil parties, requiring proof of harm, thus intertwining with the civil party model. On the other hand, the CPC retains the perception of the victim as a witness and emphasizes their protection from re-victimization, which aligns with the model of the victim as a witness in the criminal process. However, despite the seemingly broad rights accorded to victims, they are not elevated to the status of an equal party compared to prosecutors and defendants. Only the accusing victim is recognized as an equal party, revealing fundamental deficiencies in the rights granted.

In conclusion, the victim in the Albanian criminal process (excluding the accusing victim) is a participant with rights but lacks the status of a complete party [23], revealing a unique and evolving conceptualization model.

3. CRIME AND VICTIMIZATION DATA IN ALBANIA

The interpretation of victimization processes requires a thorough examination across different stages, including the victim's perception of a crime, reporting to law enforcement, and the formal initiation of criminal charges. It is crucial to recognize that data from these various stages and quantitative methodologies may vary, capturing experiences at different phases of the victimization process. In the initial stage, data reflects the victim's subjective experiences and perceptions, influenced by cultural elements. Subsequent stages produce data shaped by administrative and criminal systems, guided by statutes and regulations that are specific to that jurisdiction.

Official victimization data, structured by legislation and institutional mandates, are indispensable but insufficient for a comprehensive understanding. Additional quantitative and qualitative data from large-scale surveys play a vital role in enhancing this understanding.

Primary crime and victimization data in Albania originate from records maintained by the police, prosecution, and the judicial system. While State Police and prosecution statistics are annually summarized, judicial statistics are presented in yearbooks by the Ministry of Justice. Police statistics, with demographic details, are valuable, but prosecution and judicial statistics lack victim-related information, except for domestic violence cases.

Access to police and prosecution statistics for research is facilitated through quarterly crime statistics published by the Albanian Institute of Statistics [11]. However, these statistics lack integration and analysis, retaining limitations inherent in police and prosecution data. Additionally, there is a lack of statistical micro-data, contributing to a scarcity of official information documenting the status of victims throughout the criminal process.

Apart from gender-based violence, supplementary data is limited. National gender-based violence surveys, conducted by INSTAT in collaboration with UNDP and UNICEF [18, 19, 20], offer critical insights into various forms of violence. Several studies on specific crimes, supported by international organizations and NGOs, present another source of information, although caution is needed due to their project-specific conceptualization and methodology.

Since 2019, the safety barometer has been implemented in Albania, addressing issues of fear and personal safety. While not directly related to crime or victimization, the results contribute relevant insights to the analysis.

Albania lacks comprehensive victimization surveys and sufficient data on victimization, posing a significant obstacle to in-depth studies on this critical subject. The absence of essential data hinders the exploration of patterns, risks, and aspects of victimization, impeding the development of targeted policies and the country's capacity to address the evolving landscape of crime and victimhood effectively. Urgently, Albania should prioritize establishing robust data collection mechanisms, including victimization surveys, to facilitate comprehensive research and informed decision-making in victimology.

4. THE VICTIMIZATION RATE AND DEMOGRAPHICS IN ALBANIA: WHAT DO WE KNOW?

Victimization Rate in Albania: According to data published by INSTAT [11], the aggregate count of documented victims in Albania has consistently declined, with 13,650 victims recorded in 2022, indicating a 19.3% reduction from the previous year. This translates to a victimization rate of 4.94 victims per 1,000 inhabitants, down from 6.05 in the preceding year. A parallel downward trajectory is evident in crimes against life, with a victimization rate of 1.99 crimes per 1,000 inhabitants.

Further research is crucial to determine whether the reduction in the number of victims is due to an actual decline in criminal activity, underreporting of incidents, or alterations in law enforcement practices concerning victim identification and documentation. This is particularly noteworthy given that overall criminality does not show a corresponding decline.

In the United States, there has been a significant decrease in violent victimization rates, declining from 79.8 per 1,000 inhabitants in 1993 to 16.5 in 2021 [4]. Victimization rates across EU countries range from 3% to 18%, influenced by diverse factors [8].

Crime data within the EU indicate a decline in common offenses, such as theft, robbery, and assault [12], but feelings of insecurity on the streets have not decreased much. Criminological investigations have long highlighted an inverse relationship between the fear of crime and the measured rate of criminality [22], stemming from rational responses to criminal behavior. In the Albanian context, the level of criminality appears to be directly proportional to the perceived sense of fear. A majority of Albanians express a sense of security in their homes, neighborhoods, towns/villages, and the country overall [13]. Notably, perceived threats to safety encompass drug use, illegal possession of weapons, murder, and traffic accidents, while incidents such as school violence, gender discrimination, and street harassment are deemed lower on the spectrum of perceived threats.

Victimization Demographics in Albania: The available data for 2022 delineates victims in Albania by gender, revealing 9,450 male victims and 4,200 female victims.

Analyzing these figures separately unveils a male victimization rate of 6.8 per 1,000 male inhabitants and a female victimization rate of 3 per 1,000 female inhabitants. Consequently, men in Albania are over twice as likely to be victimized compared to women, aligning with global trends where men constitute the majority of victims [21].

These findings are consistent with global research on victimization patterns among men and women, showing that heightened victimization risk is associated with being white, male, young, unmarried, possessing low self-esteem, and having a history of victimization [21]. The literature attributes these trends to the lifestyle and course of event dependence theory, suggesting that men are more prone to engaging in high-risk behaviors such as theft, public drunkenness, drug use, or association with criminal elements. This rationale would similarly apply to Albanian men, who exhibit a higher tendency to engage in high-risk social behaviors.

An intriguing aspect is the division of victims by gender and crime category, revealing that men generally have a higher victimization rate across crime categories, with exceptions noted in sexual crimes and domestic violence. Notably, men are over five times more likely to be victims of murder, while women are victims 2.3 times more often than men in crimes constituting domestic violence.

The crimes with the highest victimization rates in Albania include traffic violations, theft, domestic violence, and intentional crimes against health. Significantly, domestic violence emerges as a significantly pervasive crime.

Global homicide rates average 6.1 per 100,000 inhabitants, with 90% of murders committed by men and 81% of victims being men (UNODC, 2019). In Albania, the murder rate is 1.9 per 100,000 inhabitants, with 85% of murder victims and 94.4% of perpetrators being men. Notably, women globally and in Albania are more likely to be victims of homicide by an intimate partner or family member. Globally, 64% of homicide victims in such cases are women, rising to 81% in intimate partner homicides (UNODC, 2019). In Albania, a consistent majority (ranging from 66.6% in 2020 to 92.3% in 2019) of murdered women fall victim to homicide by an intimate partner or family member [1].

INSTAT data on victimization can also be geographically classified based on the district where the event occurred. Tirana, encompassing nearly 35% of all victimizations, emerges as the district with the highest victimization rate, a proportionality reflective of its population share (33.5% of the entire country's population). Although this analysis is incomplete without complementary data on the territorial distribution of victimization, the ratio between population size and victimization rates reveals disparities among districts with several districts having victimization rates not proportional to their population share. These differences suggest a potential influence of social disorganization theories, warranting further investigation to ascertain additional factors contributing to the distribution of victimization rates among districts.

The demographic characteristic of the age group is one of the few recorded by the police. The available statistics distinguish between minor victims (under 18) and adult victims. Child victims constitute a small percentage of the total victims, averaging 6.5%, with a gradual decrease in their number since 2017, a significant drop in 2020, and a marginal increase in 2021.

The number of adult victims has steadily decreased in tandem with the overall decline in the total number of victims. While limited data is available on minor victims due to the absence of detailed statistics, a gender-based analysis reveals that similar to victims in general, boys overwhelmingly outnumber girls among minor victims. In 2022, girls accounted for 26.6% of minor victims.

Gender-based Violence Victimization Rate and Demographics in Albania: Findings from national surveys conducted in 2007, 2013, and 2018 on gender-based violence in Albania consistently affirm the prevalence of domestic violence against women, particularly by intimate partners, within families and communities. While these studies employed similar methodologies and instruments for intimate partner violence collection, it is essential to acknowledge that the 2018 survey incorporated some modifications to measure additional types of intimate partner domestic violence.

The 2018 survey results reveal that 52.9% of women aged 18-74 have experienced one or more of five different types of violence in their lifetime, encompassing intimate partner violence, violence during a romantic relationship, non-partner violence, sexual harassment, and/or stalking. Regarding violence perpetrated by an intimate partner, 47.0% of married or cohabiting women and 65.8% of women involved in a relationship without cohabitation have experienced domestic violence at one point in their lifetime. Furthermore, among all women aged 18-74, 18.2% have experienced non-partner violence, 18.1% have faced sexual harassment, and 12.6% have encountered stalking.

These results underscore the significant prevalence of victimization by violence against women and girls in Albania. Comparatively, UNWOMEN reported in 2013 that approximately 35% of women worldwide had experienced at least one type of violence by a partner or someone else in their lifetime. In Albania, the victimization rate of violence against women is 1.5 times higher than the global average, based on the 2018 survey.

The Statistical Yearbook of the judicial system, maintained by the Ministry of Justice, records 2,795 victims of domestic violence throughout Albania in 2021, with a victimization rate of 1 per 1,000 inhabitants. Adjusting for the female-male ratio and the country's population, the rate of victimization by domestic violence is 1.5 per 1,000 female residents, notably lower than the perceived rate derived from national surveys.

The 2018 survey revealed that 3.1% of women aged 18-74 had experienced sexual abuse during childhood. Additionally, 18.1% of women in the same age group have 'sometimes' or 'currently' experienced various types of sexual harassment.

A relevant study on violence in intimate relationships among adolescents reported that 66% of young people have been exposed to violence, with girls more likely to be exposed due to knowing an abused person, and boys due to knowing a bully (AWEN, 2019). The perpetration of violence is predominantly by men, while women are primarily victims.

Demographically, victims of domestic violence from an intimate partner, according to the 2018 survey, are more likely to be in the 18-24 age group and the first or second year of marriage. Additional demographics from previous surveys indicate that

victims are more likely to have completed only the minimum level of compulsory education (9 years), reside in rural areas, not work outside the home (or be on maternity leave), and have a history of exposure to violence, sexual abuse, tolerance of violence, or substance abuse. Perpetrators are more likely to have a high school education, with statistical insignificance regarding employment status.

The age group of 18-24 exhibits the highest percentage of experiencing sexual harassment and stalking, while women aged 65-74 are at an increased risk of elder abuse by family members.

Analyzing court cases of domestic violence in Albania, female victims aged 26-36, currently married with two children, possessing 9 years of education, unemployed, residing in urban areas, and primarily abused by their husbands, are predominant.

Crime Reporting Rate in Albania: The underreporting of crime remains a global issue, with non-reporting posing serious challenges in criminal justice for victims and the system alike. Victim support programs heavily depend on police referrals, making unreported crimes a missed opportunity for victims to receive help, support, and compensation. Consequently, there is a growing body of literature examining the factors influencing victims' willingness to report crimes.

Early studies indicated that legal proceedings were initiated in 75 to 80% of cases when victims or witnesses reported criminal events [24]. This has led to the characterization of victims as the 'gatekeepers of the criminal justice system' [15]. Subsequent research showed that approximately 40% of all crimes come to the attention of the police [24].

These conclusions remain relevant. The violent victimization reporting rate in the US was 46% in 2021 [4]. In the EU only 30% of violent incidents and 11% of harassment are reported to the police [8]. Reporting rates for property crimes are higher, with 73% of home burglaries, 95% of credit card fraud cases, and 50% of consumer fraud cases reported [8].

Unfortunately, there are no available statistics on general crime reporting rates in Albania. National surveys on domestic violence reveal that a significant percentage of abused women are reluctant to openly discuss their experiences. These surveys show that the percentage of women disclosing violence has decreased from 16-28% in 2007 [18] to 16.9% of abused women in 2018 [20]. Only 8.4% of abused women sought help in 2018 [20], and even those sought help predominantly from their families.

The decision-making process regarding reporting crime involves labeling the event, determining its seriousness, and deciding on a course of action [16]. Social influences, emotional reactions, and the victim's narrative play crucial roles in this process [17]. In Albania, women experiencing physical and sexual violence are more inclined to report [20].

In Albania, many abused women refrain from seeking help due to perceptions that the situation isn't serious enough, fear of embarrassing the family, and concerns about blame or shame [20]. Conversely, those who seek help often do so due to encouragement from friends and family, recognition that violence is unacceptable, and an inability to endure further harm [20].

Repeat victimization decreases the likelihood of reporting the last incident [10]. Higher levels of trust in the police correlate with increased reporting, a factor that may contribute to lower crime reporting in Albania, where only 43.06% have faith in the State Police [13]. Additionally, a lack of trust in prosecutors and courts further hampers crime reporting [13].

Place-based factors also influence reporting, with stronger social cohesion in a neighborhood positively correlating with reporting rates. Conversely, greater socioeconomic disadvantage in a neighborhood is associated with lower reporting rates [2]. This aligns with data on domestic violence in Albania, where cases going to court are primarily from urban areas [14].

In conclusion, the 'dark figure' of unreported crime in Albania likely mirrors global trends, representing nearly half of all crimes. Understanding the factors influencing reporting is crucial for addressing this issue. Future research should explore deeper into the unique challenges faced in Albania and propose strategies to enhance crime reporting and victim support.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The victim status in Albania's criminal justice system has evolved from a traditional to a contemporary rights-focused approach. However, the current hybrid model presents several conceptual challenges. To address this, refining the legal framework is suggested to ensure equal treatment by elevating victims to the same standing as prosecutors and defendants, contributing to a more victim-centric system.

Analyzing victimization statistics reveals gaps in understanding crime dynamics due to the absence of victimization surveys. Urgently, Albania needs robust data collection, including surveys covering various crimes, demographics, and locations. In addition, official victimization data must be collected for various stages of the criminal process that are currently left out. Collaboration with international organizations and NGOs can aid in implementing standardized methodologies for comprehensive research in victimology.

Patterns in victimization rates and demographics in Albania prompt questions about the actual decline in criminal activity, underreporting, or shifts in law enforcement practices. Disparities among genders, age groups, and locations underscore the need for targeted interventions and further investigation. The prevalence of domestic violence, particularly against women, emphasizes the urgency of addressing this issue.

Albania faces the same challenge of crime underreporting that many other countries face, and it is surely influenced by social, emotional, and systemic factors. Understanding actual reporting rates, motivations, and barriers is crucial for effective victim support programs and building trust in the criminal justice system.

In-depth research of the three victimological aspects outlined in this paper is essential to the understanding of victims and victimization processes in Albania. While Albania follows many of the global crime trends, there are evident cultural, social, and systemic peculiarities that warrant the undertaking of scientific research and the combined employment of all research methods. Insights gained from data collection and research thereof can inform targeted strategies to improve the reporting culture,

contributing to a more robust and victim-centered criminal justice system, and fostering a safer and more equitable society.

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