

Changing Crime in Phnom Penh

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Is Phnom Penh more or less dangerous than it was five years ago? Residents and frequent visitors to the city have in recent years noted a more relaxed and peaceful ambience. In the past self-imposed curfews emptied streets early in the evening but has Phnom Penh become as safe as other cities?

All over the world official crime statistics account for only a fraction of crime. Many crimes are not detected or reported to the police. Even when crimes are reported they are not always recorded by the police, although records of serious crimes such as homicide are usually more reliable. Criminologists refer to these unaccounted crimes as the 'dark figure of crime'. The 'dark figure' of unreported crime varies from country to country and partly reflects confidence in police and differences in the severity and frequency of some crimes. Compared to many places in the world Cambodia has one of the lowest rates of reporting crime to the police and thus one of the largest 'dark figure' of crime.

The United Nations International Crime Victims Survey (UNICVS) in Cambodia

To obtain valid estimates of the extent of crime large victim surveys involving representative samples of the population have been conducted. One such measure is the United Nations International Crime Victims Survey (UNICVS) which estimates the prevalence of 12 crimes. Since 1989 the UNICVS has been used in 74 countries and/or their main cities. While these 74 countries have not participated in all the five UNICVS sweeps (1989, 1992, 1996, 2000, and 2005), many, including Cambodia, have been involved in the last two sweeps.

In 2001 1177 households in Phnom Penh and 572 in Kandal were interviewed about their crime experiences using the UNICVS². We also collected demographic, attitudinal and socio-economic information from every household. Five years later, using the same methods, we administered a second sweep of the survey, involving 1092 households in Phnom Penh and 635 in Kandal. The UNICVS questionnaire asks respondents whether during the past *five years* their household or personally (depending on the type of crime) have been victim of any of the following crimes: for households; car theft, theft from car, car vandalism, motorcycle theft, bicycle theft, burglary, attempted burglary and livestock theft³ and, for individuals; personal theft, robbery, sexual offences against women, and assault or threat of assault.

¹ Griffith University, Key Centre for Ethics, Law, Justice and Governance, January 2008. We are extremely grateful to Mr. Robert Bradley and Mr. Huot Veng Chan of the Cambodian Criminal Justice Assistance Project (CCJAP) for assisting in the collection of the data in 2001 and 2006.

² Other provinces were also included in the first sweep (Kampot, Spueu, Chhnang and Cham), however, funds were not available to include them in the 2nd sweep of the UNICVS. The survey was funded by AusAid and carried out with the assistance of CCJAP.

³ Livestock theft is not usually a crime included in the UNICVS but was added to the protocol due to the widespread keeping of livestock in Cambodia.

The UNICVS also asks respondents whether they were victim of these crimes during the *last year* (i.e. during the year preceding the interview). From their answers one year victimisation prevalence estimates are computed. The UNICVS questionnaire also asks individuals if there were victims of commercial fraud or corruption during the last year.

An important feature of the UNICVS is that it asks victims if they reported their victimisation to the police. So the extent of the ‘dark figure’ of crime can be approximately estimated. The fear of crime (e.g. how safe respondents feel after dark), perception about police performance (e.g. how good police are at controlling crime), and attitudes about the punishment of offenders (e.g. what should the punishment be for a recidivist burglar) are also included in the UNICVS interview.

Findings of the UNICVS

We first report the *five-year* and *one-year* prevalence estimates of victimisation for 12 crimes altogether (i.e. victimised by at least one of the 12 crimes *at least once*) during the first and second UNICVS sweep (2001 and 2006) in both Phnom Penh and Kandal (Figure 1). Then we present for Phnom Penh the one-year victimisation estimates and the proportions who reported to the police for each of the 14 surveyed crimes (including fraud and corruption) during 2000 and 2005 (Table 1).

In Figure 2, we compare Phnom Penh’s one-year (2005) victimisation estimates for only 10 crimes⁴ with 26 other cities during the same year. We report on the fear of crime for both sweeps and how Phnom Penh in 2006 compared with other cities in the world (Figure 3). We also compare Phnom Penh with other cities perceptions about police performance (Figure 4) and finally, attitudes about the punishment (i.e. the proportion of respondents favouring a jail sentence) of a recidivist burglar (Figure 5).

Trends

The results presented in Figure 1 indicate that criminal victimisation (for 12 crimes in this instance) has remained stable in Kandal but declined in Phnom Penh. In 2001 72% of the Kandal sample had experienced at least one crime in the past *five-years* and in the *last year* (one-year prevalence) 31% at least one crime. In Phnom Penh the risk of crime was higher with 77% victims of at least one crime in the past *five-years* and in the *last year* 46% at least one crime. Five years later the second UNICVS survey showed the five-year and one-year estimates in Kandal were 73% and 28% respectively, but had reduced to 70% and 24% in Phnom Penh. Criminal victimisation was now less likely in Phnom Penh than in Kandal.

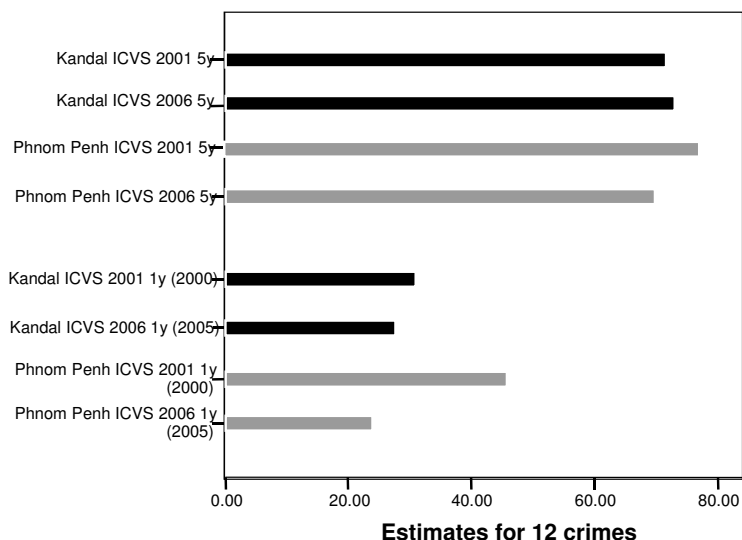
Risks decline in Phnom Penh

Table 1 show that the decline in criminal victimisation in Phnom Penh was for all types of crimes. In 2000 the rates for theft from car, livestock theft, burglary, personal theft, and especially fraud and corruption were high but have

⁴ In this comparison excluding car vandalism and livestock theft because they were not measured for all cities.

substantially reduced by 2005. However, about one in five are affected by corruption and one in four consumer fraud.

Figure 1:
UNICVS five-year & one-year estimates (12 crimes) 2001 & 2006 for Kandal & Phnom Penh.



* Note one-year prevalence estimates may be subject to significant annual fluctuations and the five-year-prevalence estimates (for 12 crimes in UNICVS 2006 shown in Figure 1) are also subject to non-sampling errors such as a respondent forgetfulness. Also the UNICVS does not measure homicide and victimless crimes (i.e. drug use) and therefore also undercounts some crimes.

Most victims do not report to the police

Table 1 also shows that most victims did not report their victimization to the police. Victims of motorcycle theft (61.5% reported in 2000 and 69.6% in 2005) and robbery (45.5% reported in 2000 and 62.5% in 2005) were more likely to report to the police than other crimes, and more victims did so in 2005. Victims of other crimes were much less likely to report to police and this had not improved by 2005. Compared to other cities Phnom Penh had one of the lowest proportions of crimes reported to the police.

Phnom Penh and other Cities

For year 2005, it was possible to compare Phnom Penh with 26 other principal cities for 10 crimes (i.e. excluding car vandalism, livestock theft, fraud, and corruption). Eleven cities (London, Buenos Aires, Tallinn, Amsterdam, Reykjavik,

Belfast, Dublin, Johannesburg, New York, Copenhagen, and Stockholm) had higher overall prevalence than Phnom Penh (Figure 2)⁵.

Table 1:
One-year estimates & % report to police for Phnom Penh in 2000 & 2005

Crimes	2000 (N=1177)		2005 (N=1092)	
	prevalence %	reported %	prevalence %	reported %
Car theft ^a	1.3	100.0	0.0	-
Theft from car ^a	20.5	4.3	4.3	10.0
Car vandalism ^a	2.6	0.0	1.7	0.0
Motorcycle theft ^a	7.7	61.5	2.4	69.6
Bicycle theft ^a	9.9	10.9	5.8	2.4
Livestock theft ^a	20.0	5.3	8.2	0.0
Burglary	16.2	16.2	7.5	18.3
Attempted burglary	7.8	31.5	2.7	6.9
Personal theft	13.8	8.6	6.5	9.9
Robbery	1.9	45.5	1.5	62.5
Sexual offences against women ^b	1.8	8.3	0.2	50.0
Assault/threat	7.8	27.2	2.0	27.3
Fraud	39.6	5.7	25.4	6.5
Corruption	28.1	1.2	18.3	1.0

^a Rates calculated for owners of vehicles or livestock: car owners (2000 = 229; 2005 = 235); motorcycle owners (2000 = 1011; 2005 = 957); bicycle owners (2000 = 644; 2005 = 712); livestock owners (2000 = 285; 2005 = 329). ^b Rates calculated for female respondents: females (2000 = 673; 2005 = 590). The large fluctuation between 2000 and 2005 in reporting sexual crimes to the police is based on a very low number of victims.

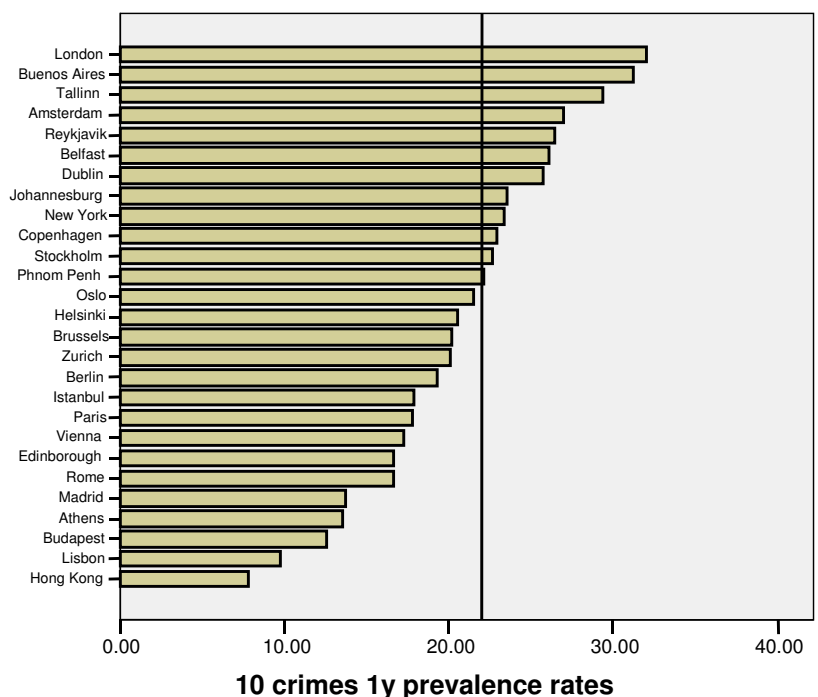
However, among the cities compared Phnom Penh had the highest risk of burglary⁶ and corruption. It was also among the highest for fraud (exceeded only by Budapest and slightly worse than Athens and Hong Kong) and pick-pocketing (ranked 5th after Lima, Tallinn, Buenos Aires, and London). Yet it was among the lowest for violent crime. Although Phnom Penh ranked 12th for robbery this was about 20% of the highest estimate which was reported for Buenos Aires. Lima,

⁵ Van Dijk, J.J.M., Van Kesteren, J.N. & P. Smit, 2007, "Criminal Victimization in International Perspective: Key Findings from the 2004-2005 ICVS and EU ICS", [Draft] University of Tilburg & UNODC.

⁶ Yet Phnom Penh residents were much less likely to perceive the risk of burglary as high compared to many other cities.

Johannesburg, Tallinn, London, Brussels, Belfast, New York, Lisbon, Dublin and Zurich all recorded higher risks of robbery than Phnom Penh. For sexual assault, assault against women, and assault (with force) Phnom Penh was among the lowest: for example, it was less than a third of the levels of assault against women observed for cities such as Lima, New York, Helsinki, and Copenhagen; and less than a 10th of the levels of violent assault experienced in Johannesburg and less than a quarter of the levels found in Edinburgh.

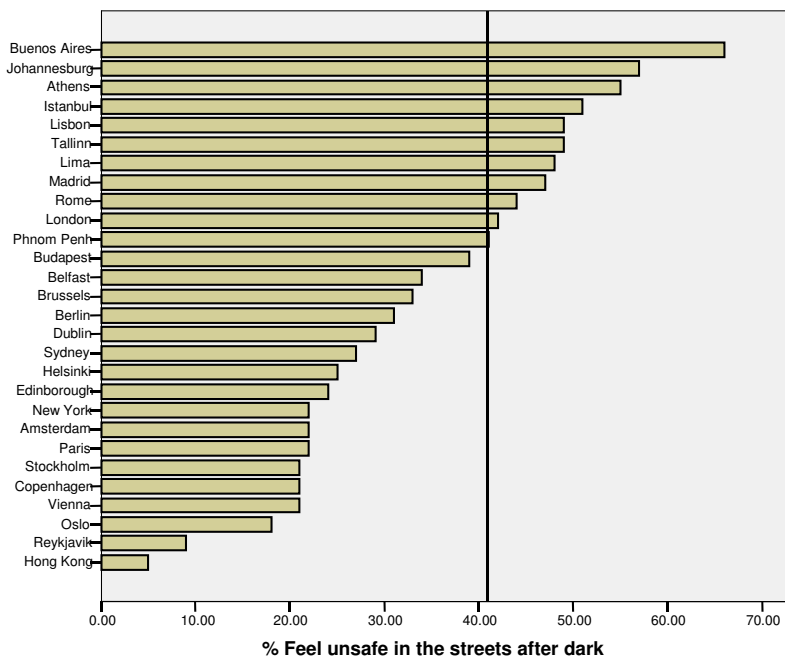
Figure 2:
26 cities compared by one-year victimisation rates (2005) for 10 crimes



Fear of Crime

Over two-fifths of Phnom Penh respondents in our first and second sweeps felt *unsafe* or *very unsafe* “walking alone in your area after dark” (46.6% in 2000 and 41% in 2006) and in Kandal fewer respondents felt unsafe (39.5% in 2001 and 33% 2006). Overall more respondents in both provinces felt safe in 2006. Respondents also felt much safer “at home after dark” with 25.5% feeling *unsafe* or *very unsafe* in Phnom Penh in 2006 compared with 34% in 2001 while in Kandal the proportion fell from 39% to 29%. Although two-fifths of Phnom Penh respondents felt unsafe in their local area after dark, respondents in 10 other cities (Figure 3) felt more unsafe: in order of “fear” - Buenos Aires, Johannesburg, Athens, Istanbul, Lisbon, Tallinn, Lima, Madrid, Rome, and London.

Figure 3:
Fear of crime in 2006 for 27 Cities



Public perceptions of police and attitudes to offenders

Acceptance of policing and the legitimacy of police is a crucial aspect of crime prevention. In many cities, particularly Hong Kong, the public had a more positive perception of police performance than Phnom Penh residents. Only 56% of Phnom Penh respondents in 2006 felt that the police were doing a good job at “controlling crime” and 55% felt they were helpful⁷. However, Figure 4 shows that attitudes towards police in Phnom Penh were no worse than for Brussels or Rome and were better than in Madrid, Athens, Istanbul, Tallinn, and Buenos Aires. In the first sweep 37% of respondents who were victims of corruption cited police officers, but in the second sweep fewer (31%) mentioned police officers and more cited municipal officials (from 43% in 2001 to 58% in 2006). While in our first sweep 29% of the Phnom Penh public felt that police officers were likely to engage in corrupt conduct only 14% expressed this negative opinion in the second sweep.

The UNICVS questionnaire asks all respondents about what kind of punishment should apply to a 20 year old male who is found guilty of burglary for the second time (for stealing a colour TV). The options included a fine, a community service order, a suspended sentence, and a prison sentence. In 2006, 57% of the Phnom Penh public thought that a recidivist burglar should serve time in prison. Only

⁷ Phnom Penh respondents were less positive about police in 2006 than in 2001 when 64% thought they did a good job of controlling crime and 62.5% thought they were helpful. Respondents in Kandal also were less positive about police in 2006 than 2001: 64% felt they did a good job and 67% thought they were helpful in 2001 but 60% felt they did a good job and 57% thought they were helpful in 2006.

Hong Kong and Johannesburg respondents (76%) were as or more punitive. However, respondents in Lima, Belfast, Buenos Aires, and Istanbul were only slightly less punitive than Phnom Penh residents.

Figure 4:
Public perception about police performance in 25 Cities.

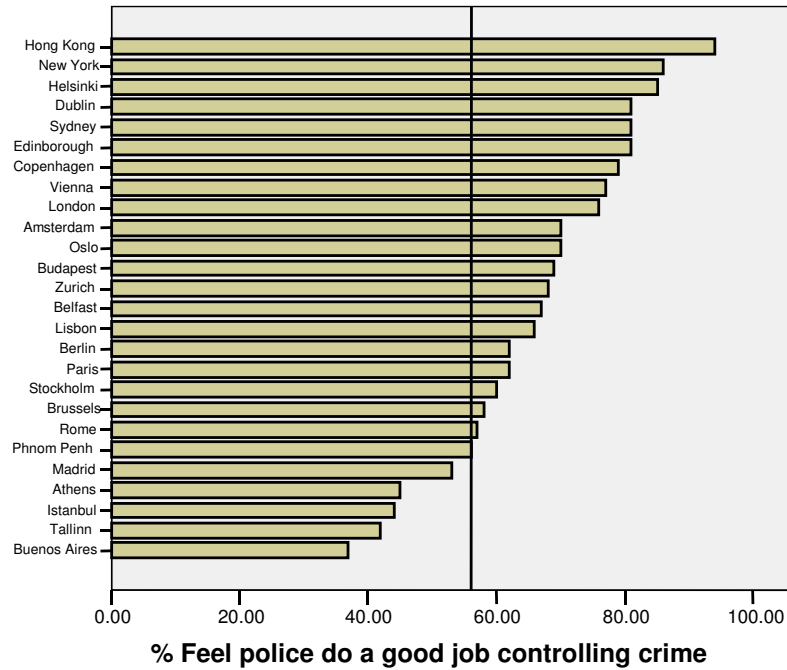
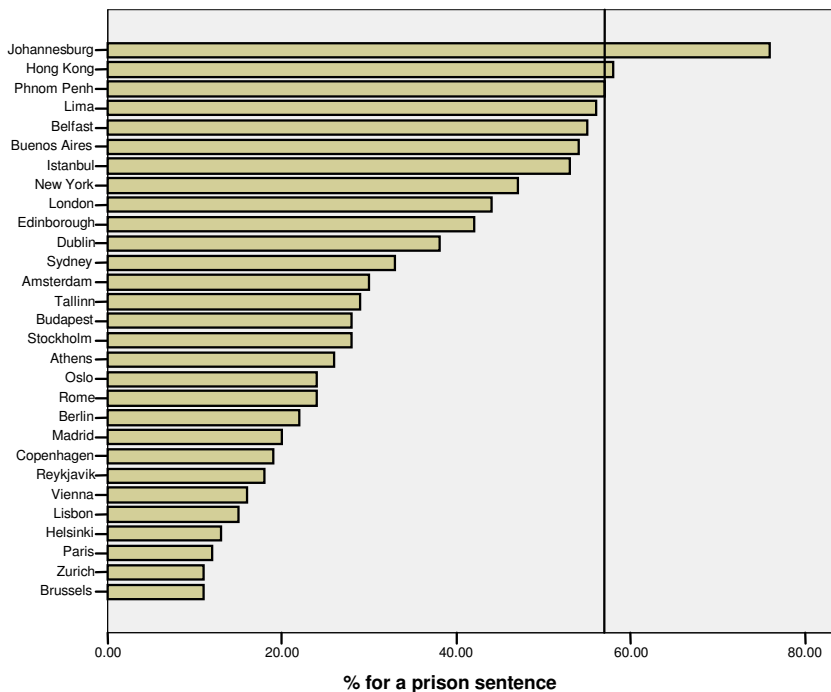


Figure 5:
Public attitudes to the punishment of a repeat offender.



Crime Risks

The risks of criminal victimisation are generally declining, and compared with many other capital cities Phnom Penh residents are not more likely to be at greater risk of victimisation. Compared to other cities, in 2005 the risk of non-lethal robberies and assaults was relatively low in Phnom Penh. Yet, the risk of burglary, personal theft, livestock theft, and particularly fraud and corruption remains relatively high. Livestock theft was of course more prevalent in the rural provinces (Kampong Cham, Kampong Chhnang, Kampong Spueu, and Kampot) that we surveyed in 2001 (between 45%-66% five-year rates)⁸.

As elsewhere in the world, younger people were more at risk of all types of personal victimisation than older people, and males were more at risk than females of violent personal victimisation. However, females were more likely to be at risk of personal theft, and assault than males.

From these surveys we can see some moderation of crime risk and fear but few signs of improvement in the public’s confidence in policing. However, the vast majority of victims remain unwilling to report crime and this suggests that much remains to be done to improve the effectiveness of crime prevention and the credibility of policing institutions.

⁸ A further survey of Kampong Cham in October 2007 will also provide data on changes in criminal victimisation in rural Cambodia.