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Penal Issues

CESDIP

Centre de Recherches
Sociologiques sur le Droit
et les Institutions Pénales

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Personal Violence in France since the Mid-'80s

Penal Issues has set out to publish the findings of the CESDIP research programme on crime trends. Issue XXI.4 dated September 2008 was devoted to homicides. The present issue is devoted to non-lethal personal violence, as studied by **Renée Zauberman, Philippe Robert, Emmanuel Didier, Sophie Névanen and Lisa Miceli** in the framework of a contract (open invitation to tender) with the National Research Agency.

Estimating the trend in a type of crime requires the comparison of data from several sources. In the case of non-lethal violence, victimisation surveys are at hand, in which a representative sample of respondents are questioned about offences to which they were victims during a given period. The results may be compared with the data contained in statistics for police and gendarmerie activity. Because of the variety of types of violence possibly experienced by survey participants, these will be divided into three categories, analysed in the following order:

- serious physical violence entailing working incapacity of at least eight days,
- other physical violence (less serious injury, blows, and so on),
- « other » violence (such as rackets, non-violent snatching, threats, insults, and so on).

Data and methods

Victimisation surveys:

- a first nationwide victimisation survey conducted by the CESDIP in the mid-'80s;
- 11 annual EPCV surveys (*Enquête permanente sur les conditions de vie des ménages*, EPCV, on the living conditions of households) containing a small module on victimisation, conducted by the INSEE (*Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques*, National institute for statistics and economic studies) from the mid-'90s on;
- since 2007, at the request of the Ministry of the Interior, the INSEE has replaced these by surveys called *cadre de vie et sécurité* (CVS, personal environment and safety), entirely focused on victimisation.

Each of these surveys asks about victimisations suffered over the two years previous to the study. All contain a module on the violence that respondents feel they had suffered (were you victim to an assault or to acts of violence, including by a person you were acquainted with?) These nationwide surveys represent the basis of the series used to study the trend in personal violence.

Other studies occasionally used are:

- the « *Baromètre Santé* » (Health Barometer), a survey conducted by the *Institut national de prévention et d'éducation pour la santé* (INPES, National institute for prevention and health education);
- ESCAPAD surveys (*Enquête sur la Santé et les Consommations lors de l'Appel de préparation à la défense*) on health and substance use conducted during military preparation days

The Ministry of the Interior statistics count acts transmitted by the police and the gendarmerie to the justice system, with the exception of highway offences, offences caused by recklessness or negligence and those incurring the least serious penalties (*contraventions*, petty offenses).

Method: rendering the two sources comparable requires a number of preliminary operations.

Surveys indicate the **proportion of respondents who were victims (prevalence)** and the **average number of victimisations of a same kind suffered by victims** over the past two years. Multiplying one by the other yields an **incidence rate** (number of acts suffered per 100 respondents over the reference period). The ratio of the latter to the overall population (over age 15) provides estimates in absolute figures, which may then be compared with police figures.

Crime categories selected among the latter are those whose definitions come closest to the phrasing describing victimisation incidents in the surveys.

Victimisation surveys were created because a number of crimes were neither reported to the police nor uncovered by them. Consequently, police records provide lower figures than the estimates drawn from surveys.

To account for this difference, we introduce the concept of **apparent (or reported) incidence**, which refers exclusively to the victimisation incidents for which respondents claimed to have filed a complaint. Here too, the resulting rate is set in ratio to the reference population so as to obtain estimates, in absolute figures, comparable to police figures.

These should, in theory, be located within the confidence intervals¹ of the estimates of reported incidence. If such is the case, the difference between the two sources is entirely explained by the greater or lesser propensity of victims to report incidents to the police. If, conversely, the police figures fall outside the limits of the confidence interval, the reasons for the difference between the two sources must be sought elsewhere.

¹ Since extrapolation of the results of a sample survey to the overall population can only be probabilistic, there is a 95% chance that the confidence interval, more or less wide depending on the size of the sample, contains the real value.

Victims of violence within the overall population

For contextualisation, we would recall that this personal violence is a relatively exceptional instance, all in all. It affected 4% of the population in 1984-1985, and affects 17% in 2005-2006. Although the sudden rise of late may be partially accounted for by some modifications in the questionnaire, there is a definite upward trend (cf. **Figure 1**). Moreover, people are increasingly repeatedly victims of violence: average multi-victimisation rose from 1.3 incidents over the two previous years in the mid-'80s to 2.6 in the most recent survey.

However, this overall evolution conceals very different trends depending on the type of violence, as we shall see.

Physical violence

In the case of *serious physical violence*, a paradox immediately arises: over the last decade, the police figures are increasingly higher than the survey figures (**Figure 2**). This seems absurd: the official counts would record more incidents than those claimed by victims.

Actually, the police term of comparison is mostly composed of the offence of deliberate assault and battery. Until 1981, this was defined by a total incapacity to work (TIW) of at least eight days. In 1981, 1983, 1993, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2002, 2003, 2006 and 2007, law were passed extending this definition to violent acts causing less serious physical consequences and even some with no such consequences. The surveys, on the other hand, retained the old definition of a TIW of at least eight days. But in police statistics, the cases corresponding to this definition are now drowned in the mass of additional cases². The outcome is that there is no longer any term of comparison for that category, unfortunately a highly sensitive one.

It is, moreover, difficult to pinpoint any very significant trend in this violence, for which the order of magnitude remains very low. Larger samples would be required to obtain more accurate estimates, at least.

We may however attempt to work on the overall category of physical violence, that broader whole in which the controversial category of deliberate assault and battery is diluted (cf. **Table 1** and **Figure 3**).

Until the end of the 1990s, both sources show a similar, moderately upward trend. Conversely, they diverge somewhat in the early 2000s: survey findings show a sort of plateau whereas police statistics continue to rise. This may be due to the series of laws extending the perimeter of the offence of deliberate assault and battery.

The last survey shows a sudden, considerable drop in the number of these physical assaults; there are far fewer

Figure 1. Prevalence of violence (%) within the overall population (1984-2006)

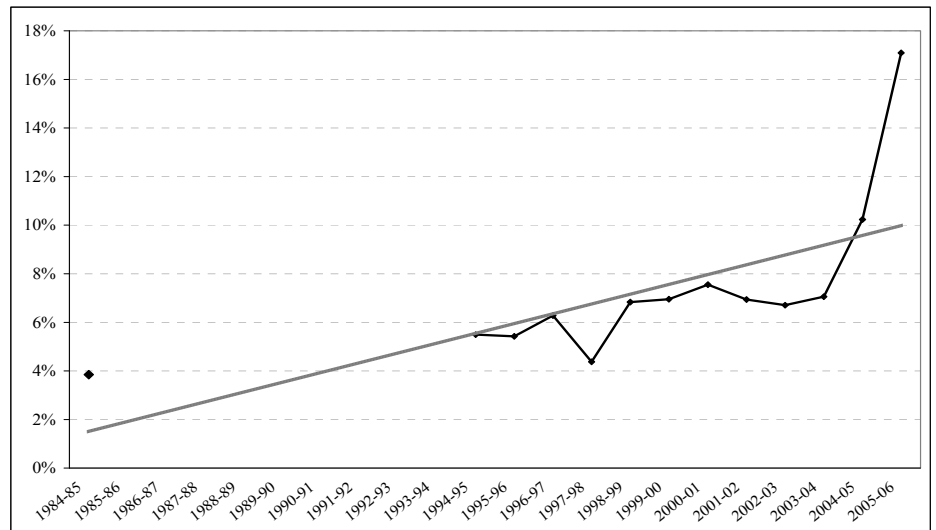


Figure 2. Serious physical violence (incidence and police data (1984-2006))

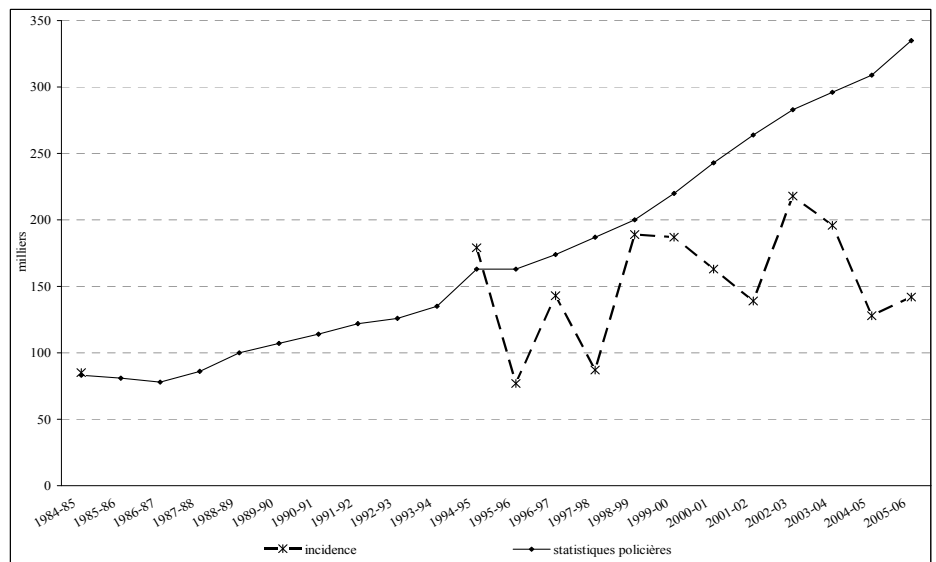


Table 1. All physical violence (incidence, reported incidence, police statistics, in thousands) (1984-2006)

	Estimated incidence	Estimated reported incidence	Police statistics
1984-1985	1 023 [846-1 201]	557 [454-660]	204
1985-1986			194
1986-1987			182
1987-1988			200
1988-1989			227
1989-1990			243
1990-1991			262
1991-1992			280
1992-1993			291
1993-1994			306
1994-1995	2 304 [1 889-2 719]	879 [706-1 052]	317
1995-1996	1 562 [1 324-1 800]	477 [390-565]	326
1996-1997	2 281 [1 987-2 575]	582 [490-675]	347
1997-1998	1 970 [1 713-2 227]	825 [698-953]	366
1998-1999	2 048 [1 755-2 342]	955 [810-1 101]	394
1999-2000	2 188 [1 870-2 506]	997 [841-1 153]	441
2000-2001	2 517 [2 180-2 855]	1 076 [903-1 249]	504
2001-2002	2 190 [1 895-2 486]	1 085 [927-1 243]	550
2002-2003	2 072 [1 777-2 366]	928 [787-1 070]	562
2003-2004	2 423 [2 207-2 640]	955 [858-1 051]	563
2004-2005	2 569 [2 339-2 800]	939 [843-1 036]	576
2005-2006	2 009 [1 779-2 238]	577 [495-659]	607

² Sentences corresponding to the old definition may be identified, using court statistics. They show that whereas those legislative extensions resulted by 1984, in one fifth of the sentences handed out on this count, that figure is now up to three fourths.

victims of violence in 2005-2006, and they suffered fewer victimisation incidents during the recall period. All in all, we find the lowest level since the late 1990s. More information will be required – such as the 2006-2007 CVS – to see whether the 2005-2006 findings indicate a reversal of trend or an exceptional drop with no aftermaths.

The fact remains that the magnitudes provided by the two sources differ enormously – a disparity of about 1 to 5 – despite the attenuation caused by the sharp drop in the latest survey findings.

Last of all, until 2004-2005, police counts were consistently lower than estimates of reported incidence. In other words, they show fewer violent acts than respondents claimed to have reported to the police. The explanation is simple: despite the spate of laws which, as mentioned above, upgraded a great many former petty offenses to misdemeanours (*délits*), there must still be quite a few complaints that still correspond to the definition of petty offenses, which are not included in the ministry of the Interior statistics. The sharp drop in survey findings for 2005-2006, combined with the continued rise in police statistics (not caused by a higher complaint rate, in this case), makes police counts converge with estimates of reported incidence for the first time.

« Other » Violence

There remain all those cases in which respondents told the INSEE pollsters that they had been assaulted, while specifying that they had not suffered any incapacity to work or even any sort of injury or beating (Table 2 and Figure 4). This means a very wide range of threats, insults, and attitudes perceived as aggressive, but also ordinary racketing without any assault, or mere snatching of a cell phone, with no associated violence...

Up to 2003-2004, the upward trend is sharper in police statistics than in survey findings, after which the two more strongly diverge. The last two surveys show an explosion – quite paroxysmal in the last survey – which does not correspond to anything similar in police data. This results both from a great increase in prevalence and a rise in multiple victimisation. Is it due to a change in the wording of the question, which mentions, for the first time, that respondents should include purely verbal violence? The tendency of the EPCV to pay greater attention to these low-intensity violence than the other surveys available had already been pointed out. This may either be because INSEE pollsters « encourage » people to note even the most minimal incidents, or because the face-to-face situation enables more systematic memory scrutiny than telephone interviews. Possibly, modifications in the protocol of the latest EPCV and even more so, of the CVS, lent almost grotesque dimensions to that bent. Do these recent modifications suffice to account for that soaring rise? Is it an echo of the 2005 urban riots and their

Figure 3. All physical violence (incidence, reported incidence, police statistics) (1984-2006)

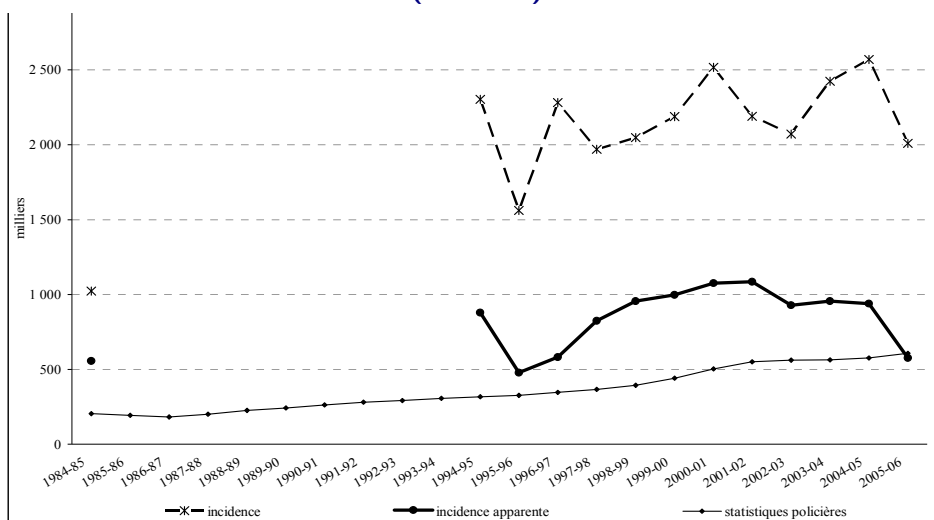
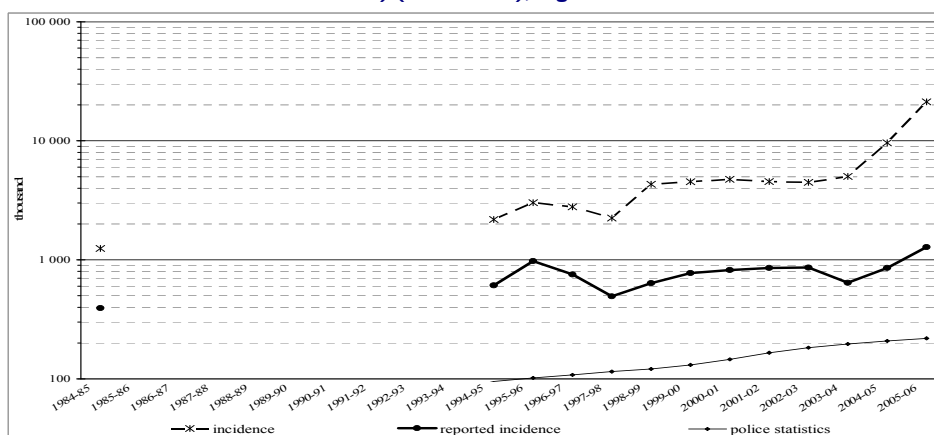


Table 2. « Other » violence (incidence, reported incidence, police statistics, in thousands) (1984-2006)

	Estimated incidence	Estimated reported incidence	Police statistics
1984-1985	1 248 [1 089-1 406]	393 [343-442]	29
1985-1986			30
1986-1987			28
1987-1988			41
1988-1989			57
1989-1990			60
1990-1991			62
1991-1992			63
1992-1993			66
1993-1994			79
1994-1995	2 180 [1 829-2 532]	611 [512-709]	95
1995-1996	3 027 [2 732-3 322]	976 [881-1 071]	102
1996-1997	2 782 [2 508-3 056]	753 [678-827]	108
1997-1998	2 247 [2 003-2 491]	494 [440-547]	115
1998-1999	4 319 [3 929-4 710]	637 [579-695]	121
1999-2000	4 531 [4 116-4 946]	776 [705-847]	131
2000-2001	4 746 [4 337-5 154]	822 [752-893]	146
2001-2002	4 547 [4 150-4 945]	855 [780-930]	166
2002-2003	4 482 [4 090-4 874]	860 [785-935]	183
2003-2004	5 011 [4 728-5 294]	642 [606-678]	196
2004-2005	9 621 [9 210-10 033]	855 [819-892]	208
2005-2006	19 825 [19 113-20 537]	1 195 [1 153-1 238]	219

Figure 4. « Other » violence (incidence, reported incidence, police statistics, in thousands) (1984-2006); logarithmic scale



after-shock? Or again, does it reflect increased sensitivity to violence among respondents?

The question is difficult to answer for the time being. We can only note that victims of this « other » violence apparently differ from other victims of

violence. First, it is the only category of attacks in which the prevalence is higher for women than for men, although the difference declines between the 2003-2004 EPCV and the CVS (2005-2006). Next, it is the only category in which prevalence is (slightly) higher among employers and executives than in the middle management/employee group and (much more) than among blue-collar workers, although the category most affected is always the economically inactive, probably an artefact produced by the higher prevalence of women victims.

But the main finding lies elsewhere: the magnitudes diverge so widely as to be on different planets³, showing that police counts do not at all reflect the world of petty violence uncovered by surveys.

For its better part, the distance between the two sources is due to the victims' extreme reluctance to lodge complaints. However, throughout the period, the police and gendarmerie record fewer of these « other » acts of violence than the victims claim to have reported. The chances are that this « deficit » is caused by the host of incidents too minor to be labelled misdemeanours: being mere petty offences, they are unfortunately excluded from official reckoning.

Conclusions

First of all, official data seriously overestimate the increase in serious physical violence because, unlike judicial statistics, they have not succeeded in guarding themselves against the disturbing effects of a particularly great influx of legislation. Surveys and court statistics both indicate a low level for this category of offences; to get accurate information, and especially information on trends in this infrequent type of victimisation, it would be helpful if national surveys used samples of a size similar to that of their equivalents in other, neighbouring countries.

Police statistics and surveys agree more or less on the trend for personal violence as a whole, but the former give a very incomplete picture.

The Ministry of the Interior data considerably underestimate the extent and pattern of this trifling violence – the « other » violence – that so strongly marks general population survey results in recent years... without any clear indication of whether respondents are more often victims or have turned more thin-skinned to incidents they would have overlooked during earlier surveys. It would be useful, at any rate, to at least include those petty offences called *contraventions* in police counts.

Without those « other » aggressions, it would hardly be possible to speak of a rise in personal violence. There is no indication of a significant increase in serious violence, and the increment in physical violence as a

A possible underestimation of youthful victims of violence

Surveys point to the special situation of youth with respect to violence. The Health Barometer, for instance, shows prevalence rates for personal violence victimisation quite similar to those of the INSEE surveys, except for youths, for whom the rates are much higher (cf. Table 3).

Table 3. Prevalence rates (%) for physical violence; comparison between the Health Barometers and EPCV by age group

	1999		2004	
	Health Barometer	EPCV	Health Barometer	EPCV
15-19 years	9.8	4.4	6.7	5.0
20-25 years	7.6	4.2	5.2	4.0
26-34 years	2.8	1.6	2.5	1.7
35-44 years	2.1	1.5	2.0	1.7
45-54 years	1.7	1.5	1.3	1.0
55-64 years	1.5	0.9	1.0	1.2
65-75 years	0.5	0.2	0.8	0.5
Total ages 15-75	3.1	1.8	2.4	1.9

Similarly, ESCAPAD, administered to samples of 17 to 19 year-olds, shows much higher figures than those found by INSEE surveys for the same age groups and for very similar periods⁴. Furthermore, the ESCAPAD and the Health Barometer find similar magnitudes, whereas their survey methods differ enormously, with telephone interviews in one case and self-administered questionnaires in the other.

As for « other » violence suffered by young people, comparison with the ESCAPAD surveys further nourishes our suspicion of possible underestimation. For example, for 1999, ESCAPAD finds a 25.8% prevalence rate of insults and threats, whereas the corresponding EPCV finds a rate of 7.1% for the same age groups. For 2001 and 2002, the prevalence of threats was 15.2 and 13.0% for ESCAPAD, whereas the EPCV mention rates of 5.6 and 5.7%. Even if the differences in the wording of questions are greater in this case than for physical violence, even if more comparisons would be needed, there is reason to fear that the violence suffered by youths is underestimated, and that this underestimation pertains to all sorts of violence, although to violence only. A test on thefts did not lead to the same findings.

The reason why surveys diverge on this point is unclear, but in any case it is worth noting that both the Health Barometer and ESCAPAD use much larger samples than the national victimisation surveys, even after the (limited) extension of the latest EPCVM and CVS.

whole seems quite moderate. It is low-intensity violence that contributes most to the rise in violence.

Moreover, youthfulness seems to play a crucial role with respect to the trends in violence, including as victim, but the latter role remains to be explored, as well: this is a second reason for increasing the size of samples.

At any rate, the availability of several sources measuring offending – some institutional, others taken from non-institutional surveys – is clearly most useful, and comparison between these sources enriches the measurement of crime and of its trends. Had we administrative statistics only, we would seriously overestimate serious violence and we would even more seriously underestimate « other » violence.

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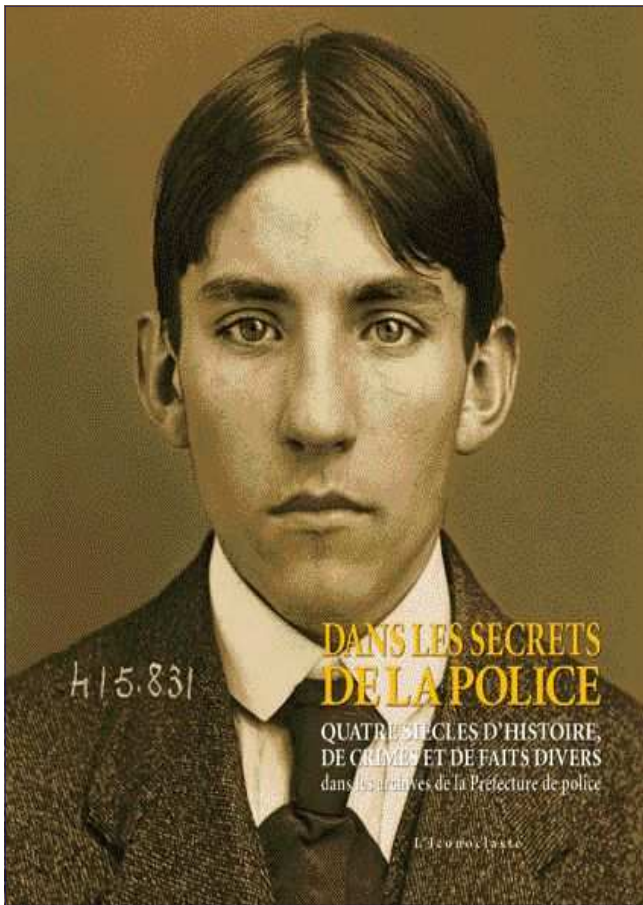
³To the point where we are obliged to adopt a logarithmic scale, without which the curve for police data would be practically inseparable from the abscissa.

⁴ESCAPAD : 8.5 % in 2000, 8.6 in 2002, 8.1 in 2003 ; EPCV : 4.7 % in 1999, 3.8 in 2001 and 2.9 in 2002.

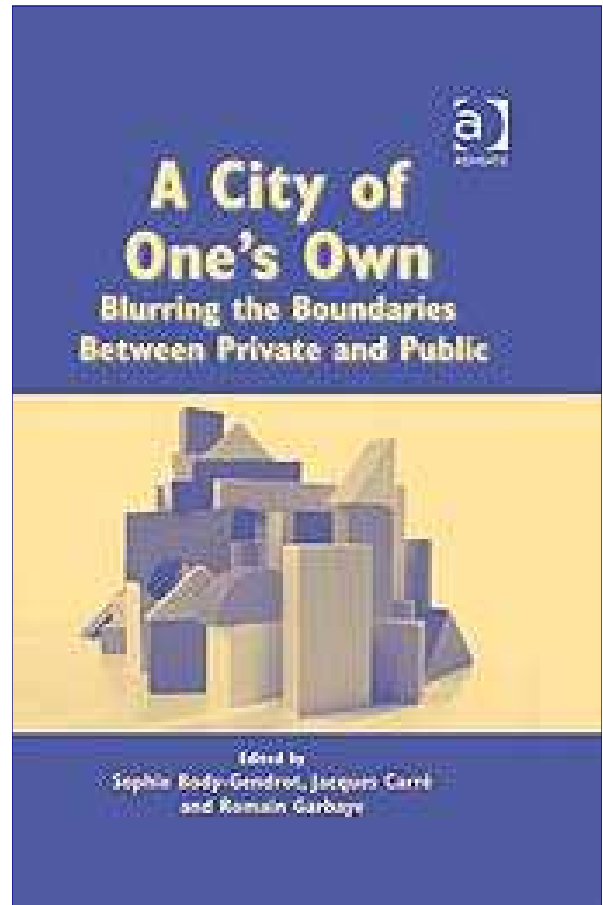
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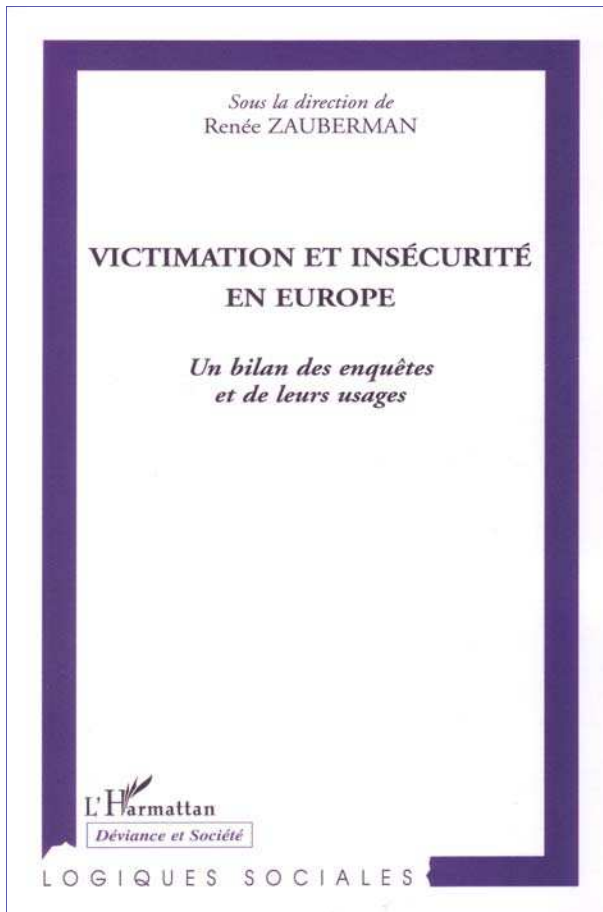
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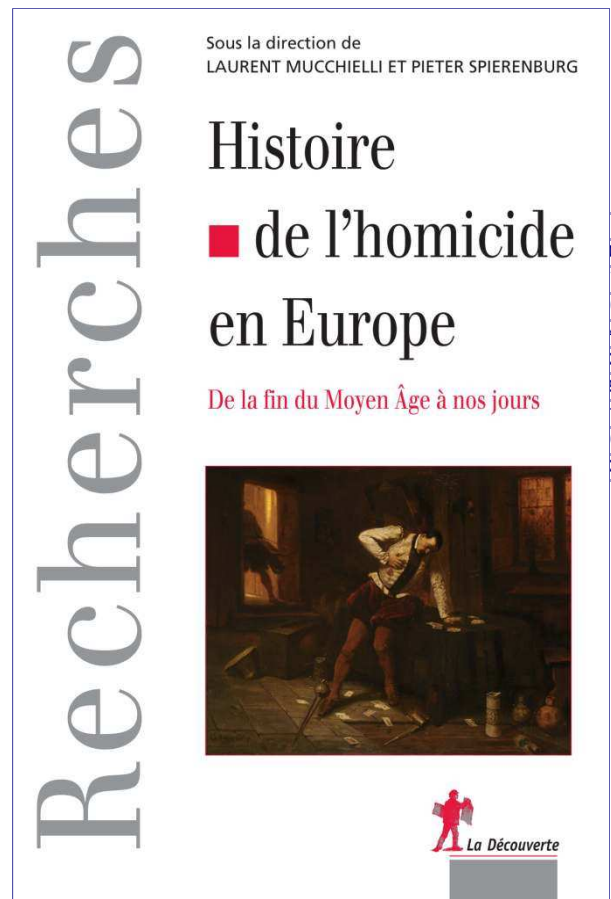
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