



Measuring Personal Thefts in France: Victimisation Surveys and Police Statistics since the Mid-1980s

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Penal Issues

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Measuring Personal Thefts in France: Victimisation Surveys and Police Statistics since the mid-1980s

This issue pursues the presentation of the CESDIP's studies on crime trends, in the wake of a first issue on homicide (September 2008) and another on non-lethal personal violence (December 2008). The present paper, dealing with personal thefts, is based on research conducted by **Renée ZAUBERMAN**, **Philippe ROBERT**, **Sophie NÉVANEN** and **Lisa MICELI** and funded by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche.

Measuring crime trends can draw upon several data sources. Victimisation surveys, questioning population samples on offences to which they had been prey over a given period, were invented because a number of offences are not found in police and gendarmerie activity statistics. The present study of personal thefts is based on a comparison of these two sources.

While the information available for personal thefts in general is homogeneous, specific data on robberies are more fragmentary.

Data and methods

Victimisation Surveys

Those surveys available in France form a heterogeneous collection:

- a first national survey was conducted by the CESDIP in the mid-1980s, on a sample of 11,000 individuals;
- following a 10-year interruption, 11 annual surveys called *Enquête Permanente sur les conditions de vie des ménages* (EPCVM), that is on the living conditions of households, included a module on victimisation and were conducted by the *Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques* (INSEE), the national statistical agency, starting in the mid-1990s;
- since 2007, this module has been replaced, at the request of the *Observatoire national de la délinquance* (OND), by annual surveys called *Cadre de vie et sécurité* (CVS), that is on life environment and safety, entirely devoted to victimisation. This disruption aimed at improving the comparability of the survey findings with police data rather than retaining their comparability over time, an option that made their serialisation a complex venture¹.

The first EPCVM had reached some 6,000-odd respondents; the following ones touched almost 11,000 people. The last two questioned as many as 25,000 people, after which the figure fell to 17,000 with the CVS.

Each of these surveys questions about victimisations suffered over the two years prior to their administration. All contain a module on the personal thefts that respondents felt they had suffered (*were you personally victim to a theft?*), (burglaries and vehicle thefts were investigated in separate modules). In the last two EPCVM, respondents who claimed to have suffered **personal violence** were also asked whether there was a theft associated (making it a robbery). The three CVS devoted an independent module to this victimisation, with an explicit request that it be excluded from the response on personal theft.

These will be compared with:

- the surveys conducted every other year since 2001 in the Île-de-France region (the Greater Paris Area) by the *Institut d'Aménagement et d'Urbanisme* (IAU-IdF) covering large samples of some 10,500 individuals;
- urban surveys conducted by the CESDIP in Amiens in the late 1990s and in 2005 in Aubervilliers, Aulnay-sous-Bois, Gonesse, Saint-Denis (all four communities located in the northern part of the Île-de-France Region) and urban community of Lyons for the *Forum français pour la sécurité urbaine* (FFSU). Samples ranged from 1,000 to 5,000 respondents.

Ministry of the Interior crime statistics count offence reports transmitted by the police and the gendarmerie to the justice system; they exclude those involving traffic violations, negligence and petty offenses calling for the least severe sentences.

Methodology : to make these two sources comparable, various preliminary operations are required:

Surveys provide information on the **proportion of victims among respondents (prevalence)** and on the **number of victimisations of a same type (multiple victimisation)** over the past two years. Multiplying one by the other yields the **rate of incidence** (number, per 100 respondents, of incidents suffered over the reference period). Applying this rate to the population aged 15 or over yields **estimates in absolute figures**, which may then be compared with police data.

Among the 107 crime categories of police statistics, a selection is made of those with a formulation closest to the items used in the surveys (for personal theft, pickpocketing, other ordinary thefts affecting private persons).

As victimisation surveys were devised precisely because a whole set of offences were not reported to the police or uncovered by it, police recordings stand theoretically at a lower level than survey estimates.

To account for this divergence, the notion of **reported incidence is brought in**, which includes only those victimisations for which respondents claimed to have filed a complaint. Here again, the rate yielded is applied to the reference population to obtain estimates in absolute figures comparable to police data.

The latter must theoretically fall within the confidence intervals² for estimated reported incidence. If this is the case, it means that the difference between the two sources is entirely explained by the propensity of victims to report incidents to the police. Conversely, if police data are outside the limits of the confidence interval the reasons for the difference between the two sources must be sought elsewhere.

¹ For an in-depth discussion of the problems raised by this serialization, see MICELI, *et al.*, 2009.

² Since the findings of a sample survey can only be probabilistically extrapolated to the overall population, the confidence interval – more or less wide open depending on the size of the sample – is the interval inside which there is a 95% chance that the actual value is located.

Increasingly Fewer Theft Victims in the Overall Population

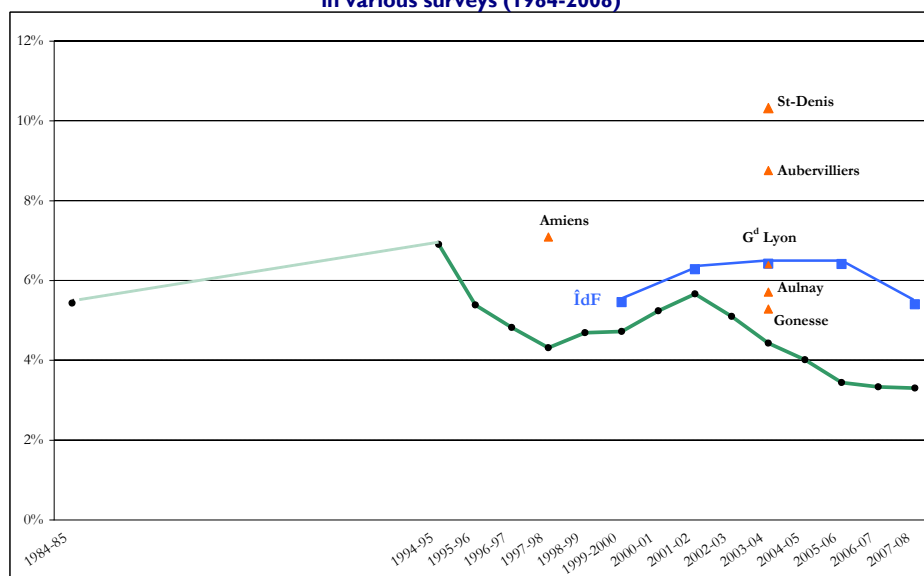
Table 1. Personal thefts; nationwide surveys, 1984-2008

	% of theft victims in population (prevalence)	Average number of thefts per victim (multivictimisation)	% of thefts in population (incidence)
CESDIP 1984-1985	5.43	1.57	8.55
EPCVM 1994-1995	6.90	1.30	8.96
EPCVM 1995-1996	5.38	1.28	6.89
EPCVM 1996-1997	4.82	1.29	6.21
EPCVM 1997-1998	4.31	1.15	4.97
EPCVM 1998-1999	4.69	1.27	5.96
EPCVM 1999-2000	4.72	1.25	5.91
EPCVM 2000-2001	5.24	1.35	7.07
EPCVM 2001-2002	5.66	1.33	7.51
EPCVM 2002-2003	5.10	1.29	6.57
EPCVM 2003-2004	4.43	1.34	5.95
EPCVM 2004-2005	4.01	1.25	5.01
CVS 2005-2006	3.44	1.36	4.68
CVS 2006-2007	3.33	1.29	4.30
CVS 2007-2008	3.30	1.27	4.18

Source: CESDIP, INSEE.

Coverage: metropolitan France.

Figure 1. Personal thefts, % of victims among the population (prevalence) in various surveys (1984-2008)



Source: CESDIP, INSEE, IAU-IDF.

Coverage: varying according to survey.

This victimisation only affects a small fraction of the population residing in metropolitan France: less than 5 percent.

While it may possibly have increased between the mid-1980s and the middle of the following decade, a downward trend is noted thereafter, only interrupted for a few years around 2000 (see [table 1](#)).

The latest surveys actually show a sharper downward trend, with the lowest prevalences in the entire series.

With the exception of the 1980s survey, victims of theft were stolen on an average of 1.2 to 1.4 times over two years, without any noteworthy change in these figures, so that incidence closely parallels the trend indicated for prevalence.

The prevalence rates shown by available urban and regional surveys are always higher than those for nationwide surveys ([figure 2](#)), probably because they were conducted in highly urban settings whereas national sweeps naturally cover some sparsely built-up areas and some that are completely rural. Nevertheless, the curve for the Île-de-France region does not fundamentally diverge from the nationwide one, although the drop is less marked and occurs later, at any rate.

Sources Converge only Slightly

Not only do surveys and police statistics yield figures of extremely different magnitudes because of a complaint rate of about 40% throughout the period, but their trends are also seen to be very poorly correlated. For the period as a whole, police data show oscillations, with no very clear trend: the definite downward movement shown by surveys is nowhere to be seen. This is probably another example of the effects of organisational processes specific to the police institution: upward and downward trends for various types of crimes tend to be attenuated by administrative sources³, a phenomenon found in the various countries where it could be studied.

The reason why the two sources draw closer at the end of the period is mostly because police statistics decline less sharply than surveys findings.

Up to 2002-2003 (except for 1997-1998), police statistics registered (far) fewer thefts than victims claimed to have reported. In

³ For a systemic analysis of these phenomena, which he calls *institutional inertia*, see VAN DIJK, 2009, 40 and ff.

the last five surveys, on the other hand, the opposite is found: police data increasingly exceed the confidence interval for reported incidence... in other words, there would be more cases recorded than victims claimed to have reported to the police.

In the last five surveys, changes were operated in the questionnaire's items on victims' reporting to the police: they were made more specific and more detailed, producing a drop in the percentage of complaints mentioned by respondents, and therefore in reported incidence. The recent *excess* in police figures in comparison with survey data is therefore more credible than their previous *deficit*.

What can account for this *excess*? Can it be due to the presence, in police records, of categories excluded from surveys (complaints lodged by theft victims under age 15 and those lodged by non-residents such as foreign tourists)? Or perhaps it is the result of thefts uncovered spontaneously by the police and recorded without any complaint being filed. But these explanations involve situations that are usually not statistically significant. Furthermore, there is no reason why the uncertain coinciding of police crime categories and surveys' victimisation categories would work in opposite directions at different times. Should we then hypothesise greater police eagerness to record complaints systematically in the recent period? But in that case, police counts should, at best, coincide with reported incidence... The instability in survey protocols obviates any definite conclusion here.

However, returning to the comparison of police records with the theft incidence curve, two massive findings remain: there were far more thefts suffered than there were thefts recorded; police statistics mute the trends for this type of victimisation.

A Limited Decline Following a Long Period of Very Marked Rises

Having completed the comparison between survey findings and police data, an attempt can be made to use the lengthier series of the latter to nuance the diagnosis of declining predation on victims' property by setting it in a longer term perspective.

Retrospectively, police statistics ([figure 3](#)) indicate the onslaught of a powerful wave of property crime in the early 1960s. Once adjusted for population movements, the level of thefts and burglaries has been multiplied by six over the span of a half-century, rising from about 44 to 298/10,000 in 2008, but specifically, the entire upward turn of the curve took place between 1960 and 1993.

What is the meaning of this finding? A greater propensity of theft victims to lodge complaints? Greater police assiduity in recording thefts? Or simply, an escalation in this type of offending? Or again, a mixture of the three, but in what proportions, then? No victimisation surveys susceptible of serving as terms of comparison, are available for the crucial 1960-1985 period.

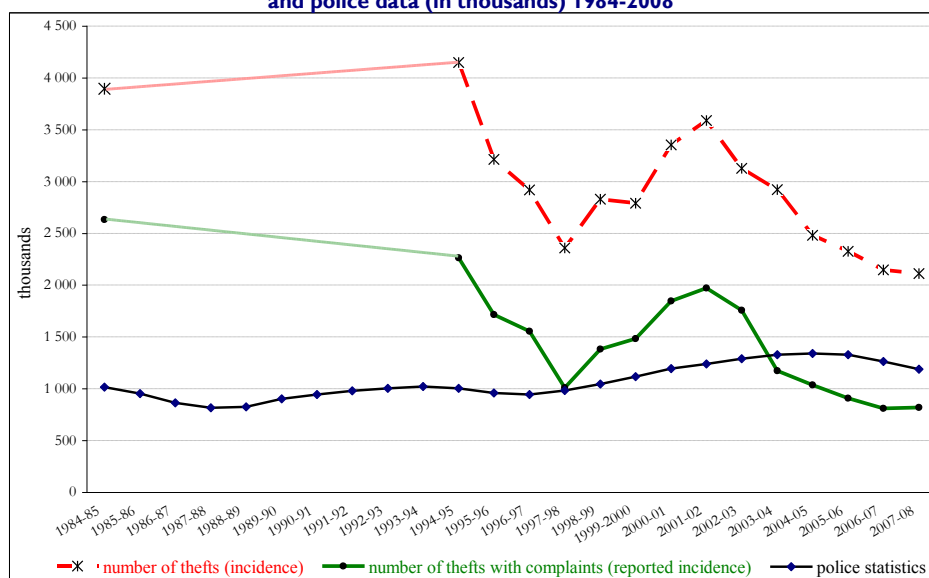
Table 2. Personal thefts without violence, comparison between sources, (in thousands), 1984-2008

		Estimated number of thefts according to surveys (incidence)	Estimated number of thefts with complaints according to surveys (reported incidence)	Police statistics
CESDIP	1984-1985	3 895 [3 593-4 196]	2 633 [2 430-2 837]	1 016
	1985-1986			952
	1986-1987			864
	1987-1988			815
	1988-1989			824
	1989-1990			903
	1990-1991			945
	1991-1992			979
	1992-1993			1 004
EPCVM	1993-1994			1 022
	1994-1995	4 150 [3 757-4 543]	2 264 [2 050-2 478]	1 005
	1995-1996	3 213 [2 967-3 459]	1 717 [1 585-1 848]	958
	1996-1997	2 920 [2 680-3 160]	1 556 [1 428-1 684]	943
	1997-1998	2 360 [2 148-2 571]	1 009 [919-1 100]	983
	1998-1999	2 831 [2 591-3 070]	1 383 [1 266-1 500]	1 044
	1999-2000	2 791 [2 550-3 032]	1 483 [1 355-1 611]	1 116
	2000-2001	3 355 [3 086-3 623]	1 845 [1 698-1 993]	1 193
	2001-2002	3 588 [3 318-3 859]	1 970 [1 822-2 119]	1 240
	2002-2003	3 126 [2 883-3 370]	1 757 [1 620-1 894]	1 290
	2003-2004	2 923 [2 759-3 086]	1 173 [1 107-1 239]	1 328
	2004-2005	2 480 [2 331-2 630]	1 038 [975-1 100]	1 339
	2005-2006	2 327 [2 143-2 510]	909 [838-981]	1 329
CVS	2006-2007	2 146 [1 973-2 319]	811 [745-877]	1 264
	2007-2008	2 112 [1 940-2 283]	818 [752-885]	1 189

Source: CESDIP, INSEE.

Coverage: Metropolitan France.

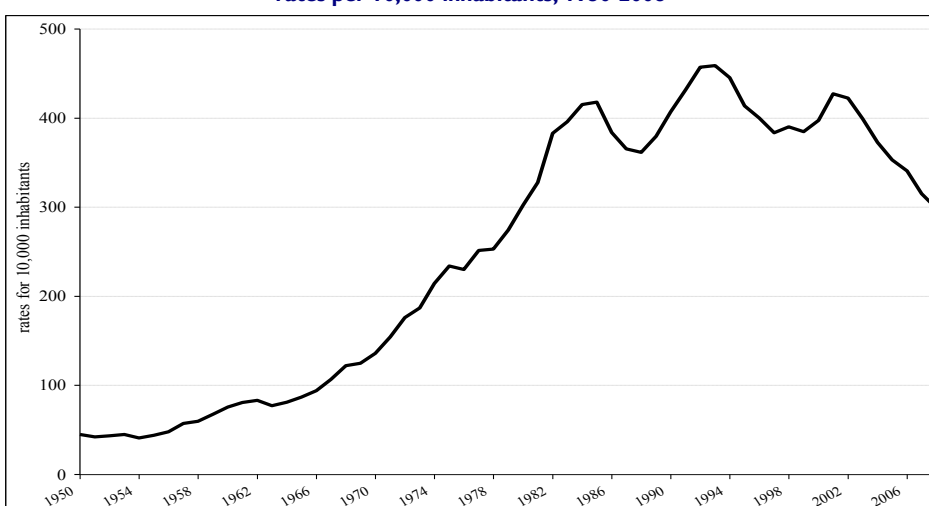
Figure 2. Personal thefts without violence, trends in incidence, reported incidence, and police data (in thousands) 1984-2008



Source: CESDIP, INSEE, Ministry of the Interior.

Coverage: Metropolitan France.

Figure 3. Thefts according to police and gendarmerie statistics, rates per 10,000 inhabitants, 1950-2008



Source: CESDIP, based on Ministry of the Interior data.

Coverage: Metropolitan France.

It has often been pointed out that the development of theft insurance has encouraged people to lodge more complaints, even with the crime level remaining constant. But periodical surveys on the expansion of theft insurance disprove that hypothesis: despite the efforts of insurance companies, this kind of insurance only became widespread (and then very suddenly) at a time – the latter 1970s – when most of the increase in thefts had already occurred.

As for the hypothesis of more attention paid by the police to this offence, it is groundless: to the contrary, the collapse in the theft detection rate – 36.3 in 1950, 14.4 in 2007 – indicates their growing lack of interest therein.

By elimination, then, it may be reasonably inferred that a very sharp increase in these property offences occurred over a period of two and one half decades, a fact that should put in perspective the drop during the most recent period. Analysts often tie this « outburst » of acquisitive offending to the onset of an economic model in which goods, and the corresponding lifestyles, reach the mass of people irrespective of social status; values have been reconstructed around the possession of those goods, which have gradually come to stand for social prestige. With women at work and cohabitation between different generations declining constantly (among other factors), the spatial distribution of activities has been reshuffled so as to leave those goods unguarded. People who have little or difficult access to them through legitimate channels may try to get them by other, more devious means. This set up the conditions for property offenses to become one of the daily-life risks massively facing citizens.

A Difficult Estimation of Robbery

Regional and urban surveys conducted since the turn of the 21st century have shown a large proportion of violent crime to actually involve robbery. In effect – and this has been repeatedly corroborated – respondents spontaneously list robberies as assaults rather than as thefts.

The issue is all the more important as the decline in thefts and burglaries is often claimed to be at least partially compensated by a rise in violent property crime. Better protection of homes against intrusions and of vehicles against theft is said to shift predatory activities, so that the easiest way to seize coveted goods such as cell phones is to snatch them from someone carrying them along.

The first nine EPCVM nationwide surveys contain no specific information on this victimisation. The last two surveys added an item similar to that contained in the regional surveys: *during that last assault, was there... theft with violence?* For the CVS the scheme was modified on two counts: an independent module devoted to robberies and the addition of an explicit question specifying that the violence may be physical or verbal: *have you personally been victim of a theft or attempted theft with physical violence or a threat?*

Table 3. Robberies, 2003-2008

	% of victims of robbery in population (prevalence)	Average number of robberies per victim	% of robberies in population (incidence)
EPCVM 2003-2004	0.82 [0.71-0.93]	1.56	1.28 [1.11-1.45]
EPCVM 2004-2005	0.76 [0.65-0.87]	1.52	1.16 [0.99-1.32]
CVS 2005-2006	0.98 [0.83-1.13]	1.34	1.32 [1.12-1.51]
CVS 2006-2007	1.05 [0.90-1.20]	1.45	1.52 [1.30-1.74]
CVS 2007-2008	0.75 [0.62-0.88]	1.36	1.02 [0.85-1.20]

Source: INSEE.

Coverage: Metropolitan France.

Not only is the period observed short (see table 3), but the national findings are high a rate for attempted robberies as the national and urban surveys, in spite of the

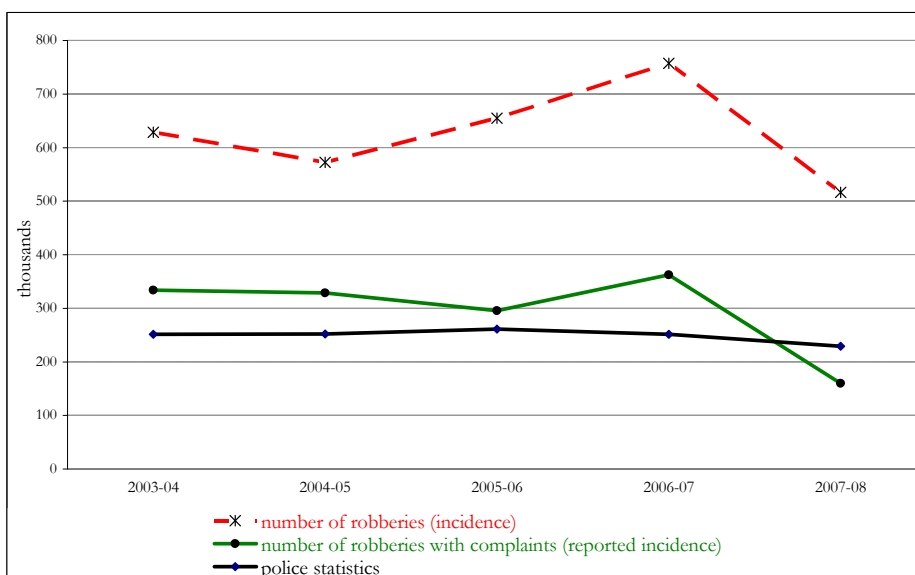
Table 4. Robberies, proportion of victims (prevalence) in regional and urban surveys (%)

Île-de-France 1999-2000	Île-de-France 2001-2002	Île-de-France 2003-2004	Île-de-France 2005-2006	Île-de-France 2007-2008	Urban Surveys 2003-2004				
					Auber-villiers	Aulnay-sous-Bois	Gonesse	Saint-Denis	Grand Lyon
2,57	2,48	2,19	2,70	2,43	4,83	4,10	2,49	6,55	1,76

Source: IAU-IDF, CESDIP.

Coverage: varying according to surveys.

Figure 4. Robberies (incidence, reported incidence, police data (in thousands), 2003-2008



Source: INSEE, Ministry of the Interior.

Coverage: Metropolitan France.

far lower than those yielded by regional

This difference may perhaps be accounted for by the highly urban character of the areas covered by regional and urban surveys. However, this hypothesis is only very partially corroborated. In nationwide surveys, robberies are definitely more frequent in large cities, but the prevalence rates for urban areas of over 100,000 inhabitants do not exceed 1.6, making them clearly lower than those found in regional and urban surveys.

Another hypothesis would be that differences in prevalence of robberies between nationwide and urban surveys are due to the former's lesser consideration of mere attempts. With the exception of Saint-Denis, none of the CVS surveys show as

broad range of rates found in the latter (see table 4).

regional and urban studies. Is this why subnational scores are higher than those found in the INSEE surveys?

Be this as it may, there is a possibility that nationwide surveys underestimate the extent of robberies, just as it is possible – as seen in *Penal Issues* December 2008⁴ – that they underestimate the extent of assaults suffered by youths.

Comparison with police data (figure 4) essentially shows a rather unexpected gap between the magnitudes found through the two sources. Since violence is involved, one would tend to imagine that people turn systematically to the police or the gendarmerie; this is not the case, probably because the broad robbery label covers an extremely heterogeneous array of victimisations, ranging from the clear-cut assault

on an old lady to racketeering among high-school students, which are far from being systematically reported to the police.

As for the comparison between police recordings and estimates of reported incidence, it is displayed below purely for informational purposes, but the small number of surveys available, the low figures observed and their great variation from one year to the next argue against pushing analysis much further.

Conclusion

All in all, the evolution of personal thefts over the last quarter-century reflects an overall downward trend, underestimated by police statistics.

However, this decline was preceded by a much sharper quarter-century rise, the effects of which it has by no means erased.

The extent of robberies is still unclear, with figures provided by regional and urban surveys higher than those indicated by nationwide surveys.

In any case, there obviously cannot be any serious measurement of the crime trends without stable survey protocols, first and foremost, and at any rate protocols whose modifications are compatible with comparison and serialization with previous findings. Barring which we are often left to wonder whether any observed change is distinctive of the measured phenomenon or rather some spurious effect of the measuring instrument. Those countries that have developed credible survey schemes have all been obliged to respect this requirement.

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Further reading:

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⁴ http://www.cesdip.fr/IMG/pdf/PI_12_2008.pdf.