



# ARCHIWUM KRYMINOLOGII

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## ‘It’s not worth it, it’s just a bike’: Reporting property crimes in South-eastern European countries<sup>1</sup>

### „Nie warto, to tylko rower” – zgłaszanie przestępstw przeciwko mieniu w krajach Europy Południowo-Wschodniej

**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to examine South-eastern European students’ experiences being victims of criminal offences against property or being witnesses to criminal offences against property; to compare the extent to which students reported the crimes they were victims of or had witnessed; and to examine their willingness to report a theft of property of minor value (bicycle theft) in a hypothetical victimization situation, considering their country of residence and previous experience of reporting. The survey was conducted by an online survey in seven countries of South-eastern Europe (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Croatia, Hungary, Northern Macedonia, Slovenia, and Serbia) on a sample of 1,419 students. The results indicate that a large proportion of property crimes go unreported, although most students are willing to report them.

**Keywords:** reporting crimes, dark figure, property crimes, South-eastern Europe

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**Abstrakt:** Celem artykułu jest analiza doświadczeń studentów z krajów Europy Południowo-Wschodniej odnośnie do stania się ofiarą lub świadkiem przestępstw przeciwko mieniu oraz składania zawiadomień o ich popełnieniu. Przedstawiając badanym hipotetyczną sytuację, w której ktoś ukradł im rower, autorka zbadła także gotowość do zgłaszania kradzieży mienia o niewielkiej wartości. W analizie danych zostały uwzględnione również kraj pochodzenia oraz wcześniejsze doświadczenie w zgłaszaniu przestępstw. Badanie przeprowadzono przy wykorzystaniu ankiety internetowej, którą wypełniło 1419 studentów z siedmiu krajów Europy Południowo-Wschodniej (Bośni i Hercegowiny, Czarnogóry, Chorwacji, Węgier, Północnej Macedonii, Słowenii oraz Serbii). Wyniki badania pokazują, że duża część przestępstw przeciwko mieniu nie jest zgłaszana, mimo że większość studentów deklaruje teoretyczną gotowość do ich zgłaszania.

**Słowa kluczowe:** zgłaszanie przestępstw, ciemna liczba przestępstw, przestępstwa przeciwko mieniu, Europa Południowo-Wschodnia

## 1. Introduction

Police-recorded crime is probably the least reliable of all statistics related to society (Giddens 2007: 216). The reason why this so lies in the fact that the police should first be informed that a crime has occurred so that it can be officially recorded, that is, someone should report it (Haralambos and Holborn 2002: 366) and much of the crime remains unreported and unrecorded (Block 1974; Skogan 1976; Felson, Messner and Hoskins 1999). Such an unrecorded crime is called a dark figure (Bobetić et al. 2004).

The aims of this paper are to examine South-eastern European students' experiences of being victims of criminal offences against property and being witnesses to criminal offences against property; to compare the extent to which students reported the crimes they were victims of or had witnessed; and to examine their willingness to report a theft of property of minor value (bicycle theft) in a hypothetical victimization situation, considering their country of residence and previous experience of reporting.

This paper is unique because the research was conducted in seven South-eastern European countries, which deals with reporting or not reporting crimes against property and tries to discuss through the economic model of reporting crimes why the crimes against property would not be reported to the police.

### 1.1. Types of Dark Figure Research

In order to try to assess how unknown the actual crime rate is, victimization surveys ask respondents whether they have been the victim of a crime and whether they have reported it to the police (Giddens 2007: 217). In addition to the practical application of victimization research, it is also conducted for scientific purposes, to investigate the factors of reporting or not reporting various criminal offences.

The British government conducted the first victimization survey in 1982, where it was discovered that a large number of offences which had occurred had not been reported to the police. For example, only 25% of crimes of vandalism and 33.3% of crimes against life and limb were reported that year (Abercrombie, Hill and Turner 2008: 175). Victimization research has shown that there is a discrepancy between the actual number of offences and the recorded numbers or official statistics (Wittebrood and Junger 2002).

In addition to victimization research, this is also a vignette study. It examines a subject's willingness to report crime by describing hypothetical victimization situations. After reading a vignette, the participants of the study expressed their willingness to report the crime. In such research, it is crucial that the hypothetical situations are presented as realistically as possible and that the 'victimization scenario' is a situation that the participant is familiar with, or can relate to (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975; Goudriaan and Nieuwbeerta 2007).

## **1.2. Factors in reporting crime**

There are several factors that could be related to one's decision to report crimes. Socio-economic status can influence the decision to report: for example, people with lower socio-economic status may be less likely to report crimes (Skogan 1984). In terms of gender, research has shown that women are more likely to report crime, while men are less willing to do so (Skogan 1984). The explanation for this is that men are more likely to have worse experiences with the police (Piliavin and Briar 1964; Beck and Julia 2004; McAra and McVie 2005; Weitzer and Tuch 2005).

Furthermore, when it comes to the age of the victim, mature people are more likely to report a crime (Hopkins and Newstone 1992; Finkelhor and Ormrod 1999). However, research has shown that, after the age of 60, readiness to report crime again declines (Goudriaan 2006: 166). The hesitation of younger people to report crime has been linked to negative experiences with the police, most often experienced by younger people (Bickman 1976; Hopkins and Hewstone 1992; Low and Durkin 2001; McAra and McVie 2005). One's place of residence may also play a role in the decision of whether to report a crime, as rural people are less likely to report crime due to greater social cohesion, so problems are usually solved within the community. In contrast, people in urban areas are more likely than residents in rural areas to turn to institutions when crimes occur (Skogan 1984).

Trust in the police is also an essential factor in reporting crimes. According to research, people who have greater trust in the police, appropriate expectations, and more experience with the police are more likely to report a crime (Avdija and Giever 2010). Furthermore, the availability of police, increased anonymity, and the encouragement of a police officer to file a report (Tolsma, Blaauw and te Grotenhuis 2012), as well as increased numbers of police officers also play an essential role in encouraging reporting (Levitt 1998).

Furthermore, cognitive and emotional factors can play an important role, which can influence the decision of whether or not to report a crime (Gottfredson and Gottfredson 1980; Greenberg and Beach 2004). Additionally, the type of crime plays a significant role, so, for example, crimes against sexual freedom will be reported least often (Bachman 1998; Akers and Kaukinen 2009). Other factors that can also influence reporting behaviour are collective efficiency (e.g. social control) (Hart and Colavito 2011), the distance of place of residence from the scene of the crime (Wisniewski et al. 2013), the perception of fairness (Douhou, Magnus and van Soest 2012), spatial planning (Lee, Clancey and Fisher 2013), previous victimization (Avdija and Giever 2012), the overall context in which the crime occurred (Rennison, Dragiewicz and De Keseredy 2013), and the socio-economic model of reporting (Goudriaan and Nieuwbeerta 2007).

### 1.3. Economic model of reporting crime

The economic model is one research model about reporting crimes, alongside the psychological, sociological, and socio-ecological model (Goudriaan 2006: 15–19). According to this model, the victim of a crime takes into account the costs and benefits that he/she will experience if he/she reports the crime (Skogan 1976). If a person estimates that he/she will benefit, he/she will report it. However, if he/she estimates that the application will cost time and effort and that the damage from the crime will not be compensated for – be it material or intangible damages – that person will not report the crime (Goudriaan 2006: 16). According to Bowles, Reyes, and Garoupa (2009), a person will report a crime if it is related to more significant material damage, for example, secured property that had been alienated. The disadvantage of this model is that it assumes that the victim is capable of making a rational decision at some point and excludes contextual factors that could influence the victim's decision to report (Goudriaan 2006: 17).

## 2. Hypotheses

According to the research goal, the following research questions were constructed in order to attempt to answer them through data analysis:

1. To what extent were students from a South-eastern European country victimized by property crime?
2. To what extent have students from a South-eastern European country witnessed property crimes?
3. To what extent have students from a South-eastern European country reported criminal offences against property of which they were the victims?

4. To what extent did the students of each South-eastern European country report the crimes against property they had witnessed?

Also, considering the research objective, the following hypotheses were constructed:

- H1:** There is a statistically significant difference in willingness to report a bicycle theft depending on the country of residence.
- H2:** There is a statistically significant difference in the willingness to report a bicycle theft depending on previous experience of reporting crime as a victim.
- H3:** There is a statistically significant difference in the willingness to report a bicycle theft depending on previous experience of reporting crime as a witness.

### 3. Methodology

The research was conducted as part of an international project called 'Research on frequency and readiness of students in post-socialist countries of South-eastern Europe to report criminal offences'. The project ran from 1 September 2018 to 30 August 2019. The research goal of the project was to research the frequency and readiness of students in the post-socialist countries of South-eastern Europe (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Hungary, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia) to report crimes and to determine the differences among them in regards to previous victimization, level of trust in the police, attitudes towards the police, social values, and socio-demographic characteristics.

The survey method was quantitative, and the data collection instrument was an online questionnaire. The survey was conducted by posting the questionnaire in student Facebook groups, where students voluntarily accessed the link and participated in the research. Data collection took two months (January and February 2019).

#### 3.1. Instrument

The instrument for collecting data was an online questionnaire. The questionnaire contained a victimization survey asking participants whether they had been the victim or witness of a particular crime and whether they had reported it to the police (e.g. Have you ever been a victim of property crime?; Did you report the crime you were a victim of?). Additionally, the questionnaire contained vignettes, that is, hypothetical situations of victimization or witnessing a particular crime and questions about their willingness to report the crime on a scale of 1 to 4 (variable willingness to report bicycle theft; pseudo-interval scale), where 1 means 'I'm quite sure I wouldn't report it to the police' and 4 means 'I'm quite sure I would report it to the police' (e.g. If someone stole your bike, would you report it to the police?).

The questionnaire also included self-assessment questions about the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants (country, age, sex, socio-economic status on a scale of 1 to 4 (1 – very poor, 2 – poor, 3 – good, 4 – very good).

The online research method was chosen because of the increased anonymity since it could be a sensitive issue and because it has proved to be one of the better ways to research students (Kosinski et al. 2015; Vehovar et al. 2015). The questionnaire was approved by the Ethics Committee of the relevant institution and subsequently translated into Bosnian, Hungarian, Montenegrin, Macedonian, Serbian, and Slovenian language. The alphabets used in the questionnaire were Latin and Cyrillic, depending on the country.

### 3.2. Participants

The survey was conducted on 1,419 students in seven countries of South-eastern Europe: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Hungary, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia.

Although the sample is appropriate, it is worth noting how many students exist in each country and what percentage they make up in the sample. Table 1 shows the percentage of students in the population and in the sample.

Table 1. Distribution of students by country

	Population (n)	Population (%)	Sample (n)	Sample (%)
Bosnia and Herzegovina	87,548	22.4	241	17.04
Croatia	158,016	16.98	227	15.99
Montenegro	19,210	2.06	160	11.27
Hungary	283,350	30.44	201	14.15
North Macedonia	56,941	6.12	155	10.92
Serbia	249,604	26.82	222	15
Slovenia	75,991	8.17	213	15.63
Total	930,660	100	1,419	100

Note: Data on the population breakdown were downloaded from the official statistical offices for each country: Agencija za statistiku BiH (2018–2019), Uprava za statistiku Crna Gora (2018–2019), Državni zavod za statistiku (2018–2019), Hungarian Central Statistics Office (2017–2018), State Statistics Office (2018–2019), Statistični urad (2018–2019), Republički zavod za statistiku (2018–2019).

Table 2 shows the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 2. Socio-demographic characteristics of participants by country

Country	Age (mean)	Gender (%)	Socio-economic status (%)
<b>Bosnia and Herzegovina</b> n = 241	22.59	Female: 80.1 Male: 19.9	Very poor 0.9 Poor 22.7 Good 63.8 Very good 12.7
<b>Croatia</b> n = 227	21.95	Female: 81 Male: 19	Very poor 2.3 Poor 25.9 Good 59.5 Very good 12.3
<b>Hungary</b> n = 201	22.24	Female: 78.5 Male: 21.5	Very poor 1.5 Poor 27.7 Good 61.5 Very good 9.2
<b>Montenegro</b> n = 160	22.55	Female: 78.6 Male: 21.4	Very poor 2 Poor 20.3 Good 69.9 Very good 7.8
<b>North Macedonia</b> n = 155	22.84	Female: 81.9 Male: 16.8	Very poor 2.7 Poor 34.5 Good 58.8 Very good 4.1
<b>Serbia</b> n = 222	22.01	Female: 84.7 Male: 15.3	Very poor 3.6 Poor 34.7 Good 57.7 Very good 4.1
<b>Slovenia</b> n = 213	22.77	Female: 71.8 Male: 28.2	Very poor 3.4 Poor 23.4 Good 60 Very good 13.2
<b>Total (All countries)</b> n = 1,419	22.4	Female: 79.4 Male: 20.3	Very poor 2.3 Poor 27 Good 61.4 Very good 9.3

## 4. Results

The data was analysed with IBM SPSS software. Frequencies (valid percentages) and means were the analyses used for the descriptive statistical analysis. One-way ANOVA was also used to test the hypotheses, i.e. to determine whether there were differences between groups with regard to their willingness to report crime.

Table 3 presents the percentage of participants who were victims or witnesses of property crimes. From the total sample population, 65.1% of respondents had been victims of property crime at least once, while 23% had been witnesses of property crimes. Furthermore, Table 3 shows how many students (in percentage) in the study population reported property crime as a victim or witness.

Table 3. Descriptive results – victims and witnesses

	YES		NO	
	%	Frequency	%	Frequency
Have you ever been a <b>victim</b> of property crime?	34.9	495	65.1	924
Have you ever been a <b>witness</b> of property crime?	23	327	77	1,092
Did you REPORT it to the police? ( <b>victims</b> )	52.4	294	47.6	267
Did you REPORT it to the police? ( <b>witnesses</b> )	27.3	86	72.7	229

Comparing the experience of victimization in relation to property crime by country, the highest number of victims was from Hungary (48.3%), then Slovenia (44.1%), Serbia (40.1%), and Croatia (32.2%). At the same time, the lowest numbers of victims were from Montenegro (28.7%), North Macedonia (26.5%), and Bosnia and Herzegovina (22.8%) (see Figure 1).

Furthermore, Figure 1 presents the percentage of participants who had witnessed property crime, by country. The most such respondents were from Slovenia (30.5%) as well as from North Macedonia (26.5%) and Hungary (25.9%), while the lowest numbers were from Serbia (23.9%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (20.3%), Montenegro (18.1%), and Croatia (16.7%).

Figure 2 shows the frequency for reporting crimes against property when it comes to participants who have been victims of property crime. According to the results, the highest proportion of participants who reported such crimes are from North Macedonia (72.5%), then from Bosnia and Herzegovina (63%), Croatia (60.3%), Montenegro (59.1%), and Slovenia (49.5%); the lowest numbers



Figure 1. Experience of being a victim or witness of property crime by country (%)

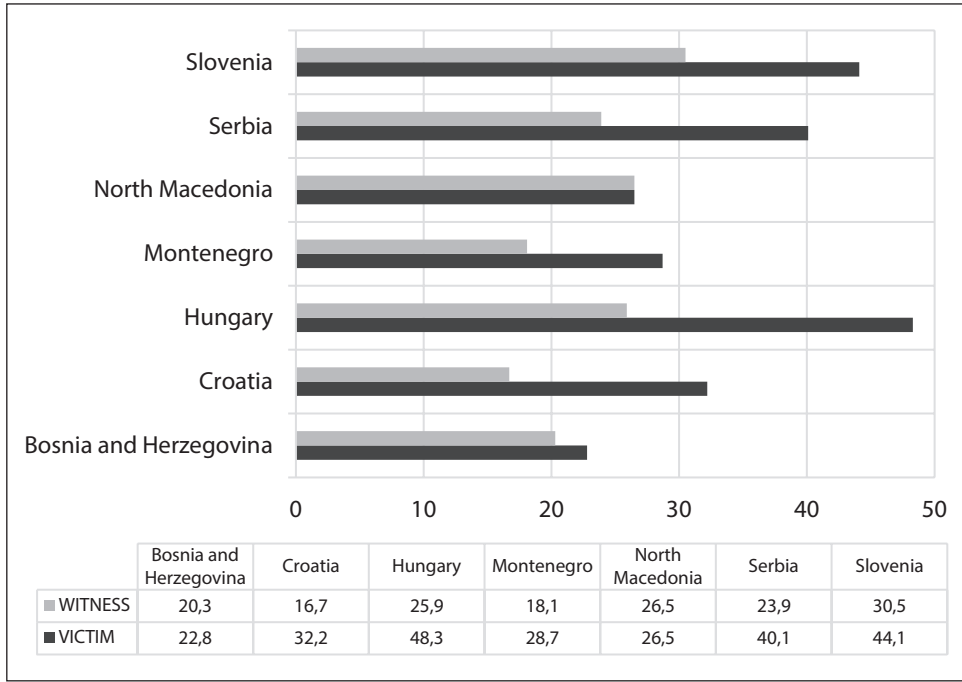
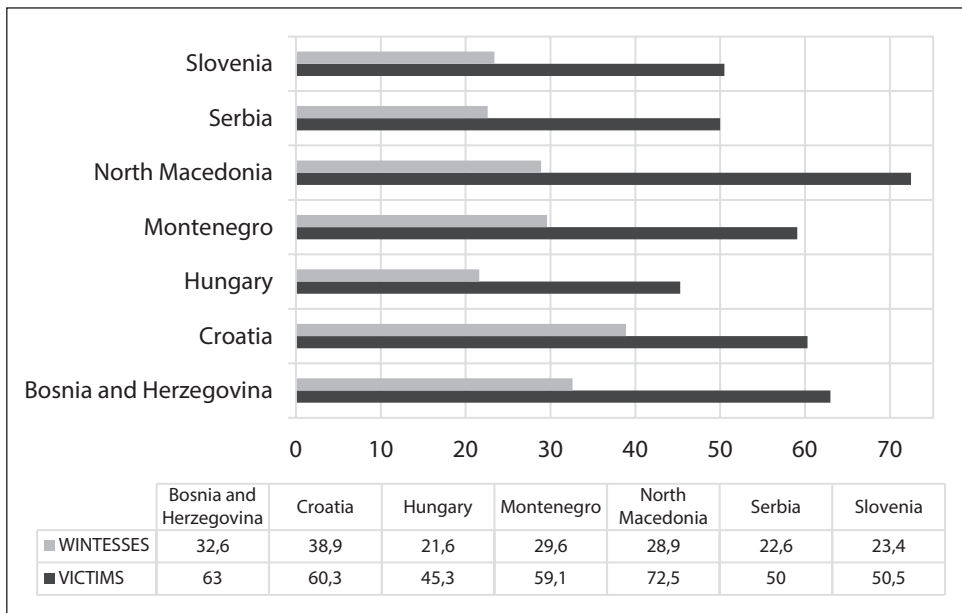


Figure 2. Reported property crimes – victims and witnesses (%)



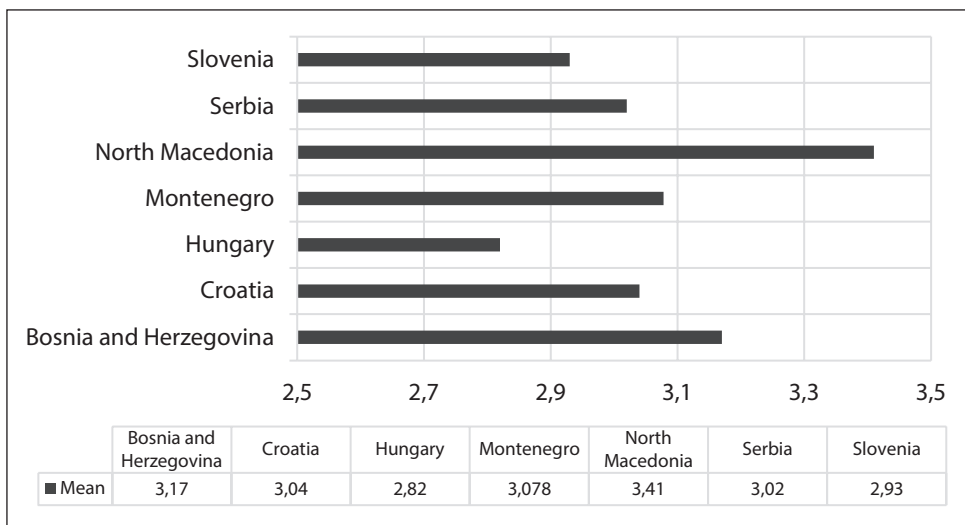
of respondents reporting property crimes were from Serbia (50%) and Hungary (45.3%) (see Figure 2).

However, according to this study, there are more reported than unreported property crimes. In six of the countries considered (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia), more than 50% of victims reported criminal offences against property; the exception was in Hungary, where more are unreported (54.7%) than reported (45.3%) (see Figure 2).

On the other hand, when it comes to witnesses of property crimes, the results presented in Figure 2 indicate that, generally, most participants who witnessed a crime against property did not report the crime they witnessed. If we compare them by country, the highest number of witnesses who reported property crimes are from Croatia (38.9%), then from Bosnia and Herzegovina (32.6%), Montenegro (29.6%) and Northern Macedonia (28.9%). In contrast, a smaller number were reported in Slovenia (23.4%), Serbia (23.4%), and Hungary (21.6%).

Figure 3 presents arithmetic means of subjects' willingness to report bicycle theft by country (ranging from 1 to 4). According to the descriptive data, the participants from North Macedonia (mean: 3.41), from Bosnia and Herzegovina (mean: 3.17), and Montenegro (mean: 3.078) expressed the most willingness to report bicycle in a hypothetical situation. The participants from Croatia (mean: 3.04) Serbia (mean: 3.02), Slovenia (mean: 2.93), and Hungary (mean: 2.82) expressed less willingness. If there is a statistically significant difference in the willingness to report bicycle theft, it will be investigated by one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA).

Figure 3. Willingness to report bicycle theft by country



4.1. ANOVA

According to the ANOVA summary in Table 4, there is a statistically significant difference in respondents' willingness to report bicycle theft ( $p < 0.001$ ) according to their country of residence. Furthermore, according to the analysis, there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups in the willingness to report bicycle theft. That is, victims who reported (mean: 3.13) and victims who did not report (mean: 3.02) were equally willing to report bicycle theft in a hypothetical situation. There is, however, a statistically significant difference in the willingness to report bicycle theft between those witnesses who had reported a property crime (mean: 3.238) and those who had not reported one (mean: 3.01): those who had reported a crime against property are statistically significantly more willing to report bicycle theft in a hypothetical situation (Table 4).

Table 4. Summary of ANOVA results for arithmetic means

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Willingness to report bicycle theft and country of residence	Between Groups	35.785	6	5.964	8.163	<0.001
	Within Groups	1,003.139	1,373	0.731		
	Total	1,038.924	1,370			
Willingness to report bicycle theft and reporting property crime as a victim	Between Groups	2.834	1	2.834	3.649	0.056
	Within Groups	786.737	1,013	0.777		
	Total	789.570	1,014			
Willingness to report bicycle theft and reporting property crime as a witness	Between Groups	7.170	1	7.170	9.358	0.002
	Within Groups	647.439	845	0.766		
	Total	654.609	846			

\*  $p < 0.05$

A Games–Howell post hoc test was used to determine between which countries there is a statistically significant difference because the requirements for homogeneity of variance were not met (*Levene Statistics* = 2.549;  $df_1=6$ ;  $df_2=1,373$ ;  $sig.=0.019$ ). According to the test, a statistically significant difference exists between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Slovenia (Mean Difference [IJ] = 0.243 \*), and Hungary (Mean Difference [IJ] = 0.243 \*), in that participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina are statistically significantly more willing to report bicycle theft

in a hypothetical situation. Furthermore, there is a statistically significant difference between North Macedonia and Montenegro (Mean Difference [IJ] = 0.33 \*), Croatia (Mean Difference [IJ] = 0.363 \*), Hungary (Mean Difference [IJ] = 0.585 \*), Slovenia (Mean Difference [IJ] = 0.481 \*), and Serbia (Mean Difference [IJ] = 0.39 \*) because students from North Macedonia are more willing to report bicycle theft in a hypothetical situation. Furthermore, the participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia are statistically significantly more willing to report a bicycle theft in a hypothetical situation than participants from other countries, but there is no statistically significant difference between these two countries. Likewise, there is no statistically significant difference between participants from Montenegro, Croatia, Slovenia, and Serbia, i.e. participants from these countries have an equal willingness to report bicycle theft in a hypothetical situation.

## 5. Discussion

Two out of three hypotheses were confirmed in this study. It was found that students from North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina were statistically significantly more willing to report bicycle theft than students from Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia and Hungary. There are no results from the International Crime Victims Survey (ICVS) for these countries, but there are data for some others when it comes to bicycle theft. For example, in African countries, 77.9% of respondents consider bicycle theft to be serious and 37.4% reported losing a bicycle (Naudé, Prinsloo and Ladikos 2006). According to the ICVS for European countries, bike owners are more likely to have their bicycle stolen than a car owner is to have their car stolen (Van Dijk et al. 2005). Furthermore, theft of bicycles and motorcycles are highest in countries where such vehicles are the most common, e.g. the Netherlands and Denmark (Van Dijk et al. 2007). In South-eastern Europe, many young people drive motorised scooters so there are more thefts of those vehicles (Van Dijk et al. 2007).

In addition, it was confirmed that there was a statistically significant difference in willingness to report bicycle theft in the hypothetical situation of witnessing a crime against property – witnesses who had reported an actual crime reported more of a willingness to report one in a hypothetical situation.

There is no statistically significant difference for victims of property crimes where the same willingness to report a crime in a hypothetical situation was expressed by those who had reported a property crime in a real-life situation and those who had not. This may be a valuable piece of information for future research. That is, since there was no difference in the respondents' willingness to report crime, but there is a difference in reality – some crimes are reported, while others are not – it may be that the research participants provided socially desirable

answers to questions about their willingness to report. On the other hand, there is also the possibility that those who had reported a crime in the past had an unpleasant experience of reporting it and would not report one again, while those who have never reported such a crime do not regret the fact, and thus show an equal willingness to report one in future.

Descriptive data from the survey showed that just over half of victims reported the crime against their property. Considering that crimes against property are reported more often than other crimes (Garoupa 2001; Cohen 2005), the question arises as to the extent to which other crimes are reported, for example, the least often reported crimes: sex offences (Akers and Kaukinen 2009). Furthermore, participants who had witnessed a crime against property reported a crime in just under 30% of cases, significantly less often than the percentage reported by victims. Through the economic model of crime reporting, we can assume that victims report crime more often than witnesses because it is not the witnesses' property and they are not directly damaged.

Most of the participants in all countries (mean: >2) stated their willingness to report bicycle theft, which means that there is a willingness to report a crime even though the property is not of great value. However, in real-life situations, many of the participants did not report the crime. This may be due to the context in which the crime was committed, which supports the criticism of the economic model of reporting crime (Godriaan 2006) and opens room for further study on this topic. The reasons why property crimes are not reported are varied.

Since there is a difference between the countries in willingness to report crime, the reasons for doing so should be taken as a potential topic for future research. One reason why crimes are reported or not reported may be varying degrees of trust in the police in different countries (Pavlović and Vinogradac 2020). Another reason may be a lack of evidence or the perception that something is not valuable enough to report (Pavlović and Vinogradac 2020). Therefore, it is important that future research on reporting crimes against property are investigated through the economic model and qualitatively to see the real reasons for not reporting.

### 5.1. Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. Firstly, since it is based on an online survey and a convenience sample, there is a possibility that the sample is not representative; we should be cautious when drawing conclusions about the general population based on such samples. For example, the majority of respondents in the sample are women, as they were more involved in the survey than men. It can also be seen that the sample is restricted to users of facebook who are linked to student facebook groups and have an inclination to participate in the survey, and who possibly wanted to share their experience – thus, there is a chance that the sample over-represents victims. Also, in addition to victimization research, the study used

a vignette study with hypothetical research situations. A hypothetical situation can never be completely realistic and may not include all the factors that could influence one's decision to report a crime.

## 6. Conclusion

As a measure of encouraging young people to report crimes, Finkelhor and Ormrod (2001) propose measures and policies to combat crimes, encourage police reporting of crimes, emphasize the seriousness of certain crimes, break the code of silence, and encourage cooperation between police and educational institutions.

Ultimately, it can be concluded that much of the property crime committed goes unreported. Rates of crime reporting vary from country to country, and the willingness to report crimes against property exists even if the property is of lesser value. However, although there is a willingness to report crimes, they are still not reported, so factors other than economic ones should be taken into account in future research. Furthermore, since this study shows there are a large number of students who have been victims of property crime, it seems necessary to focus only on victims as a prospect for future research. However, more research is needed, especially in South-eastern Europe, where such research is lacking.

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