

Subjective Indicators: Usefulness and Information  
Potential for Policy Making  
- Some Introductory Remarks -

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What are we talking about?

## Objective Indicators

⇒ Measures of societal reality **unfiltered by perceptions and independent from personal evaluations**

## Subjective Indicators

⇒ Measures expressing **subjective states, perceptions, assessments, preferences** etc.

➤ While there are different possibilities of objective measurement, **subjective measurement is restricted to the survey method.**

➤ By generating subjective indicators, **respondents are not addressed as providers of information only**, but rather as persons characterised by specific emotional states, opinions, value orientations, preferences etc.

## Early Research on Subjective Social Indicators

- ♦ Campbell, Angus, Converse, Phil (eds.): The Human Meaning of Social Change. New York 1972.
- ♦ ‚Quality of Life in Britain Surveys‘ 1971 - 1975
  - Abrams, Mark: Research on subjective social indicators, (Social Trends No. 4, 1973)
  - Jon Hall et al. (SSRC, Survey Unit): "Quality of Life Survey" (Urban Britain: 1973)
- ♦ ‚Comparative Scandinavian Welfare Survey‘ (e.g. Allardt, Erik 1975)
- ♦ ‚American Quality of Life Survey‘ (Campbell/Converse/Rodgers: The Quality of American Life. New York 1976.
- ♦ Andrews, Frank M., Withey, Stephen B.: Social Indicators of Well-Being. New York, London 1976.
- ♦ German Welfare Survey 1978 – 1998 (e.g. Glatzer/ Zapf eds. 1984)

## Views on Subjective Indicators:

### Contra

- One of the concerns "with an approach based on people's own assessment of their **degree of satisfaction** is that it is **partly determined by their level of aspiration**" (Erikson, 1993: 77).
- Looking at how satisfied people are, from this point of view is criticized as "measuring how well they are adapted to their present conditions" ... "people's opinions and preferences should go into the democratic political process through their activities as citizens, but not through survey questions and opinion polls" (Erikson 1993: 77/78).

### Pro

- Subjective wellbeing = ultimate goal of societal development and political action
  - ⇒ Angus Campbell (1972): „ultimately, the quality of life must be in the eye of the beholder, and it is there that we seek to evaluate it“
- subjective perceptions and evaluations important for human behavior, e.g. 'perception of safety in the neighbourhood' („If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences“ (W.I. Thomas)

## Types of Subjective Indicators

### ➤ Indicators of Subjective Well-being

- ◆ Happiness
- ◆ Life Satisfaction
- ◆ Satisfaction with ‚domains of life‘, e.g. Work, Education, Income, Health
- ◆ Perceived Health

### ➤ Indicators of Subjective „Ill-being“

e.g. Stress / Strain, „Anxiety“, Alienation, Anomie, Loneliness

## Other Types of Subjective Indicators...

- Perceptions, e.g. degree of inequality, equity, conflicts, safety
- Aspirations, e.g. income, education, career, life goals
- Expectations, e.g. victimisation, loss of job
- Perceived risks/opportunities, e.g. risk of poverty, labour market opportunities
- Importance ratings, e.g. life domains (health, family etc.), freedom, equality
- Preferences, e.g. political parties, values, leisure time activities
- Identification, e.g. with social class, nation, city
- Optimism / Pessimism
- Concerns
- Trust (in persons, institutions)

## Concerns About and Reservations Against Subjective Indicators

- provide „soft“ / qualitative information rather than „hard statistical facts“
- doubts about reliability (e.g. stability of observations) and validity (e.g. cultural bias)
- limited comparability (inter-personal; inter-cultural)
- weak correlations between objective and subjective indicators
- „whitewashing“ of reality

# Subjective Indicators $\neq$ Objective Indicators

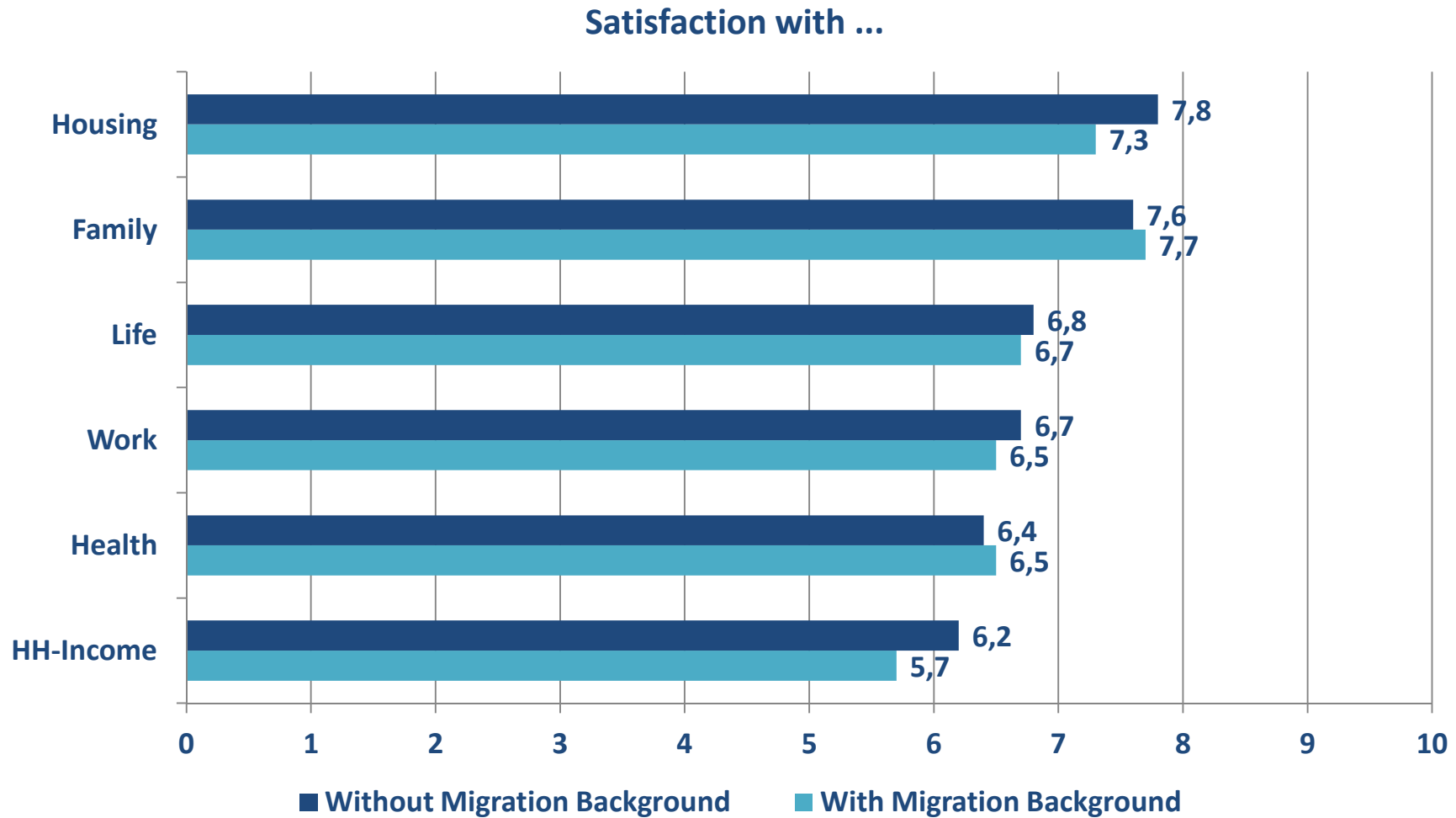
$\Rightarrow$  2 Examples



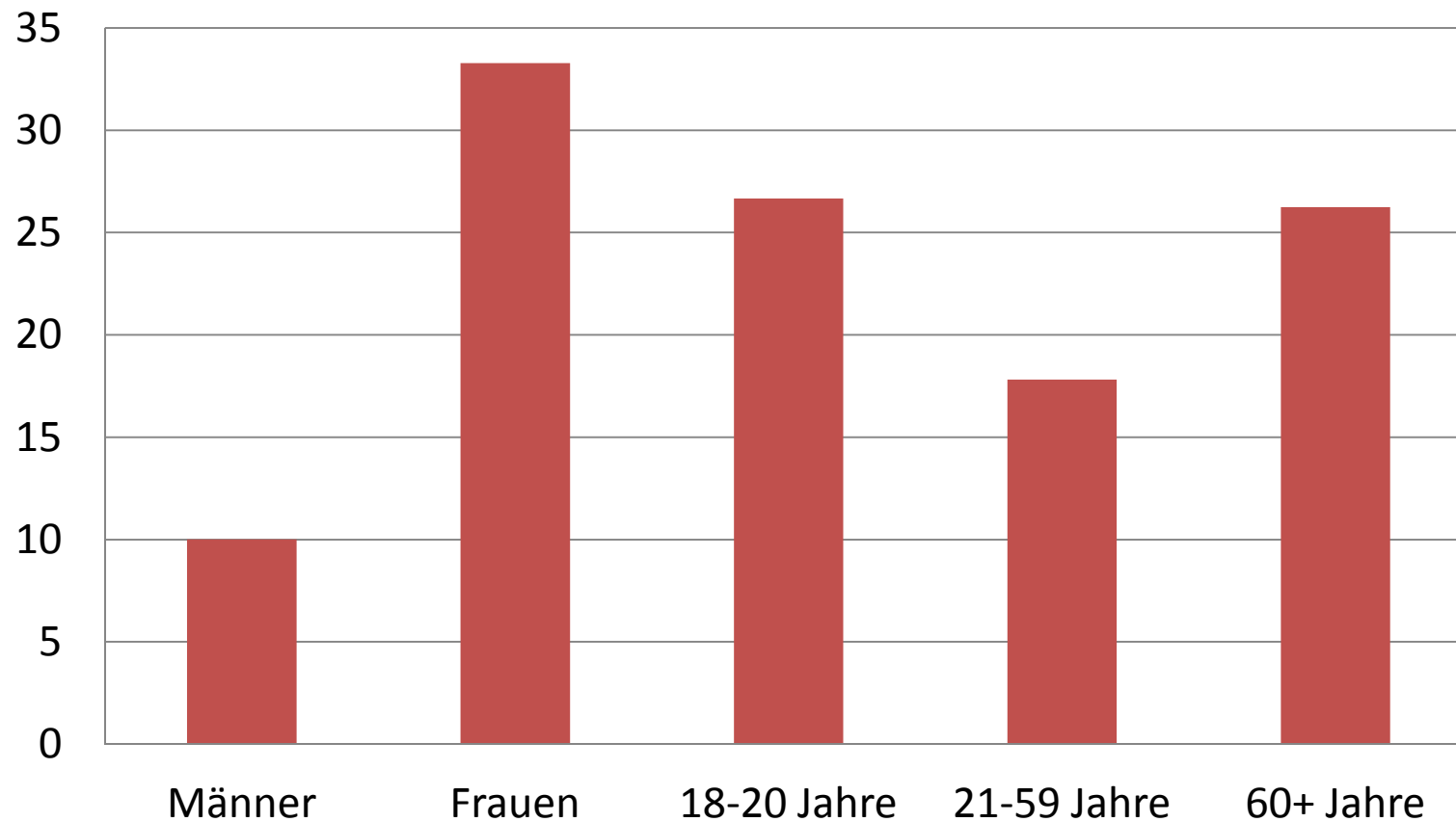
## Objective Indicators: Living Conditions - Persons With and Without Migration Background

	Without Migration Background	With Migration Background
Without School Leaving Certificate, %	2	12
„Compulsory School’ (Hauptschule) %	25	34
Un- , Semi-Skilled Workers, %	12	34
Relative Income Position (Equivalent Household Income; Median D= 100)	104	83
Poverty Rate (%)	12	21
Housing Space (qm/Person)	50	36

## Subjective Wellbeing – Population With and Without Migration Background

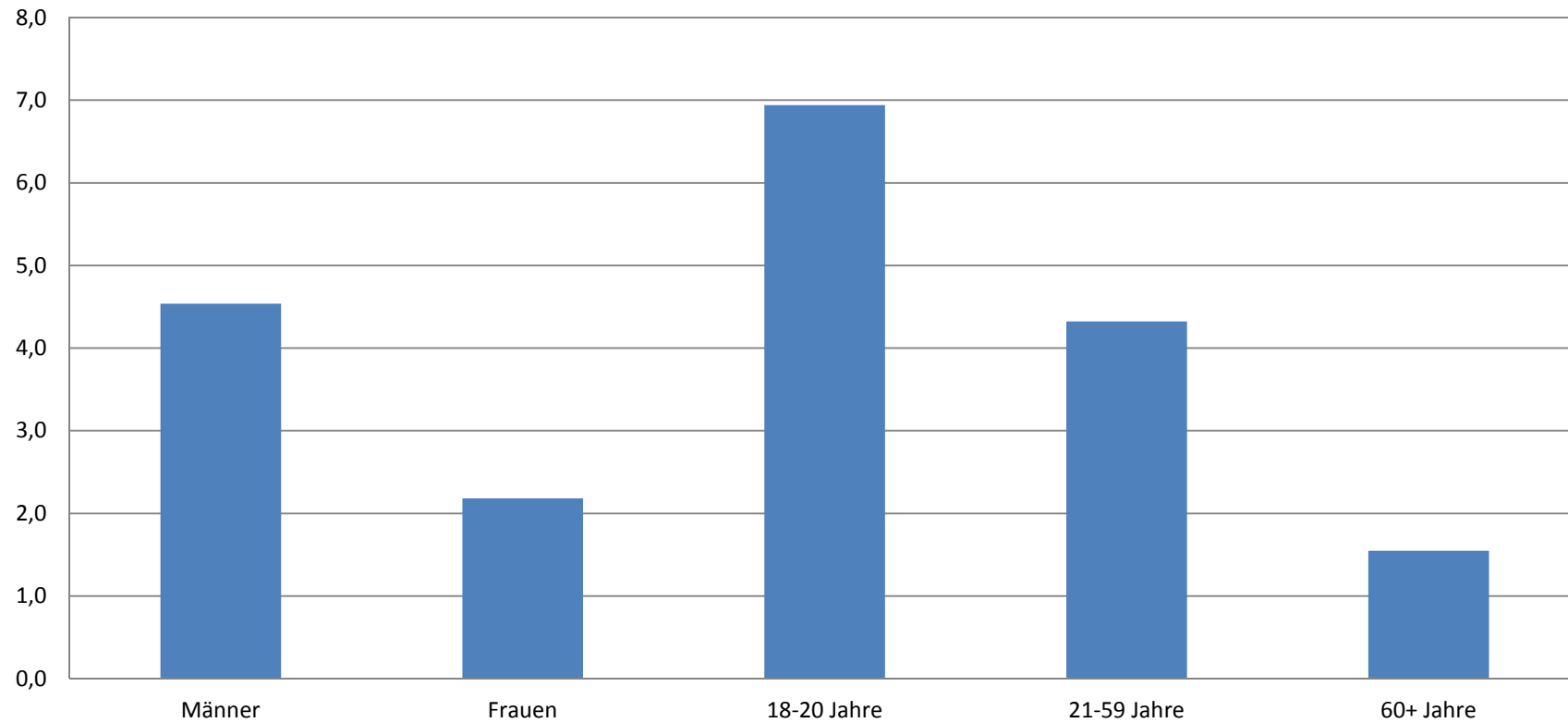


## Perceived Safety in Neighbourhood - % unsafe / very unsafe (D, 2008)



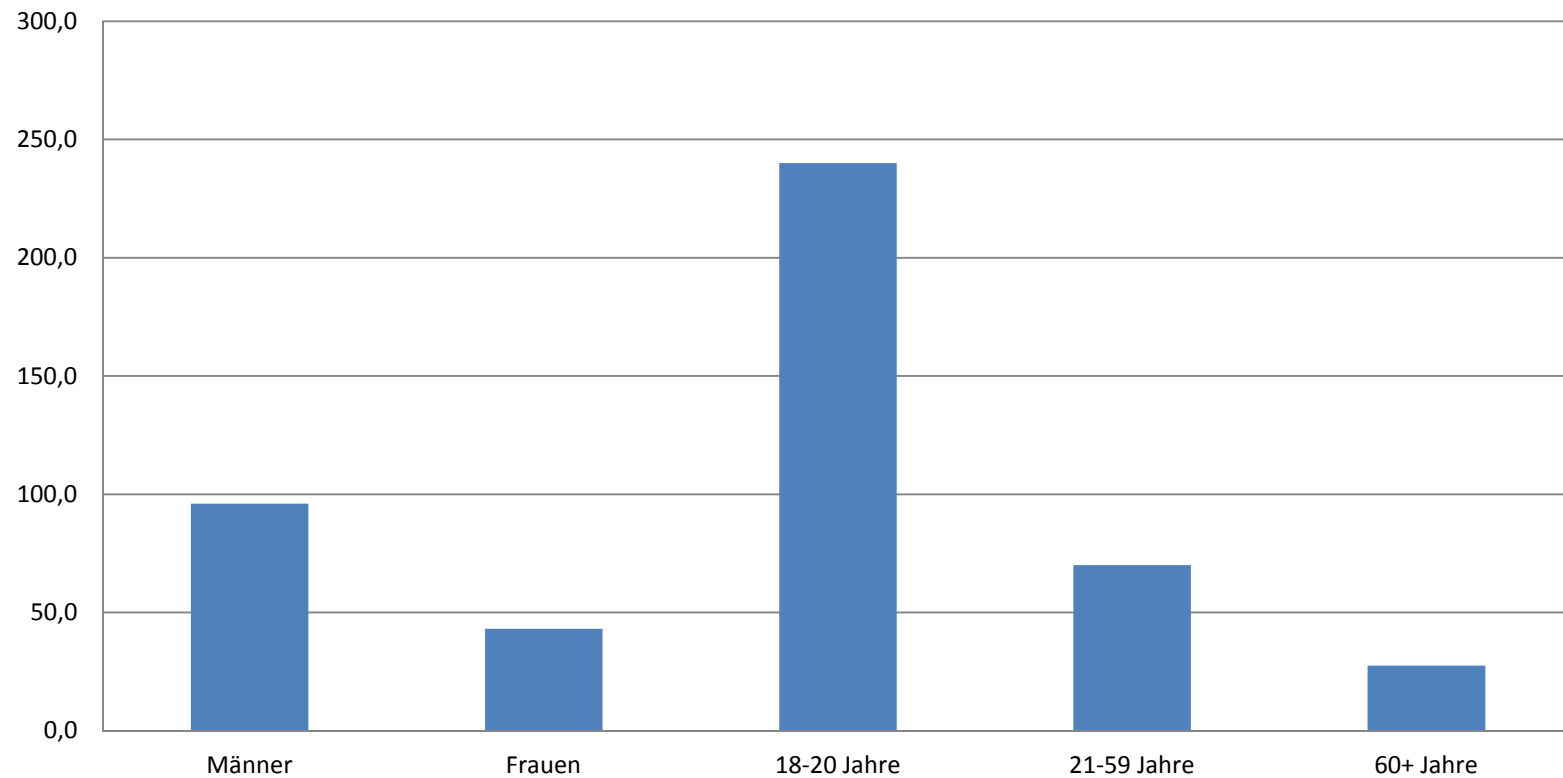
“How safe do you – or would you - feel walking alone in this area after dark?”

## Victimization Risk - Cases and Attempts of Murder and Manslaughter (per 100.000 Persons – D, 2008)



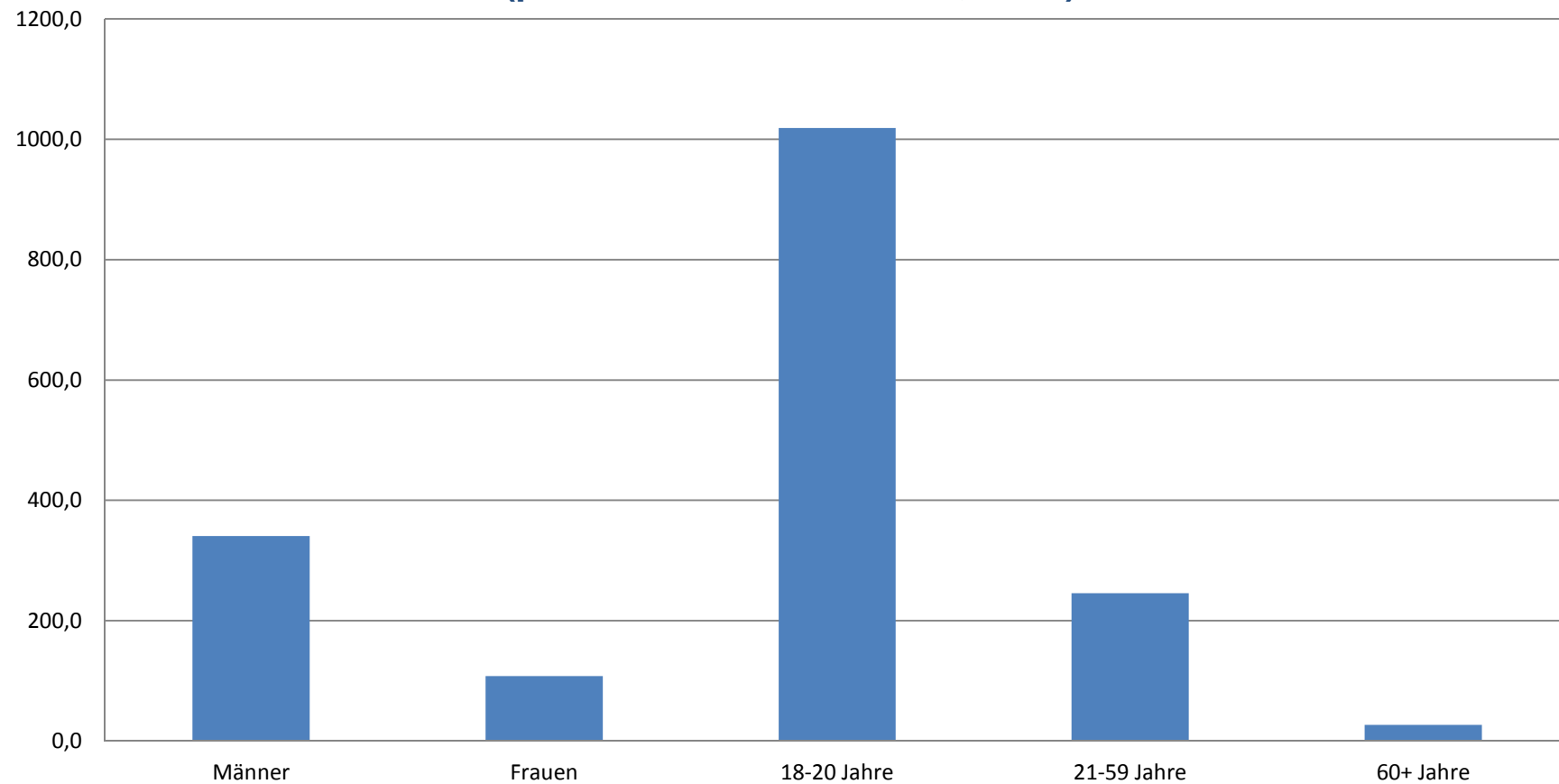
Source: GESIS – ZSi: German System of Social Indicators; SIMon

## Victimization Risk - Robbery (per 100.000 Persons – D, 2008)



Source: GESIS – ZSi: German System of Social Indicators; SIMon

## Victimization Risk - Bodily Harm (per 100.000 Persons – D, 2008)



Source: GESIS – ZSi: German System of Social Indicators; SIMon

## Typology of Welfare Positions

Objective Living Conditions	Subjective Well-Being	
	positive	negative
Good	Well-Being	Dissonance
Bad	Adaptation	Deprivation

Source: Zapf 1984, p. 25

## (Some) Issues to Address During this Conference...

- What is the added value of using subjective indicators in policy making?
- What are eventual problems and limitations of using subjective indicators in policy making?
- Are different sorts of subjective indicators more or less useful for policy makers?
- Do mechanisms like ‚aspiration dynamics‘, and processes of ‚social comparison‘ and ‚adaptation‘ raise specific problems for the usability of subjective indicators in policy making?