

Lucia Zedner: 'Victims' (edited extract)

Victims, once on the margins of criminological research, are now a central focus of academic research.

Mass victimization surveys

One of the most important factors in regenerating criminological interest in victims was the development of the victim survey. In America, in the 1960s, mass victimization surveys were designed to uncover the unreported 'dark figure' of crime.

In Britain, the first major survey was carried out in London by Sparks, Genn, and Dodd (Sparks *et al.*, 1977). In addition to attempting to ascertain the extent and nature of unreported crime, it also asked questions about victims' perceptions of crime and attitudes to the criminal justice system. In so doing it may be said to have set the agenda for many subsequent surveys and smaller-scale, qualitative studies.

Nationally, crime surveys have been funded and administered by central government. The first British Crime Survey [BCS] reported in 1983, drawing on a representative sample of over 10,000 people over the age of 15. Its main aim was to estimate the extent of crime independently of statistics recorded by the police. In addition it collected data on 'factors predisposing people to victimisation; the impact of crime on victims; fear of crime; victims' experiences of the police; other contacts with the police; and self-reported offending' (Mayhew and Hough, 1983). It has been replicated several times, reporting in 1985, 1989, 1992, 1994, and 1996 (Hough and Mayhew, 1985; Mayhew *et al.*, 1989; Mayhew and Maung, 1993; Mayhew *et al.*, 1994, Mirrlees-Black *et al.*, 1996). The first Scottish Crime Survey was carried out in 1983 (Chambers and Tombs, 1984). More recently, an ambitious cross-national crime survey was carried out using comparable surveys in fourteen countries (Van Dijk *et al.*, 1990) and further cross-national studies are presently in progress (Koffman, 1996: 14). These new macro studies aim to quantify the true volume of victimization and to identify the social, economic, and demographic characteristics of the victim population. Their technique typically involves asking large samples of the population, nationally or in a given area, questions about crimes committed against them over a specified period – generally six months or a year. Non-household and non-personal offences (such as vandalism, shoplifting, and fraud) are excluded from BCS questionnaires. Information is collected about personal and property crimes committed (the time and place of the incident, its impact, whether or not it was reported to the police) and about the victims (their age, sex, race, social class, and their consequent attitudes and behaviour) (Crawford *et al.*, 1990: 2–3).

Perhaps their most significant finding is that, as anticipated, crimes reported to the police represent only a small fraction of those which occur. The first British Crime Survey revealed that around only one in four crimes of property loss and damage was recorded in the official statistics and around only one in five offences of violence. Successive BCSs combine to give a good picture of changing trends in crime. For example, the 1995 BCS found that thefts of household property had risen by about 50 per cent since 1981 and thefts of personal property by 31 per cent over the same period (Mirrlees-Black *et al.*, 1996: 20). The percentage of crimes reported to the police has also increased since the BCS began from 31 per cent in 1981 to 43 per cent in 1991, falling only slightly to 41 per cent in 1995 (Mirrlees-Black *et al.*, 1996: 16).

The 1995 BCS found that whilst the chance of being a victim of a minor offence was high, the risk of suffering a more serious offence was small (Mirrlees-Black *et al.*, 1996). Theft was the most common offence, and vehicle theft particularly so – over a third of all incidents revealed by the BCS involved theft of, or from, or

criminal damage to a vehicle (36 per cent). Burglaries, on the other hand, made up only 9 per cent of crimes, violent offences (wounding and robbery) made up 6 per cent, and common assaults another 15 per cent (Mirrlees-Black *et al.*, 1996: 13). To take one, much quoted, example from the 1989 BCS, the 'statistically average' adult can expect to have his home burgled once every thirty-seven years, or have the family car stolen once every fifty years. Whilst comforting to the general public, such figures are less than informative, since they gloss over major geographical, social, and economic differences. Risk of victimization generally is closely related to geographical area, and risk of personal victimization correlated with age, sex, and patterns of routine activity, such as going out in the evenings and alcohol consumption. For example, although over a quarter of vehicle owners suffered some form of crime against their vehicle, risk is closely related with living in the north, inner cities, flats and terraced houses, and young or 'better-off' households (Mirrlees-Black *et al.*, 1996: 45). More striking still are the correlates of burglary. The risk of being burgled was found to be much higher in inner city areas particularly in the north and in the Greater London area. Flats were at greater risk than houses, end of terrace than mid-terrace houses, and rented accommodation rather than owner-occupied homes. Households with lower levels of disposable income, with single-adult and with younger heads of households, and those without household insurance were all also at greater risk.

Crimes of violence also correlate closely with specific variables. Data from the 1988 BCS shows that robbery is twice as likely to occur to those under 45 than over and to men than women. Living in inner cities, especially in the West Midlands and London, and going out at night also increase the risk of victimization. Men make up the bulk of assault victims (80 per cent). Most at risk are those who are single, under 30 years old, drink heavily several evenings a week, and who assault others. Assaults were reported to occur most often in places of entertainment such as pubs and clubs, secondly in the workplace, and thirdly the home. However, such estimates do not take into account the likelihood that domestic assaults are under-reported even in crime surveys. That only 1 per cent of women and 0.3 per cent of men reported suffering domestic violence by a current or ex-partner in 1995 is almost certainly an underestimate (for reasons discussed below) (Mirrlees-Black *et al.*, 1996: 30).

For many types of crime, both Afro-Caribbeans and Asians tend to be more at risk than whites. In part this may be explained by the fact that they are over-represented in social and age groups particularly prone to crime. Members of ethnic minority groups are disproportionately likely to be council tenants, or to live in younger households in socially disadvantaged areas. Pakistanis appeared to be most vulnerable to racially motivated crimes. They reported that nearly a third of all incidents had been racially motivated compared to 18 per cent of Indians and 14 per cent of Afro-Caribbeans (Fitzgerald and Hale, 1996: 2). Assaults, threats, and vandalism were those offences most often thought to be committed for racial reasons.

This new generation of victim surveys proved to be a valuable resource widely welcomed by criminologists: one which radically restructured the criminological

agenda. Nonetheless, many methodological problems have been identified both by independent commentators and by the surveyors themselves. An initial difficulty lies in identifying a sample which is representative of the population. Past samples for the British Crime Surveys were drawn from the electoral register, a source known to under-represent ethnic minorities, the young, and the less socially stable – all groups particularly prone to victimization. Even amongst those actually approached, non-respondents may include disproportionate numbers of victims. Mindful of these methodological problems, since 1992 the BCS has drawn its sample from the Postcode Address File (a listing of all postal delivery points): a source likely to produce a more representative sample than the electoral register. All the surveys since 1988 also include an 'ethnic minority booster sample' to ensure a sample large enough to obtain statistically reliable findings.

As a measure of crime, victim surveys are also problematic in that they enumerate only those incidents for which individuals are able and willing to identify themselves as a victim. For this reason they tend to concentrate on physical and sexual assaults (though even these may not be readily revealed to an interviewer) and personal or household property crime. They necessarily ignore the entire gamut of corporate, environmental, and motoring offences. Nor can they easily uncover crimes against organizations, such as company fraud, shoplifting, or fare evasion (Hough and Mayhew, 1983: 3–4). Crimes in which the 'victim' is complicit, such as drug offences, gambling, and prostitution, are also unlikely to be revealed since this would entail confession to offences for which respondents may themselves face prosecution. Crimes where the victim and offender are known to each other are less likely to be reported to the interviewer, especially if the offender is a relative or a member of the household. In the case of domestic violence or sexual assault, the offender may even be present when the interview takes place. Even where he is not, the common assumption that 'real crime' is something that occurs only between strangers is likely to inhibit the revelation or recognition of much physical and sexual violence committed against women. As a consequence this 'hidden violence', as Stanko characterizes it (Stanko, 1988), is likely to be significantly undercounted in all but the most sensitive crime surveys. For example, the 1988 British Crime Survey revealed only fifteen cases of sexual assault amongst the 5,500 women surveyed (Mayhew *et al.*, 1989), a figure recognized by its authors and critics to be a gross underestimate.

The popular reporting of national crime surveys tends also to create a distorted picture of the distribution of crime. By ignoring geographic and social differentials, press reports have generally implied that the risk of victimization is uniformly low. Recent analysis of BCS data reveals that the uneven distribution of crime is explicable not by the numbers of those who are victims alone, but by the unequal concentration of repeat victimization on particular groups (Trickett *et al.*, 1995). Further distortion may result from the fact that educated, middle-class respondents appear better able to understand the questions posed and more willing to report offences to the interviewer. Further down the social scale, respondents may be so regularly exposed to crime that they fail to recognize

activities as criminal or have difficulties in recalling all the offences perpetrated against them. Where the period under survey is more than a few months, problems of recall are likely to become especially marked. Victims may forget less serious incidents or may have difficulties in remembering whether a more distant occurrence fell within the specified time period.

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