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Revictimisation: Reducing the Heat on Hot Victims

Ken Pease & Gloria Laycock

Preventing crime and preventing repeat victimisation are priority issues for the criminal justice system in 1999.

Numerous research studies have shown that a small minority of offenders is responsible for a large proportion of all offences recorded by the police and, further, that a minority of victims experiences the majority of crime. It is well known that crime incidents are not uniformly distributed across geographic areas. Some neighbourhoods experience more violent crimes than others, and understanding this dynamic is valuable in formulating crime prevention and law enforcement strategies.

The Australian Institute of Criminology's Research and Public Policy Series no. 15, Repeat Victimisation in Australia by Satyanshu Mukherjee and Carlos Carcach, showed that over half of all property crimes (e.g. break and enter, attempted break and enter and motor vehicle theft) occurred in just over a quarter of all households. Households that experienced three or more incidents (10 per cent of all victim households) during the year accounted for 25 per cent of all incidents. The same study showed that about two-thirds of personal crimes (assault, sexual assault and robbery) are experienced by 41 per cent of victims. It also made the point that if, as a crime prevention measure, we wish to target 1000 randomly selected unvictimized households, we may on an average prevent 83 household crimes; but if we select 1000 previously victimised households, we may be able to prevent 286 household crimes.

Australian research complements international research on repeat victimisation and the paper reproduced here, written by two leading British researchers, was originally published for the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), Washington DC.

The Australian Institute of Criminology is pleased to be able to bring this type of international work to the attention of Australian readers, and sees great value in cross-national fertilisation.

Adam Graycar
Director

Highly prized is the truly productive crime prevention strategy, one that lightens the load on an overworked criminal justice system and, more importantly, reduces the number of victims. But to prevent crimes—especially in hot spots (high-crime areas)—police must determine where and when crimes are likely to occur. Drawing primarily on data collected in the United Kingdom, this [paper] underscores why a focal point for effective crime prevention is the hot dot, the victim who repeatedly suffers crime. Illustrative of hot dots, two studies indicated that about 4 per cent of surveyed victims suffered approximately 44 per cent of the offences. In one locality, other research found that 43 per cent of domestic violence

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incidents occurring over a 25-month period involved only about 7 per cent of 1450 households.

Among the characteristics of repeat victimisation:

- An individual's past crime victimisation is a good predictor of his or her subsequent victimisation, often inflicted by the same offender.
- The greater the number of prior victimisations, the higher the likelihood the victim will endure future crime.
- If revictimisation occurs, it tends to do so soon after the previous victimisation.
- Repeat victimisation is highest in areas of highest crime.

Those characteristics of the revictimisation phenomenon provide a reliable early warning of where and when crime may strike next. Armed with that knowledge, police can maximise the potential of crime prevention. When focused on the recently victimised, crime prevention is seen to be integral with victim support. A police officer's visit to a crime victim is directed at preventing the next possible incident as well as addressing the current one.

Concentration on preventing revictimisation by targeting efforts to and around repeat victims emphasises the importance of detecting offenders and makes detection an important component of prevention. For example, a 24 per cent reduction in domestic burglaries over 9 months in a municipality was attributed, in large part, to fewer domestic burglary revictimisations as the result of victim-focused crime prevention efforts.

Although one should not make the mistake of overemphasising the role of revictimisation in preventing crime, an equally serious error is failure to explore the repeat-victimisation approach as a valuable component of crime prevention strategy.

Jeremy Travis
Director, NIJ

Apprehending criminals, prosecuting them successfully, and sentencing the guilty fairly and efficiently are, of course, critical goals of any criminal justice system. But the real prize in crime strategy must be effective crime prevention. Preventing crime means fewer criminals for the overworked criminal justice system and, more importantly, fewer victims.

Why Not More Prevention?

So, in the United States and United Kingdom, why do we not have clear crime prevention strategies at the national or even lower governmental levels? The reasons are many.

First, neither police departments nor other agencies can prevent crime by working alone. They require partnerships, but effective crime prevention partnerships are not easily established.

Second, crime prevention success is notoriously difficult to identify. Crime rates rise and fall, and the more locally based the monitoring the more unpredictable the changes. Counting something that did not happen—a prevented crime—is guesswork, aided by general statistics.

Third, in the United States and United Kingdom, policing has been driven by high call-for-service volume, which fuels a reactive, incident-based, fast-response mode of law enforcement. In that context, one does not become a police chief by being a crime prevention expert.

Perhaps the biggest problem confronting prevention is that to thwart crimes, police must anticipate the place and time of occurrence—especially for the hot spots, the high-crime areas. At first, that may appear impossible, but “sting” operations work because the place and time of a crime is known precisely—they have been chosen by the police. Fortunately, less dramatic approaches can shorten the odds

of being in the right place at the right time to deflect or detect crime.

Hot Spots and Hot Dots

The hot spot is usually a hot smudge, with crimes occurring within a block or two of each other. The ultimate hot spot, the hot dot, is the victim who repeatedly suffers crime. Such victims receive too little attention. That is evident in the United States and United Kingdom, where official statistics provide disembodied crime counts and enumerate offenders at different stages of processing. We fail to find counts of victims in such statistics.

Even victimisation surveys, until very recently, provided little indication of how victimisations were distributed across victims. In 1976, the late Richard Sparks was the first person to highlight this issue for victim surveys (Sparks 1981). Despite his prescience, national victimisation surveys on both sides of the Atlantic continued to neglect those who experience repeat crimes.

Methods that help police focus efforts on where and when crime is likely to occur may be based on knowledge of offender, place or victim. For example, crime pattern analysis is used to pinpoint hot spots. Concentrating on recent victims of crime can help to identify crime-prone people and places and thus lead to more efficient deployment of police resources. As for repeat victimisation, the following assertions can be made with reasonable confidence (see, for example, Farrell 1995):

- An individual's past crime victimisation is a good predictor of his or her subsequent victimisation.
- The greater the number of prior victimisations, the higher the likelihood the victim will experience future crime.

- Especially within the most crime-prone areas, a substantial percentage of victimisations consists of repeat victims. In large measure, areas differ in crime rate by virtue of rates of repeat victimisation within them.
- If revictimisation recurs, it tends to do so soon after the prior occurrence.
- The same perpetrators seem to be responsible for the bulk of repeated offences against a victim.
- Many factors, from police shift patterns to computer systems, conspire to mask the true contribution of repeat victimisation to the general crime problem.

A Look at Victimisation Data

The authors' awareness of the significance of repeat victimisation for the deployment of crime control efforts came after examining the data generated by the 1986 Kirkholt burglary prevention project in England (Forrester et al. 1988). Because too little money was available to protect all the homes at risk, police had to identify those most at risk. What quickly became evident was that the best predictor of a future burglary was a past burglary.

The extent of repeat burglary was so high that by December most homes burgled earlier in the year had been burgled at least once more. This level of repeats was exceptional but clearly indicated the value of counting repeats and understanding the process that led to offence repetition.

A review of data collected in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, suggested that repeats tended to occur soon after the last incident, most within 6 weeks (Polvi et al. 1990). This pattern has now been observed for a number of offences. For burglary, an

additional period of elevated risk extended about 4 months after the first burglary. That period of increased risk may reflect an "insurance effect": if householders are insured and replace their goods, after 4 months the burglar can be confident that new goods are available.

Upon the authors' review of what victimisation surveys have told us about repeat victims, the first surprise was how very little the reports of such surveys addressed repeat victimisation. The second was how the design of such surveys tended to understate repeats—for example, by limitations on the number of victimisations any given victim was allowed to report and by conventions about the maximum number of offences permissible to include in a series of similar offences.

Even so, analysis of British Crime Survey data suggests that some 4 per cent of victims suffered about 44 per cent of the offences (Farrell & Pease 1993). Those figures are in no sense precise, but they do provide a ballpark estimate of the substantial contribution of repeat victims to crime counts. An unpublished Stockholm victimisation survey yields almost identical findings.

The Missing Link

Most fascinating was the missing link in victimisation counts. Although victimisation surveys include such measures as the number of victimisations per 1000 population, they do not mention how victimisations are concentrated (number of crimes per victim). The concentration measure is at least as important as others.

In the most victimised 10 per cent of areas in England, more than 30 times as much property crime occurs as in the least victimised 10 per cent. However, even within the most victimised 10 per cent of areas, just over half

of the people questioned had suffered no property crime during the previous year. Of the almost half who had, persons experienced an average of four such crimes each. That suggests a crime problem very different from one where high-crime areas differ only in the number of victimisations per 1000 population. In fact, high-crime areas are such, to a very large extent, because they have high rates of repeat victimisation.

If repeat victimisation is so important, why have the police not noticed? Shrewd officers often have, but why the absence of substantial police literature on repeats? The reasons may include the following:

- The working lives of police officers are fragmented. They do not have the continuity of experience to make the necessary links.
- Police recording systems tend to be designed to document events as if they were independent. Many reasons explain why repeats are not identified as such (subtly different descriptions of the same location, etc.).
- Many crimes remain unreported, with repeat victims often less likely to notify police—frequently for what victims regard as good reasons, including avoidance of revisions or terminations of insurance policies or disillusionment with how police dealt with earlier reports.

Why Repeats?

Two basic reasons help explain the occurrence of repeat victimisations.

The first pertains to risk assessment by offenders. For example, the house with a right-of-way behind it, and with an area of poor housing beyond that, is likely to be regarded as a low-risk opportunity by any passing burglar.

The second is that victimisation itself makes a repeat more likely. Common sense argues for an offender to victimise a person more than once. A burglar walking down a street for the first time sees houses he presumes are suitable targets and those he presumes are unsuitable. He successfully burgles one home. The next time he walks down the same street he sees not only houses he presumes suitable or unsuitable but also one he knows is suitable. Why not burgle the latter—again? He knows his way in and out of the home and knows the value of either what he had to leave behind the first time or what he anticipates has been replaced through insurance.

Apart from common sense, the following is among evidence supporting the authors' belief that past victimisation of a person plays an important role in generating repeat crimes against him or her by the same offender: interviews with burglars and robbers reveal the surprising extent to which they return to places they burgled and robbed before; interviews with victims suggest the substantial extent to which offence similarities indicate that the same offender is involved; and a review of cleared crimes shows the extreme rarity with which different offenders are convicted of offences against the same target and the frequency with which crimes cleared to a single offender exhausts all crime against a single victim (Anderson et al. 1995).

Victimisation-focused Crime Prevention

A number of crime prevention efforts in the United Kingdom have been based on the prevention of repeat victimisation. For instance, one in Liverpool looked at the prevention of repeated domestic violence by use of alarms routed directly to the police station (see "Domestic Violence Hot Dots: Police Re-

sponse"). In Huddersfield, domestic burglary fell 24 per cent over a 9-month period, thanks in large part to reductions in repeat burglaries.

To oversell the role of repeat victimisation would be foolish. Knowledge that a school or shop may well be robbed does not necessarily enable deployment of resources to prevent the crime. Nonetheless, the temptation is to regard the repeat-victimisation approach—after a period of unmerited neglect—as exciting and as an integral component of crime prevention efforts.

Among the advantages of focusing crime prevention on the recently victimised:

- Crime prevention is thus seen to be integral with victim support. Victim support without crime prevention denies practical help to the people in most immediate need of it. Because the tradition has been to reassure victims of the improbability of crime recurring, dealing with the real possibility that it might (and preventing it) is the challenge for the integrated role.
- Repeat victimisation defines a natural pace of activity for prevention. Tracking offences implies constant (hopefully declining) effort. That is referred to as drip-feeding crime prevention, in contrast to on-again, off-again efforts.
- Repeat victimisation is highest in areas of highest crime. Put the other way around, areas are high in crime substantially because of rates of repeat victimisation. Thus, deploying efforts to and around repeat victims serves to direct efforts to the areas in greatest need. One tactic is the cocoon watch, whereby residents of the very few houses in closest proximity to one burgled are invited to

watch for signs indicating attempts at repetition.

- Concentration on preventing repeats underscores the importance of detecting the offender and makes detection an important component of prevention. If the same offender returns, detection this time confers a very particular benefit on the victim and sends a very special message to the offender.
- Most crucially, thinking about repeats involves changed perceptions. A police officer's visit to a crime victim is directed at preventing the next possible incident as well as addressing the current one.

Questions and Issues

Work on repeats is at an early stage of development. Even the definition remains in question. For example, does a repeat refer to a location, a person, or both? The provisional answer is that sometimes the distinction is academic (as in house burglary and most domestic violence). Sometimes, thinking in terms of location, such as one bay in a car park (the hot dot in the hot spot), is more profitable. Most contentiously, people may carry the risk of violence around with them, and the unit of analysis must be the person.

Over what period should we consider a victim at relatively high risk for victimisation? Should one attacked as a child be considered ever after as at high risk for repeat victimisation? Such a lengthy time span may not be a helpful way of approaching the issue. Equally problematic would be to limit the period for revictimisation to, say, 1 month after an offence. The criterion should be the period over which the same presenting risk can be reduced; that is, before the offences are best viewed as independent.

Are offences of different types but involving the same victim best classified as repetitions? A case has been made that, in racially motivated crime, a diversity of acts against the same target must be seen as related. A contrasting view is that precautions tend to be crime specific, so why be alert to cross-crime sequences where later and different events would have been difficult to prevent anyway?

However such issues are resolved, and however halting the progress toward seeing crimes as sequences, the repeat victimisation approach to crime prevention is beginning to change how officers and others perceive police work.

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Domestic Violence Hot Dots: Police Response

After research indicated that 43 per cent (74) of 172 domestic violence incidents occurring over a 25-month period involved only about 7 per cent (10) of 1450 households (Lloyd et al. 1994), police took such steps as the following to help prevent recurrence, apprehend batterers, and enhance victims' sense of security:

1. *Development and distribution of neck-pendant alarms to repeat victims (hot dots).* When a person presses the button on the pendant (or on the associated equipment installed in the home), it dials a central station that triggers a priority response from police; opens a voice channel so that officers can hear what is happening and provide assurance that help is on the way; and automatically displays on a police computer monitor data about prior calls from the address—information that is relayed to officers en route to the reported incident.
2. *Improvement in transfer of injunction information from courts to police.* Knowledge by police of injunctions against batterers permitted officers to arrive on the scene with a better understanding of their powers regarding the incident at hand. Written reminders of their general powers in domestic violence incidents are routinely distributed to others.
3. *Provision of support and information for victims.* Police employed a domestic violence specialist, who developed safety plans for victims and helped them improve their communication with other agencies. Police also gave victims cards containing domestic violence information.

Those measures above were warmly welcomed by police and victims, and several arrests were made as a result. One victim remarked that although she is still nervous and on the alert, she feels “much safer and secure” thanks to the alarm. Although the efficacy of such initiatives as this is difficult to demonstrate statistically, both researchers and police were left in no doubt about the project's worth.

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