The victims of crime

It is probably true to say that, over the past 30 years, many sociologists and criminologists have become rather less interested in focusing on crime offenders, their background and motivations, and much more alerted to the *victims* of crime, their behaviour and their response to victimisation. This relative shift in research and policy emphasis has produced a new determination to explore the research field defined as 'victimology'.

This new focus on victimisation may have intensified recently because of the dominant idea that the post-9/11 society that we live in is full of risk. This is a society in which, according to the sociologist Frank Furedi (2002) and others, we are encouraged to live in a 'culture of fear'. It is said that we now inhabit a world peopled by terrorists and criminals; one in which we are all urged to think of ourselves as potential victims of a range of criminal outrages. In this sort of context, as Zedner (2002) points out, 'the victim has moved from being the "forgotten actor" to key player in the criminal justice process'.

From offender to victim

Recent terrorist attacks have been important in producing new uncertainties and new public anxieties. But there are other, rather more longstanding, reasons for this shift in research emphasis from offender to victim. Four of these are discussed here.

(i) The causation crisis

First, there has been a notable causation crisis in theorising about the roots of crime — a crisis that began to take hold in the 1950s and 1960s. Liberal perspectives on offending, which had traditionally linked crime with poverty, unemployment or poor social conditions, were rather undermined at this time because, as social conditions and wages improved and unemployment declined in the UK, crime seemed to rise quite rapidly. Examining the motivation for *offending* thus seemed to be something of a blind alley for many liberal theorists and researchers, and also for governments.

In this uncertain climate regarding motivation, it was argued that it is better to examine the possibilities of *limiting victimisation*, rather than pondering on the many potential reasons why crime might be committed in the first place. This is one reason why it is argued that the focus for much policy research on crime has now moved from examining *crime* prevention (including assessing the impact of the offender's background) to *victim* prevention (focusing much more strongly on the immediate circumstances in which the crime took place and on the behaviour of potential victims).

(ii) The 'grey' figure of crime

Second, as 'ordinary' people's experience of crime increased and the number of recorded offences rose, so there was a growing sense that lots of crime was actually *missing* from the official statistics (which are made up only of crimes reported to and recorded by the police). This 'grey' figure of missing crime, it was argued, could only sensibly be assessed and measured by talking, in much more detail, to crime victims themselves.

The first national victim surveys in the world were carried out in the USA in the 1970s, and the first British Crime Survey took place in 1982. Some crimes were much harder to assess in this way than others: the victims of corporate crime, for example, often did not even know that a crime had been committed against them. Nevertheless, the extent and location of the crime problem revealed in these surveys suggested that crime victims must be considered an important part of the crime process. Researchers and others began to think they could get a much more accurate picture of crime from talking to crime victims.

Also, as custody and other punishments seemed to do little to dissuade offenders from committing crimes, we turned increasingly to involving victims in criminal justice procedures. For example, restorative justice programmes are championed today, where offenders (especially young ones)

BARRY LEWIS/CORBIS

Elderly women may be more structurally vulnerable to crime

are compelled to meet the victims of their crimes as a means of shaming them publically and promoting reparation.

Moreover, citizens are now expected to take on much more responsibility for their *own* victim prevention. The police, it is argued, can no longer reasonably be expected to cope alone, given the scale of the crime problem. The prospect of being a crime victim today should be regarded as a 'normal' part of everyday life (Garland 2001). So, instead of relying on preventative policing, we should all make our own preparations to limit our chances of becoming a crime victim.

(iii) Fear of crime

Third, victim surveys also revealed another aspect of the crime question that had previously been underplayed by researchers — namely, the extent and growing effects of the *fear* of crime. As experience of crime and more information about it spread from the 1970s onwards — in victim surveys and media coverage — so people seemed to become much more fearful about its incidence and its potential impact. This opened up a whole new avenue of research about how potential victims might *imagine* crime (Walklate 2007).

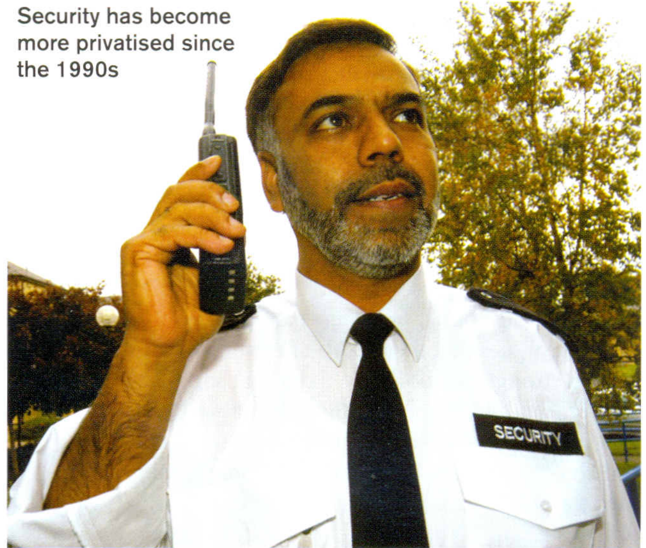
This new concern stimulated research into the tangible (obvious and measurable) costs of the fear of crime — the increased transport costs at night, for example. It is more difficult to provide a monetary estimate of the more intangible costs of fearfulness reported by a representative sample of UK citizens. A few examples of these might be a reduction of personal freedom, a lower quality of life, and reduced well-being and mental and physical health because of crime fears. But one recent authoritative estimate by Dolan and Peasgood (2007) has costed these intangibles for the population of England and Wales at an annual figure of £776.5 million.

Fear of crime is obviously big business. But it is also difficult to define and contain. How could one assess the rationality of crime fears? In a recent research paper, for example, the criminologists Ditton and Chadee (2006) argue that 'people tend to overestimate their "risk" of future victimisation, even after serially possessing the very information (their own prior victimisation record) that would allow them to predict it with less exaggeration'. In other words, our personal fear of crime is not necessarily strongly shaped by our own crime experiences. Other influences such as the media, public information, our own imaginations and our general sense of uncertainty in a 'risk' society are also strongly at work here.

(iv) New policies for victims as consumers

Fourth, from the 1970s onwards in the UK, two distinctive groups began to popularise the new policy and research focus on crime victims:

- Feminists began to argue that violence against female victims — especially in the form of domestic violence — was being underplayed in official crime figures. Feminist activists thus set up refuges for female domestic violence victims and called for much more investigation and research, including victim surveys, into the 'hidden' crimes in the home aimed at women and children.
- The Victim Support organisation was established in England and Wales in the 1970s. This is a voluntary body that tries to reduce the impact that crime has on its victims.



Security has become more privatised since the 1990s

PAULA SOLLOWAY/PHOTOFUSION

Victim Support visits crime victims and helps to promote the idea that 'aftercare' and compensation is an appropriate 'consumer' service to which all 'innocent' crime victims should be entitled.

This idea that crime victims should be seen as 'consumers' of services became more concrete when the first Victim's Charter was introduced by the Conservative government in 1990. This was essentially a list of 'rights' that crime victims could expect to have honoured in terms of how they might be treated by the police and organisations such as Victim Support.

But what was really different in the 1990s from the 1950s, as we have seen, was that the state no longer seemed able to promise to defend the rights of all its citizens in this area. Instead, crime control became much more personalised and also more *privatised*; new forms of private security had emerged — CCTV, security guards, bouncers etc. — that were funded and organised by private individuals, small businesses or corporations.

In this new era, the state also demanded *obligations* from its citizens: a promise from them, for example, that they would agree to behave in certain ways and take appropriate action (e.g. alarms, locks and insurance) that might help to limit the prospects of them becoming a crime victim. Such strategies, it was said, might also help to lessen the impact of any experience of victimisation. This was a very different era to the one that had gone before.

New approaches to thinking about crime victims

Sandra Walklate is one of the key figures in victimology, and she has been writing and researching in this field for at least two decades. In her recent work, she strongly rejects the traditional 'positivist' view of victims, which argues that the likelihood of one becoming a crime victim depends on the specific lifestyles of individuals. These approaches, she concludes, tend to exclude the arenas of home and work as potential sites for crime, and they proceed as if structural inequalities do not exist and do nothing to shape the prospects of one becoming a crime victim.

Instead, Walklate argues for the development of what she calls a 'critical victimology'. This is an approach to crime victims that has three core features:

- It recognises the importance of identifying the effects of inequalities on crime victims.
- It draws on feminist methodologies in valuing and using data — but in a critical way — drawn from victims' own experiences, especially as reported in local crime surveys.
- It recognises the wider structural processes that go on unseen and 'behind the backs' of victims. These structural features — including power relations and inequality — shape everyone's experiences of crime and of the criminal justice system in a wider sense.

In her latest book, *Imagining the Victim of Crime* (2007), Walklate argues that the wealth of existing data on crime victims strongly supports the claim that social class and age are key variables in shaping the criminal victimisation experience. As Dixon et al. (2006) report, according to the British Crime Survey, compared to people earning more than £30,000 a year, people on incomes of £10,000 a year or less are:

- 1.6 times more likely to be mugged
- 1.3 times more likely to be burgled
- 4.2 times more likely to feel insecure when walking home alone at night

Younger people seem to be most at risk from crime of all kinds, but from personal crime (violence) in particular. Home Office studies (including analyses of the British Crime Survey data) also show that young, single males are most at risk of violence, especially from people they do not know, but that women are most at risk of violence from people who are known to them. Interpersonal violence of this latter type is both dispersed and concentrated. It is dispersed because, according to crime surveys, 36% of all women report some experience of domestic violence, sexual victimisation or stalking, but it is concentrated because a small minority of women suffer multiple attacks and life-changing injuries (Walby and Allen 2004).

Walklate argues that when one considers connecting up the experience, risk and *impact* of being a crime victim, a complex picture emerges: those for whom crime seems to have the most impact — elderly females — are also those who are apparently least at risk (see Table 1). But Walklate also concludes that analyses of the crime survey data confirm

Table 1 Relationship between risk from crime and impact of crime according to victim survey data

	High risk	High impact
Class	Poor – living in private rented housing	
Gender	Males	Females
Age	Young	Elderly
Ethnicity	Ethnic minority groups	
Marital/family status	Those living in households with no other adults	

Source: Walklate (2007)

that those on low incomes, those from ethnic minorities, those living in rented accommodation or in single-parent/one-parent households, the elderly, women, and the very young are more likely to be structurally vulnerable and thus more likely to feel the serious impact of crime.

Scared of the dark? Low earners are much more afraid of walking home alone at night

Conclusion

The main lesson for sociologists here is that victims are now a vitally important feature of the crime and criminal justice landscape. Also, crime does not affect victims randomly or occur in a social vacuum: just as crime is patterned, so its 'typical' victims are patterned too, albeit in rather different ways. For example, while the large majority of offenders for most crimes are young men, many crime victims and many of the people who experience the serious impact of the fear of crime are women, children and the elderly. Many of these people are also poor and suffer from other disadvantages.

Also, as Walklate points out, some sections of society not only experience repeat victimisation but also encounter being a victim of crime *routinely*. This applies especially to female victims of domestic violence, and thus challenges the traditional, positivist understanding of victimisation as a 'one-off' event. It also raises the spectre of exactly how to make sense of criminal victimisation when the perpetrator is not some menacing figure 'out there', but is instead someone who is much closer to home and well known to the victim.

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