

Summer 1981

Towards a Revitalization of Theory and Research on Victimization by Crime

Albert J. Jr. Reiss

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/jclc>

 Part of the [Criminal Law Commons](#), [Criminology Commons](#), and the [Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Albert J. Jr. Reiss, Towards a Revitalization of Theory and Research on Victimization by Crime, 72 J. Crim. L. & Criminology 704 (1981)

This Symposium is brought to you for free and open access by Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology by an authorized editor of Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

CRIMINOLOGY

SYMPOSIUM ON VICTIMIZATION AND VICTIMOLOGY*

*The study of victimization and victimology has attracted a great deal of attention in both the academic world and the criminal justice system. On March 10-11, 1980, a Victimology Research Workshop was held to develop a research agenda in the area of basic victimology. The program was sponsored by the Office of Research Programs of the National Institute of Justice, United States Department of Justice. ** This symposium includes edited versions of eight papers on victimization and victimology presented at the workshop. Professor Reiss' foreword was written especially for this symposium.*

THE EDITORS

FOREWORD: TOWARDS A REVITALIZATION OF THEORY AND RESEARCH ON VICTIMIZATION BY CRIME

ALBERT J. REISS, JR.***

INTRODUCTION

Not long ago Dr. Edward C. Stone, chief scientist of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory's Saturn project observed that at this stage in their work scientific creativity was largely a team effort because planetary dis-

* The U.S. Department of Justice reserves the right to reproduce, publish, translate, or otherwise use, and to authorize others to publish and use, all or any part of the copyrighted material developed from the Victimology Workshop in this publication.

** This project was supported by Grant #79-NI-AX0135 awarded to the MITRE Corporation by the National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice, under Omnibus Crime Control Act of 1968, as amended. Points of view or opinions expressed in these papers are those of the authors, and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

*** Yale University.

covery requires the peculiar talents of astronomers, geologists, physicists, meteorologists, and mathematicians. He went on to observe that:

The usual creative process, the quintessential scientific process, tends to be a very individual process . . . You have an idea yourself, you conceive of ways to test your idea, you do your experiments and you report the results. This is the classical method and it usually occurs over a long period of time. But here lots of people see the data at the same time. They begin immediately to suggest ideas and expose constraints on what the data could mean. Peer review is going on at each step of the way, not at the end of the process.¹

Although the study of victimization is in many ways formally analogous to space exploration, we have not as yet reached the organizational state of Big Science where large research teams are bombarded continuously by new information that they puzzle over together. The closest we may come to that state is a periodic stock taking where a group of scientists prepare reviews and then present them to their fellow scientists with whom they then ransack both theory and data to suggest new explanations and to plot one or more courses for research in the near term. This symposium arose from such a collective enterprise. It provides a snapshot of what some would describe as the input to the workshop and not its output which is presented elsewhere.² Yet any collective assessment is in some sense incomplete whether from a participant's direct observations or a reviewer's examination of its printed record.

Having shared in the workshop from which these articles are drawn, contributed to the discussion of a proposed research agenda, and reviewed its product, my task is to briefly review the contributions of the individual articles to theory and research on victimization by crime. Any reader will discern that these articles not only advance our thinking and knowledge of the causes and consequences of victimization by crime, but also they disclose the creative process in both theory and method. Each of the articles contribute to our knowledge about victimization by crime. This introduction focuses on the gaps remaining between theory and research, with the hope that our readers will think about these knowledge gaps and of how to close them.

WHO ARE THE VICTIMS?

Most of the theory and much of the research on crime victimization

¹ *Saturn's Mysteries Confound Theorists*, N.Y. Times, Nov. 18, 1980, § C, at 8, col. 2.

² The workshop resulted in two products, one an edited transcript of the discussion of papers prepared for the workshop, *Victimology Research Agenda Development: Volume II—Workshop Proceedings* (J. Dahmann & J. Sasfy eds. MITRE Corp., MTS-80W00221, 1980), and the other a compilation of research topics resulting from the discussion, J. Sasfy & J. Dahmann, *Victimology Research Agenda Development: Volume III: Analysis and Recommendations* (MTS-80W221, Aug. 1980).

is person-centered. Yet, organizations also are victims. This selective inattention to organizations as victims is evident in a number of ways.

For much of their history, statistics on crime events have lumped person and organizational victims together in the calculation of crime rates. In calculating the robbery rate, Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) in this country still includes robberies of establishments and households with those of persons. Moreover, the base for crime rates ordinarily is a population of persons calculated seemingly on the assumption that only persons are at risk for these crime events. The UCR robbery rate is calculated for the entire U.S. population. Even when UCR separates nonresidential from residential burglaries in the United States, the rates are calculated for a population of persons rather than for separate populations of persons, households, and of all other organizations. The National Crime Survey (NCS), on the other hand, treats households rather than persons as the base population for the victimization rates for burglary, motor vehicle theft, and larceny from a household when these crimes are reported by members of households. For a time, NCS calculated commercial establishment rates, using an estimate of their number as a base for that rate. These statistical bases, however, are recent exceptions to conventional practice.

Another manifestation of the person-centered view of victimization is the way that the NCS reports victimizations. The basic continuing NCS is a study of a household and its members that limits the victimization concept to the experiences persons have as a household or as victims of personal crimes—rape, robbery, assault, and larceny from the person, with and without contact. The person role, however, is central to the NCS victimization concept so that whenever persons are victimized in an organizational role, they are not treated as victims of crime. Thus, if robbed in a commercial establishment, a patron is treated as a crime victim. Yet, if the cashier in that same establishment is robbed, the commercial establishment and not the cashier is regarded as victim. Thus to be harmed in some way by a crime event does not necessarily qualify either person or organization as a victim in the current NCS. For persons to be treated as victims, they must act as private persons and not in their organizational role. Moreover, current victimization theory and measurement does not permit treating as victims *both* the person (the cashier) and the organization (the commercial establishment), even though the consequences from harm in this event may be far greater for the cashier than the employer.

Although there are sound arguments that account for the NCS focusing solely upon the household and its members, the arguments do not rest on theoretical presumptions about victims, but rather upon techni-

cal measurement arguments or on grounds of public policy.³ Indeed, so little attention is paid to the victimization of organizations that we lack systematic information on organization victimization rates. Even crude comparisons, however, of the victimization rates of organizations as compared with those for persons disclose that for crimes where both persons and organizations are at risk the rate for organizations is far greater than that for persons. The robbery rate reported in the NCS for all persons twelve years of age and over in 1976, for example, was 6.5 per thousand whereas the actual rate was more than six times that at 38.5 per thousand commercial organizations.⁴ Were one to measure all commercial robberies as person robberies with each commercial robbery equaling one person victimization, the robbery rate in 1976 would have been only 8.1 per thousand persons, still only roughly one-fifth that of commercial organizations.⁵ Moreover, in comparing differences in victimization rates of household and commercial organizations, the rate for commercial organizations is substantially higher. The 1976 burglary rate reported by NCS for households was 88.9 per thousand households, but was actually 217.3 per thousand commercial establishments.⁶

Given the dependence of theory development upon empirical observations as well as its interdependence with testing theory, a state of benign neglect of organizational victimization exists because we lack empirical intelligence. Yet, that is perhaps only partly true. An attempt at developing an intelligence system to report on organizations as victims would encounter a number of problems such as the disadvantages of interview surveys in acquiring information on organizational victimizations. The person-centered respondent notions of the typical survey, moreover, are inadequate to collect information about organizations, particularly when the size and scope of the organization lies beyond the experience of any of its members reporting from "memory."

Aside from problems of how best to collect information about each crime type from the organization victim, serious problems exist in developing bases for calculating rates of organizational victimization. At present, we lack a demography of organizations comparable to that of persons, families, and households. Similarly, there is no sampling frame

³ The Panel for the Evaluation of Crime Surveys of the National Research Council recommended discontinuation of the "Commercial Survey" until there was agreement on its objectives and that exploratory technical studies be conducted with respect to defining or meeting those objectives in the interim. *See* PANEL FOR THE EVALUATION OF CRIME SURVEYS, NAT'L RESEARCH COUNCIL, SURVEYING CRIME 59-61 (1976).

⁴ *See* LEAA, U.S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, CRIMINAL VICTIMIZATION IN THE UNITED STATES 1976 23 (1979) (Table 2).

⁵ These calculations are based on the size of the population and number of victimizations reported in *id.* at 22 (Table 1).

⁶ *See id.* at 23 (Table 2).

for organizations, nor is there any simple way to construct an area probability sample to select them, given their stratification, spatial location, and distribution. For these reasons, rates based on estimates of the relative size and composition of an organization population are subject to considerable error.

We collect and report, then, relatively few crime statistics for organizational victims and thus devote relatively little attention to modeling the causes and consequences of, and responses to, organizational victimization. The models and measures of victims and victimization presented in the articles in this symposium represent significant contributions to our understanding of the causes and consequences of individual victimization and societal reaction to victims and their plight. Still, by focusing almost exclusively on individuals and, to a lesser extent households, these measures fail to capitalize on how our understanding of victimization can be enhanced by treating organizations and collectivities as victims. To enhance our understanding of the causes and consequences of and societal response to victimization, a few illustrations suggesting the inclusion of organizations are offered.

Were organizations treated as victims, the central concepts of lifestyles and routine activity patterns in Gottfredson's article or that of precautionary behavior in Skogan's could be reconceptualized to include organizations. Indeed, in the broadest sense, routine activity patterns are communal as well as individual or organizational in the restricted sense of formally constituted organizations. The fate of individuals and their organizations as victims is tied to their collective fate. How one watches over the life and property of others or the methods organizations use to expose and protect their members at school, at work, and at play are far from inconsequential in understanding the etiology and consequences of and responses to victimization.

There is, moreover, a tendency to examine individual precautionary behavior by emphasizing the irrational rather than the rational nature of responses to crime and its victims and to address victim precautionary behavior rather than behavior of those who are not victimized within a given period. In deciding how to cope with the consequences of crime, the managers of organizations or households, as Skogan emphasizes, may manage their fate both by risk avoidance and risk management techniques. These techniques range from decisions to move to those of how to create defensible space. Organizational decisions and behavior perhaps may depend more upon rational calculations and choice and less on fear of victimization or of crime than is the case for individual choice and behavior. Moreover, we should augment our understanding of the effects of precautionary behavior if we focus equally on those rarely victimized as upon those who are often victim-

ized. The methods organizations use to avoid and manage their victimization risk by crime may be illuminated as much by looking at those who are "successful" in doing so well as by examining those who are not.

The shift in focus in Block's article to victim-offender interactions, particularly in violent crimes, and to victim-environment relations provides a framework that can be generalized beyond violent crimes and individual victims. Block emphasizes that preventing victimization and exploring the victim reactions to their experience depend upon understanding the microenvironment of interactions between victims and offenders in specific victimization events and the macroenvironment within which the events occur. The article makes plain the basic ways that organizations ordinarily enter into explanations of victimization—as a structural context affecting one's risk of victimization and one's coping strategies. Block ignores the possibility that the rates of victimization may be higher for organizations than for persons and that organizations may experience a great deal of violence from crime, robbery, and vandalism. Indeed, in limiting violence to crimes against persons, the measurement ignores the more serious damage done to many communities, to households, and other organizations in the community through vandalism and arson. Organizations then, like individuals, must cope with violence directed against "them." Indeed, the life of an organization can be destroyed by arson and whole communities may expire by vandalism and arson. Our task is to examine the application of what Block deftly describes as "dynamics in violent crime" to formal organizations and to communities. One assumes that the interactions between victims and offenders leading to and during events differ in substantial ways when violence is directed towards property rather than persons. Vandalism, for example, may frequently rest in interactions prior to, rather than during events.

The person-centered bias in victimization is perhaps most pronounced in research on multiple victimization. Although one would expect much higher rates of multiple victimization for organizations than for persons within any given period, the problematics of multiple victimization and their explanation has fallen almost exclusively on the multiple victimization of persons. Sparks' review of theories relevant to the explanation of multiple victimization could well be considered as applicable to both the multiple victimization of persons and their organizations. Victim precipitation may be more characteristic of multiple victimization for some kinds of organizational crime than for persons.

Finally, we would note that the voluminous literature on measuring victimization by crimes concerns how one secures information from individuals rather than upon how one obtains organization information. The victim survey which has become the principal source of intelligence

on crime victims is investigated primarily to understand how victims recall their experiences or those of others rather than how best to collect the experiences and behavior of organizations.

There are strategic reasons why the modeling and measuring of victimization by crime has become person-centered, but our modeling and measuring of the causes and consequences of victimization by crime will be enhanced if we treat organizations as well as persons as crime victims.

THEORIES OF VICTIMIZATION BY CRIME

Victimizers act to produce victim states in victimizing events. This structured duality in the noun victimization—referring both to the act and the state of being victimized—is ignored by criminologists whose theories identify victimization with classes of people labelled victims and who are treated as distinct from other classes of people labelled victimizers or violators. That distinction distorts the reality of victimization as events where one or more persons by their victimizing (victimization of) others are labelled victimizers solely on the basis of their behavior in that particular event and others who are in the state of being victimized (victimization) who are labelled victims solely on the basis of consequences for them in that event. The particular states in victimization events often are treated as continuing beyond those events. Even with persons as multiple victims or violators, their classification derives from looking only at one of the two possible statuses in victimization events.

That the status presumption in events creates distinct classes or subpopulations of victims and victimizers is highly questionable is demonstrated by Simon's work reported in this symposium, using the follow-up survey information from *Delinquency in a Birth Cohort*.⁷ Not only does considerable overlap exist between populations of victims and offenders as demonstrated by the substantial proportion of violators having also been victims, but considerable evidence exists that the experience of being victimized increases the propensity for offending and that populations of victims and offenders have homogeneous characteristics. Gottfredson draws our attention to a related fact, that often characteristics closely associated with victimization are also associated with offending.

These findings demonstrate not only the importance of theories about victimization focusing upon the behavior of all parties to crime events rather than resorting to separate theories about victimization and offending or about victims and offenders, but the findings also question

⁷ See M. WOLFGANG, R. FIGLIO, & T. SELLIN, *DELINQUENCY IN A BIRTH COHORT* (1972).

which kind of explanatory theories will explain both victimization and offending.

Clearly, any theory that assumes no overlap exists between populations of victims and offenders or that they are distinct types of persons distorts the empirical research. Thus, theories about victim and offender personalities, dispositions, motives, and behavior must be consistent with the empirical finding that quite commonly, at different times and places as well as at the same time and place, the same person is victim and offender. This observation applies to organizations as well.

Indeed, given the substantial population overlap, a reasonable conclusion is that social, situational, and environmental theories of causes and consequences of victimization events will be more consistent with empirical findings on victims and victimizers. Theories that divorce properties of "victimizer" and "victim" from behaving units and treat these units as behavioral elements of events in environments will be most consistent in explaining what has up to now been treated as an etiology of offending distinct from an etiology of victimization.

The articles in this symposium disclose how substantially the development of our theories relies upon prior empirical investigation and not upon speculation. This reliance is particularly evident with respect to the substance of explanation as contrasted with properties that explain. The conceptualization of victimization and of crime in the literature and in the papers in this volume depend rather substantially upon our knowledge about selected kinds of victimization and, for victimization by crime, about selected kinds of crime.

Consider first how our conceptualization of victimization is molded by it in terms of limited kinds of victimization or, simply, of crime. The conception of victimization in terms of harm depends rather substantially upon a model which accepts crime as serious and harmful. Yet, as Biderman illustrates, most of what we treat and measure currently as serious crime (except for homicides) does not have very serious consequences. Moreover, those matters treated as trivial crimes may have far more serious consequences, if not for individuals, then for the collectivities of which they are a part. Losses from vandalism or arson, as previously observed, are far more consequential to communities than are the losses from all individual and household larceny. Indeed, one might speculate that the cycle of deterioration in many urban neighborhoods and communities begins not with burglary and crime on the streets, but with vandalism, the cumulative effects of which result in arson. Or, the existence of neighborhood businesses trading in vice may determine the fate of those communities more than increasing the risk to inhabitants of street violence, the latter being a consequence and not a cause of the former.

Quite clearly we bias the development of our theories in important ways when we limit the conceptualization to crime and of victimization by crime to traditionally serious crimes against persons and property. We compound this bias when we make our theory development unduly dependent on what we have learned by empirical investigation of victimization from those serious crimes.

This becomes in part then, as Biderman observes, a matter of how one conceptualizes events and their consequences. His article boldly challenges our conventional theoretical notions about crimes as point-in-time events and about the harmful consequences being immediate rather than continuous or long term. These conceptualizations, as he points out, stem both from our normative orientations toward these concepts and from our methods of operationalizing and measuring them in our surveys. That these matters can be approached without normative considerations is clear from a seminal work by Lowrance on the matter of acceptable risk in which he reminds us that "two very different activities are required for determining how safe things are: *measuring risk*, an objective but probabilistic pursuit; and *judging the acceptability of that risk (judging safety)*, a matter of personal and social value judgement."⁸

Our theories about victimization by crime then can be enhanced if we consider the harms and the risk that individuals and organizations experience from many sources of harm, only one of which is crime. Indeed, many kinds of objective harms can be treated as both criminal and noncriminal matters under the law. We know very little about how these matters should be treated in our harms theory since victim itself is a normative concept.

Similarly, we need to expand not only the population of crime victims to include organizations and collectivities but also to expand the kinds of crime by which these populations experience victimization. Crimes vary considerably in scope of harm and consequences. Many white collar crimes, such as fraud, environmental poisoning, and occupational safety violations, victimize many people from a single or continuing pattern of violation. We need to test the capacity of our models to explain victimization from a diversity of crimes, not simply from those now treated normatively as the most serious individual and property crimes.

Among the more highly developed models in criminology are those of societal reaction to offending. Rather surprisingly such models have not been applied to victimization and to crime events. Exploration of the power of societal reaction theory in explaining responses to victimi-

⁸ W. LOWRANCE, *OF ACCEPTABLE RISK: SCIENCE AND THE DETERMINATION OF SAFETY* 8 (1976) (emphasis in original).

zation and to crime events should permit us to better assess both the limits of societal reaction theory from criminology and its power to explain offending.

A LAST CONSIDERATION

The participants in the workshop whose papers are presented in this symposium all, more or less, have used the survey method to collect information about victimization by crime and to test their models about the causes and consequences or societal reactions to victimization by crime. Yet many of the articles cast serious doubts upon the capacity of surveys to measure that which is modeled or to test models by its measures. The articles by Sparks, Schneider, and Biderman develop a substantial agenda of methodological as well as substantive issues of grave and great importance in surveying crimes and their victims.

The resolution of matters of measuring and testing models depends not simply upon whether we can develop alternative surveys to increase the scope and precision of our measures, but also upon the development and testing of substantive theory related to our measures. As Skogan and Biderman both emphasize, our measures rest substantially on recovering information after events occur. The recovery of that information rests in turn upon theories about how information can be recovered from systems that "store" and "retrieve" it. Paradoxically, however, any method of social measurement derives from more general theories or laws about human behavior, but the laws, in turn, require methods for the derivation. Hence we must also determine how human behavior affects the methods used in measuring victimization by crime as well as their use in that context. At the same time, however, we can further develop and test our theories about human behavior relevant to our methods through our empirical inquiry into victimization by crime. The social reconstruction of reality, for example, is germane to the conceptualization and measurement of the consequences of victimization by crime. Concurrently, the explanatory power of that theory can be augmented by examining how victims' experiences and their consequences are constructed and reconstructed over time.