Crime & Deviance (4)

Victimology Studies

Introduction

Watts et al (2008) argue that 'For most of the twentieth century criminologists paid much more attention to those defined as criminals and offenders than they did to the victims of criminal activity'. However, they suggest that this neglect ended in the 1970s and since then **'victimology'** has become a major branch of the sociology of crime. This developing field has particularly focused upon **the chances of being a victim of crime according to age, social class, gender, ethnicity and region.**

Defining victims

In 1985 the **United Nations** defined victims as **'persons who, individually or collectively, have suffered harm, including**

- **physical or mental injury**
- **emotional suffering**
- **economic loss**
- **substantial impairment of their fundamental rights**

through acts or omissions that are in violation of criminal laws'.

Problems with the UN definition

(a) **Is there always a clear distinction between victims and offenders?** Consider the following examples:

➢ In many assault cases both parties may have used some violence and it can be difficult to distinguish between which violence was legitimate self-defence and which was illegal aggression. **For example, use Google to research the conviction and recent acquittal of Sally Challen.**

➢ In Scotland, parents have been convicted of smacking of children. Children are therefore seen as victims in Scotland and parents who smack as offenders but in the rest of the UK smacking is not a criminal activity.

(b) Some people may not realise they are the victims of crime. **Give examples.**

(c) Some crimes are **victimless** because both parties are committing a criminal offence e.g. if a man seeks the sexual service of a prostitute, both parties involved are offenders in the eyes of the law. A person who buys drugs from a drug dealer is just as guilty of a criminal offence as the seller.

(d) Social attitudes (known as **societal reaction**) can influence whether somebody is seen as an offender or victim. Consider the influence of social attitudes on whether the people in the following examples are seen as victims or offenders:

> ➤ Young people who are led into drug abuse by adult drug dealers.
> ➤ A wife who has been abused for years by her husband who finally snaps and kills her husband. See the Sally Challen or Sarah Thornton cases.
> ➤ A husband who helps his terminally ill wife commit suicide.
> ➤ A 32-year old Maths teacher who runs off with his 15-year pupil because they are both convinced they are in love.

Note that in some of these examples the distinction between offender and victim is not always clear.

Positivist Victimology

Perhaps the most influential contemporary approach to victimology is what has been called **positivist victimology**. This approach to victimology is mainly concerned with **identifying patterns and trends in the distribution of victims across social groups such as social classes, age-groups, men and women and ethnic minority groups.**

In the UK, positivist victimology was responsible for the first statistical study of victims – **in 1983, the government introduced the British Crime survey (now known as the Crime Survey of England & Wales).**

The Crime Survey of England & Wales (CSEW) is a **face-to-face survey** which in its British Crime Survey (BCS) form originally targeted between 8000 and 11,000 people

between 1983 and 2006. However the **2012 survey conducted over 35,000 face-to-face structured interviews with a sample of people aged 16 and over living in private households in England and Wales.** From January 2009, the survey was extended to children aged 10-15 years, resident in the household of adult respondents. **22 trained interviewers use lap-top computers to record the responses.**

The interview schedule that is used is composed of pre-coded closed questions with fixed choice responses to make it easy to quantify and turn into statistical data. The interviews take about 48 minutes to complete. Those who take part are asked about **their experiences of being a victim of crime in the past year**. The interviews mainly focus on **people's personal experience of property crimes such as vehicle-related thefts and burglary, and violent crimes such as assaults**. It also includes questions on people's attitudes towards the police. In addition to the interviews, the CSEW also includes **self-completion questionnaires** on drinking behaviour, drug abuse and interpersonal violence (i.e. domestic violence, stalking and sexual victimisation).

The **sample** of those who take part in the survey is randomly selected from a **sampling frame** called the **Postcode Address File**. It is designed to be as **nationally representative** a sample as possible in order to **generalise** the results to England and Wales as a whole. The overall response rate in 2010 was 76 per cent although this is lower in inner city areas.

Caroline Hoyle notes that 'these surveys seek a more accurate picture of victimisation than police records supply and identify **the social, economic, and demographic characteristics of victims** as well as victims' responses to crime'. In the UK crime surveys have produced a number of interesting findings about the distribution of victims amongst social groups and the relationship between victims and offenders.

The findings of the BCS/CSEW

Over the years, **data collected from these surveys have suggested** that:

- Throughout the 1990s, the BCS showed that only a minority of crimes (1 in 4) were reported to the police – this suggested that police recorded crime statistics were **the tip of a much larger iceberg of hidden crime**. However, the latest CSEW statistics from 2010-2013 indicate that **the gap between crime reported to the CSEW by victims and crimes reported to and recorded by**

the police is now at its most narrow since 1983. This confirms that crime is now falling.

- The most recent CSEW reports suggest that about **20% of the population experiences being a victim of crime over the course of a year.** Most people are most likely to be victims of **vandalism**, followed by **vehicle-related theft**, **household theft**, and **assault.**

- The 2011/12 CSEW shows that **there were 2.1 million violent incidents in England and Wales with 3% of adults victimised.** The number of violent incidents has halved from its peak in 1995 when the survey estimated over 4.2 million violent incidents. However, **half of the violent crime reported to the CSEW involved no injury.**

- The CSEW data suggests that **most crime is property related** (79%), e.g. criminal damage accounts for one in five (21%) of crimes recorded by the police.

- The CSEW discovered that **women worry more than men about being a victim of crime–** nearly one third worried about the possibility of being raped. A third of elderly women said that they felt very unsafe out alone after dark.

- However in terms of victimisation, the CSEW discovered that **men were two times more likely to become victims of crime compared with females. Young men aged 16 to 24 are most at risk (13%).** Moreover, **the CSEW found that the older a person gets, the less likely they are to be a victim of crime.**

- **'White' people have the lowest rates of victimisation** at 21.1%, followed by 'Black or Black British' people (22.7%), 'Asian or Asian British (25.6%) and those of 'Mixed' ethnicity had the highest rate at 29.5%. **Both African-Caribbean and British Asian ethnic minorities are particularly prone to being** the **victims of street robbery,** and also suffer higher rates of victimisation from **racially motivated offences** compared with White people.

- Rates of victimisation did not vary much between occupational groups (with all in the range 20% to 21.5%) but **full-time students** are particularly prone to being victims of crimes.

- The BCS/CSEW data suggests that **most victims are not greatly affected by offences committed against them.** Robbery and wounding are regarded as the most traumatic of crimes whilst burglary upsets people, especially women, because it is seen as an invasion of personal privacy.

- **Households in rural areas have a lower risk** of being a victim of BCS/CSEW household crime, e.g. burglary **compared with households in urban areas** (12% compared with 18%).

- **Poorer households** (21%) are more likely to be burgled than higher income households (15%).

- Finally, the CSEW concludes that **an average person's chances of being a victim of crime are extremely low.**

The strengths of the Crime Survey of England and Wales

(a) For the crime types it covers, the CSEW is thought to provide **a better picture than police recorded statistics** of the actual extent of household and personal crime because **it includes crimes that are not reported to the police and crimes which are not recorded by them**. Supporters of the CSEW claim that these surveys are **more valid** than the official criminal statistics because **they uncover the dark figure or hidden iceberg of crime**, i.e. **crimes that do not come to the attention of the police**.

(b) The way the CSEW data is collected is thought to be **highly reliable** because **it is unaffected by whether the public report crime to the police or by changes in the way the police record crime.** The **methodology of the CSEW has remained much the same since the survey began in 1981** – therefore it is **the best guide to long-term trends**.

(c) The CSEW's use of standardised questions and responses in structured interviews, its piloting of questions in advance in order to identify potential problems, its training of interviewers and its use of random sampling contribute to the **overall reliability** of the survey.

(d) Positivist studies of victims provide important information on the extent of victimisation and the **distribution of victims across different social groups**. For example, CSEW research has found that the most likely victims (**young,**

single men who frequent pubs and nightclubs) are not amongst those most likely to be afraid of crime.

Realist Victimology

A second approach to the study of victims is **realist victimology**. This approach has been **critical of the positivist approach** of the CSEW. In particular, it has identified a number of problems with the design and findings of the CSEW.

(1) The survey does not cover **commercial victimisation**, e.g. thefts from businesses and shops, frauds etc.

(2) The CSEW **excludes victimless crimes** (e.g. possession of drugs and prostitution). Questions have been asked about people's drug use but **asking people to self-report their own crimes is not thought to be reliable**.

(3) Ellington argues that the samples used by the CSEW are **not representative of the national population** because owner-occupiers and 16-24 year olds are generally over-represented whilst **the unemployed and homeless are under-represented.**

(4) The CSEW relies on victims having objective knowledge of the crimes committed against them. However **people's memories with regard to traumatic events are often unreliable -** there is a danger of **subjective exaggeration** as well as the **telescoping of incidents**, i.e. people unconsciously move them forward and backward in time.

(5) **People may be unaware that they have been victims** – especially if they are children or the elderly. Consequently, they cannot report the crime to the CSEW.

(6) Some critics have suggested that the CSEW may be influenced by **ideological concerns**. It is argued by **Pilkington** that **the main function of the survey is to reassure the general public that the likelihood of being a victim of crime in the UK is very slight. Therefore, the objectivity of the CSEW is questionable.**

(7) Pilkington argues that the CSEW distorts the meaning of the statistics. For example, the CSEW suggests that violent and sexual offences are very few in number.

However, Pilkington notes that **such crimes have a much greater traumatic effect upon their victims compared with property crime and their seriousness is evident by the length of the prison sentences that the average violent and sexual offender receives**, i.e. over 40% of prisoners are serving lengthy sentences for violent or sexual crime.

(8) Realist sociologists such as **Young and Lea** argue that the CSEW surveys **tell us very little about the day-to-day experience of living in high crime areas such as the inner city or problem council estates**. For example, living in these areas may mean that **residents have a well-above the national average chance of being victims of both property and violent crime.**

Newburn describes realist victimology as an approach which **emphasises the extent to which vulnerable members of society (e.g. the young, the poor and members of ethnic minority groups) are likely to become the victims of crime.**

Left Realist victim surveys

The most influential radical victimology was developed by **Left Realist criminologists such as Lea and Young, and Zedner and Kinsey** who made extensive use of **local victim surveys** to **examine the impact of street crime on those in low income neighbourhoods.**

The Islington Crime Survey

The Islington Crime Survey carried out by the Left Realist sociologists **Lea and Young** used **sympathetic unstructured interviewing techniques**. They asked victims living in **inner city London** about serious crime such as sexual assault, domestic violence and racial attacks. Their findings indicated that:

- **A full third of all households had been touched by serious crime in the previous twelve months.**

- **Crime shaped people's lives to a considerable degree** – a quarter of all people always avoided going out after dark because of fear of crime and 28% felt unsafe in their own homes.

- **Women experienced a curfew on their activities** – over half the women in the sample never went out after dark because of their fear of crime. Zedner noted that **this fear was realistic** in the context of the inner-city and **rational when the extent of unreported rape is taken into account**.

The Merseyside Crime Survey

Realist surveys have found that **fear of crime is highest among the poor** which reflects the fact that **they are most at risk from crime**. The **Merseyside Crime Survey** (MCS), for example, carried out by **Kinsey** in 1984 found that in terms of how much crime the community experiences and its traumatic effects, **poorer working-class communities suffer more than the middle-class and wealthy from the effects of crime because:**

- They often experienced **'repeat' victimisation** – particularly with regard to burglary, mugging and criminal damage.

- They were **less likely** than middle-class victims of crime **to have insurance** and therefore they often could not afford to replace items that had been stolen or damaged.

- They **could not afford to 'design crime out of their lives'** by investing in more effective locks, security lighting, alarm systems etc.

The Merseyside Crime Survey found that inner city residents were also reluctant to report crimes against them and that there existed an **inverse relationship between levels of crime and willingness to report crime.** This means that Kinsey found that where there was least crime, that is, in the middle class suburbs around Liverpool, there was the greatest willingness to report crime to the police. However **in areas of high crime (the inner-city in which the poor mainly lived) there was the least willingness to report crime.**

Kinsey's MCS found that this unwillingness to report crime stemmed from the working-class and particularly ethnic minority poor **belief that the police were biased against them.** In the Merseyside Crime Survey, **30% of respondents**

expressed a lack of belief in police fairness. The poor believed that the police were **unsympathetic to their plight** because of their experience of **repressive policing and negative labelling and racism from some officers.** Consequently poorer Whites and ethnic minorities were **reluctant to cooperate with the police** despite being victims of crime.

Kinsey's MCS therefore concluded that **poverty is the main variable which makes a person more at risk of being a victim of crime.**

So, to summarise, which groups are most likely to be the victims of crime?

- **The working class, particularly the poor and residents of the inner city and deprived council estates**
- **Young males**
- **Ethnic minorities**
- **Minority groups such as gay people, transsexuals and disabled people are often victims of hate crime**

The square of crime

CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM		CRIMINAL OFFENDER
GENERAL PUBLIC		VICTIM OF CRIME
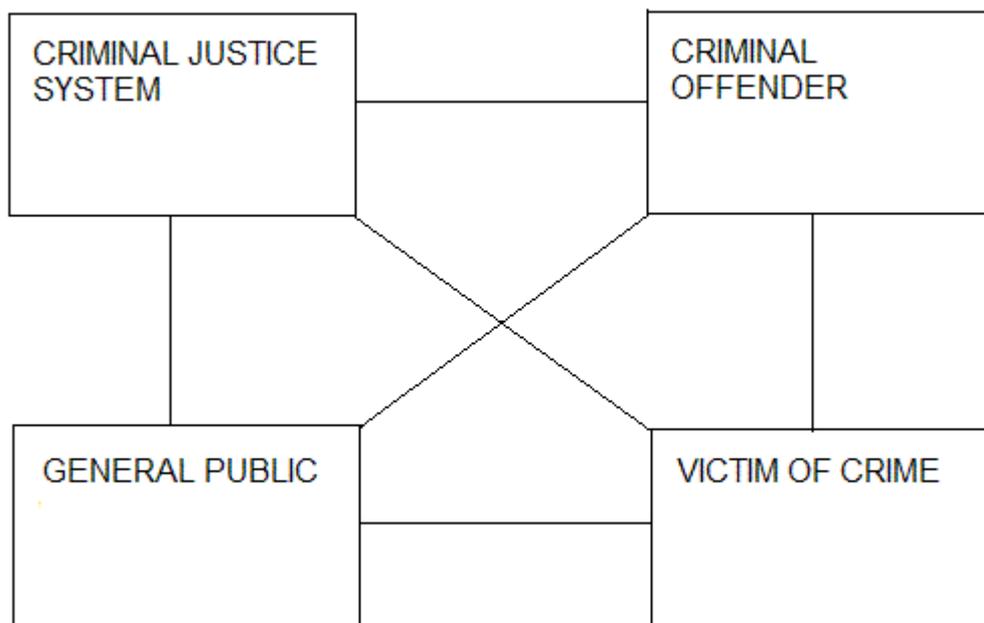
Left realist sociologists note that a person's chances of becoming a victim and/or being recognised as a victim depends upon the **'power structure'** of society. This can

be illustrated by examining the diagram above which is known as the **'square of crime'**.

The square of crime involves four elements:

1. **The State and its agencies, e.g. the police**
2. **The offender and their actions**
3. **The social attitudes of the general public which may be shaped by the mass media.**
4. **The victim of crime**

We can illustrate the likelihood of becoming a victim of crime or being recognised as a victim by taking each element of the square in turn:

(1) The State and agencies such as the court and the police.

- Laws passed by the State are mainly used to identify victims. However, the laws that do exist may be poorly enforced, e.g. the police may choose to ignore crimes against particular groups or to treat victims with contempt – the recent example of grooming of hundreds of young girls for sex in Rotherham, South Yorkshire is a good example of this.

- The police may spend more time pursuing working-class street criminals and consequently neglect or simply not recognise the victims of powerful white-collar and corporate criminals such as bankers.

(2) Offenders

Offenders may have the power to cover up their crime so that victims do not realise they are victims and/or the crime does not come to the attention of the police. They may be members of powerful groups that can influence whether a law is passed or not.

(3) The general public

The attitudes of the general public may also be important in shaping the actions of the police and courts towards certain types of victims. These attitudes are often shaped by newspapers which may create **moral panics** or social anxiety around certain types of crime which demands that the police, courts and State act to sort out the problem. For example, social attitudes towards child abuse have changed

for the better since the 1980s which gives victims the confidence to report such crimes. However, the opposite effect can also be seen, e.g. if newspapers suggest that rape is brought about by some women acting in an irresponsible way and the general public believe this to be true, victims of rape may be reluctant to come forward and report the crime.

(4) Victims

Victims are influenced by all of the above. They will be influenced by social attitudes and media reporting as to whether they think an offence is immoral, illegal and worth reporting. For example, wives may be unwilling to report the domestic violence of their husbands or they might see their husband's behaviour as normal in the social context they live.

Some may be put off by the actions of the State or the police. They might believe that the police and courts will not take their complaint seriously. In the case of rape victims, they might feel that both society and the state in the form of the judicial system will judge them and therefore they might decide not to report the offence to the police.

Critical Victimology

Critical victimologists tend to be **Marxist** and **feminist sociologists** who are **unhappy with the official or state definitions** of victims of crime.

Marxist victimology

Marxist critics of the CSEW point out that this victim survey can never properly measure the impact of crime upon society because **the general public are usually unaware that they may have been victims of crimes committed by the economically powerful, e.g.** that they are the victims of **corporate crime, green or environmental crime, state crime etc.**

Watts et al argue that the victims identified in crime surveys **are the victims 'that the state chooses to 'see'.** They claim that the **state ignores those not readily identified as 'victims'.** For example, **victims of corporate, white-collar, state or green crimes** are unlikely to appear in conventional victim surveys because **questions are not included which cover these types of offences.**

Walklate argues that a fully developed victimology needs to pay **more attention to the role of the state**. **The state is important because it has the power to define who is regarded as a victim.** Walklate says, 'the state is not an objective neutral arbiter of the 'facts', but a self-interested and self-motivated mechanism in which its interests, at different historical moments, may be more or less paramount'.

For example, in the aftermath of the July 7th bombing, the Metropolitan Police introduced a **'shoot to kill'** policy so that people believed to be about to carry out a terrorist attack could be shot dead. In July 2005, a Brazilian man, **Jean Charles de Menezes**, was shot seven times in the head and killed by armed police officers who had mistaken him for a fugitive terrorist suspect. Despite the obvious injustice of his killing, de Menezes was not officially defined as a victim. The Crown Prosecution Service decreed there was too little evidence to prosecute the officers involved and the coroner who chaired the inquest into his death refused to allow a verdict of unlawful killing, resulting in an open verdict instead. **Such a response to a fatal shooting on the underground would be very unlikely if committed by anyone other than a representative of the state.**

Class debate – are the Grenfell Tower victims likely to be viewed as victims of a crime? What groups might be identified as the possible offenders?

Chris Greer (2012) argues that some social groups are more likely to identified as victims by the mass media because are seen by editors and journalists as more newsworthy and worthwhile.

Research task for class discussion.
Compare and contrast the media coverage of the disappearance of Madeline McCann and Ben Needham with that of Shannon Mathews or Princess Masuta. Are some victims treated more sympathetically than others?

Feminist victimology

Walklate agrees with the Marxist interpretation that the State is biased in favour of the powerful and wealthy with regard to defining victims. However, she also argues that **it also tends to neglect the oppressive treatment of less powerful groups,**

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particularly women. A great deal of research carried out by critical criminologists has therefore focused on **female victims of domestic violence and rape.**

For example, feminists note that **state (Home Office) definitions of domestic abuse** see it as 'any violence between current or former partners in an intimate relationship wherever and whenever it occurs. The violence may include physical, sexual, emotional or financial abuse'. However critical victimologists have suggested that **this definition may need to radically change to reflect the reality of domestic violence for the majority of victims.**

Research into victims of domestic violence suggests that **state definitions of what constitutes abuse and therefore being a victim may be limited in scope.** For example, **Kelly**'s research into 'survivors' of domestic violence found that many women were also undermined by **verbal emotional abuse and bullying as well as physical violence**. **Sclater (2001)** notes, that some behaviour such as kicking and punching is easily recognizable as violent but behaviour, currently not covered by the state's definitions such as **threats, verbal abuse, psychological manipulation or bullying and sexual intimidation** should also be categorised as domestic violence.

The first victim survey of domestic violence victims was carried out by the husband and wife team of **Dobash and Dobash** in Glasgow and Edinburgh in 1980. They carried out 109 unstructured interviews with women living in battered wives' refuges. **Their findings challenged the notion that the state, the police and the courts took domestic violence and its victims seriously**. **They found that the police were reluctant to take action against abusive husbands and that the courts often imposed very weak sentences on offenders.** They concluded that the state, the police and the courts were **patriarchal institutions** that **did not take the rights of female victims seriously.**

Moreover, research into rape victims by other feminist researchers suggests that **the state process for dealing with rape victims and the prosecution of offenders may be inadequate and may actually be putting women off reporting this particular crime to the authorities.** In other words, these women are not coming forward as victims.

The feminist researchers **Hanmer and Saunders** carried out a series of unstructured interviews with women living in one randomly selected street in Leeds during the 1980s using sympathetic and well-trained female interviewers. They found that 20% of these women had been sexually assaulted but had not reported the crime against them to the police. Hanmer and Saunders' research suggested that **victims who did**

not come forward feared judgemental treatment from the police and the mass media.

Sue Lees' research into victims of rape is very critical of the judicial system because of the way rape victims are cross-examined in court by defence counsels which she argues constitutes a symbolic 'second rape'.

These feminist victim studies have been reasonably successful in getting the police and the courts to take offences against females more seriously and **in persuading the state that some offences need to be re-defined so that they reflect the reality of their female victims.** However, there is still some way to go, particularly in the case of rape trials.

Conclusions

All three approaches to victims make a valuable contribution to our understanding of the likelihood of becoming a victim of crime and its consequences for the individual. Firstly, positivist approaches, despite some problems of design, have both mapped out a national picture of victims and attempted to deal with more hidden victims, for example, the CSEW has recently incorporated questions on sexual crimes and domestic violence.

Secondly, Left Realism has clearly established a **relationship between poverty and crime**. Moreover, in developing the idea of the **square of crime**, Left Realists have drawn our attention to the fact that **the status of victim is socially constructed** in that it depends on the **interaction** between different groups with differing levels of power – the State, the police and judicial system, the mass media, the general public, offenders and finally, victims themselves.

Finally, critical victimology has enabled sociologists to examine the role of **power** on the processes through which people become defined as victims. They note that **those with economic and political power can deny some groups 'victim status'** by making or not making certain laws or by according low priority to the crimes of the powerful or by interpreting the laws that already exist in a relaxed or ambiguous way.