

scottish justice matters

POLICING

Reflections on developments and
changes to policing in Scotland





HAS SCOTLAND'S FALLING CRIME RATE BENEFITED EVERYONE EQUALLY?

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BOTH police statistics and crime surveys in Scotland agree that there has been a substantial drop in crime over the last 20 years. This suggests, at face value, that we should all be at less risk of becoming a victim. But is this really the case? Work by the Applied Quantitative Methods Network (AQMeN) Research Centre has set out to explore our relative risk of being a victim of crime and the extent to which this has changed during the course of the recent crime drop.

We know that some people are more likely to experience crime than others, and that people tend to experience different amounts and types of crime. In other words, risk profiles vary from person to person. Indeed, Hope and Norris (2012) found five groups of people who differed in terms of the number and types of incidents of property crime they were likely to experience, and four groups who differed in terms of their experience of personal crime.

A key question, therefore, is whether victim profiles have changed over time as a result of the fall in crime? For example, there may have been a decline in the number of victims in certain groups but not others; or the amount of crime experienced by all groups may simply have diminished across the board. Hope and Norris did not look at change in the group sizes or experiences over time; therefore, we decided to take this work a step further by exploring change in patterns of victimisation over time using Scottish crime survey data from 1993 to 2011.

We started by grouping property and personal crimes into four broad crime types (shown in the table below) and, like Hope and Norris, found a number of groups who differed from each other on the basis of how likely they were to experience different types of crime. We then went on to look at the change over time in prevalence of victimisation (that is, the percentage of people in each crime group) and the frequency of victimisation (that is, the number of crimes that victims experienced on average) for each group.

Crime types used to identify risk	Details of the crime type
Motor vehicle crime	Thefts and attempted thefts of and from motor vehicles and vandalism to motor vehicles.
Household crime	Housebreaking and attempted housebreaking (to dwellings and to outhouses), thefts inside and outside dwellings, and vandalism not to motor vehicles (not including fire raising).
Personal theft and robbery	Thefts from the person, other personal thefts, and robberies.
Assaults and threats	Assaults and attempted assaults, and threats to or against the person.

We found four typical victim groups within the population. Firstly, around 80% of the population fell into a group of **'Non-Victims'** who had a very low (almost zero) risk of experiencing any kind of crime. Secondly, about 15% of people were **'One-off Property Victims'** who experienced on average one incident of crime, mostly motor vehicle or household crime, in any one year. Thirdly, around 5% of people were part of a group of **'Multiple Mixed Victims'** who experienced an average of two incidents of crime per year, consisting of a mixture of motor vehicle crime, household crime, and assaults and threats. And finally, about 0.5% of the population were in a group of **'Frequent Personal Victims'** who experienced on average three incidents of crime in any given year, consisting mainly of assaults and threats, but possibly also some household crime or personal theft and robbery.

So had there been a change in the relative sizes of these groups over time? Figure 1 shows the change in the percentage of people within each of the four groups each year after 1993. Only one group grew larger: that is the Non-Victims, which rose from 76% of the population in 1993 to 82% in 2011. Meanwhile, the percentage of people in the One-Off Property Victims group fell from 17% to 12%, and the percentage of Multiple Mixed Victims fell from 6% to 5% over the same period. However, there was no significant change over time in the proportion of the population who made up the Frequent Personal Victim group.

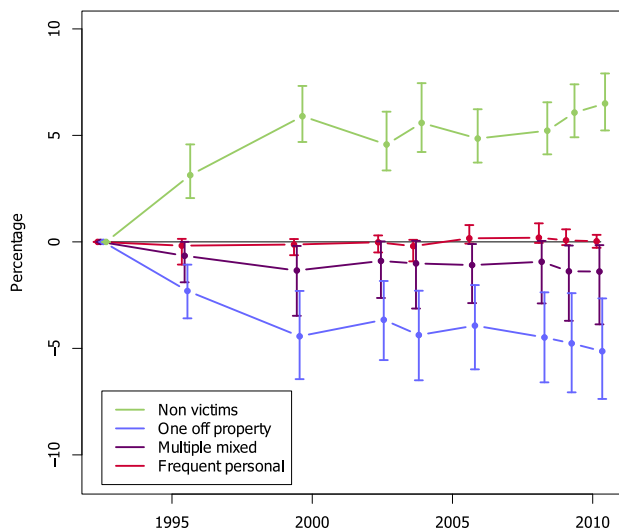


Figure 1: Percentage of people belonging to each group over time (difference from 1993)

The next question we asked was whether there had been a reduction in the frequency of crime experienced by people within these four groups? Looking at change over time in the average number of incidents of crime experienced, Figure 2 shows a significant decrease in frequency of incidents amongst the One-Off Property and Multiple Mixed Victims. The risk of victimisation amongst the Non-Victim group, which was already small, also got closer to zero. However, there was no discernible change over time in the average number of incidents of crime experienced by the Frequent Personal Victims. In other words, risk of frequent victimisation remained the same in this group.

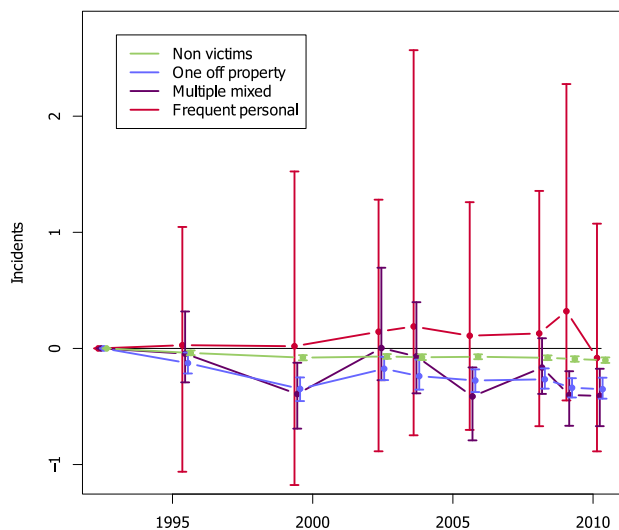


Figure 2: Average number of incidents of crime for each victim group over time: change from 1993

So the overall fall in crime can be explained by both a reduction in the number of people who become victims and a reduction in the number of incidents of crime experienced by each victim. Significant changes within the One-Off Property and Multiple Mixed Victim groups,

both of which mostly experienced motor vehicle or household crime, explains most of the crime drop. This fits with published recorded crime statistics that show a very large reduction in crimes of dishonesty in Scotland since 1991 (Scottish Government, 2014). However, we found no noticeable reduction in the size of the population in the highest risk group, the Frequent Personal victims, who experienced mostly violent crime. This is despite a significant fall in violent crimes recorded by the police.

The fact that most people are less likely to be a victim of crime is hugely reassuring and should make us feel safer as a result. However, for a small proportion of Scottish society the risk of victimisation is as great or greater than it was 20 years ago and the range of crimes they experience is just as wide. In absolute terms, an estimate of 0.5% of the Scottish population of adults aged 16 or over represents around 220,000 people (based on mid-year population estimates for 2013). Our estimates suggest that this group's share of all crime has doubled from 5% in 1993 to around 10% from 2006 onwards. Moreover, we can safely assume that these people are not randomly scattered throughout the population, but are most likely to be living in some of our more deprived communities and families.

The fact that one group of victims has not benefited from the overall crime drop and, indeed, has become more dissimilar to the rest of the population, is indicative of increasing inequality between victims and non-victims. This is concerning because it suggests that whatever factors have driven the crime drop they have not pervaded every part of our society. If this trend continues, crime will become increasingly concentrated in this group and the impact on the individuals involved is likely to be extremely damaging. The results of our analysis show that efforts need to be directed at those most at risk of victimisation if the crime drop is to be sustained.

Of course, in order to effectively target crime reduction interventions it is necessary to know what the characteristics of the people in this group are. Therefore, the next phase of our analysis will involve analysing the spatial concentration of victim groups using geographic data to see whether certain areas contain high concentrations of such victims, and using personal and household characteristics to try to predict what type of people are in these groups. This will hopefully enable policy makers and service providers to determine both who and where those most at risk of victimisation are and decide how to best target interventions to reduce the current inequality of victimisation in Scotland.

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