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Is poverty reflected in changing patterns of victimisation in Scotland?

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BACK IN THE 1980S, ‘left realist’ criminologists argued that working class people were most likely to be victimised because the root causes of crime lay in relative deprivation. Key proponents of left realism, such as John Lea and Jock Young (1984), noted that while the average chance of being a victim of crime was small, it was greatly enhanced amongst the poor, the deprived, ethnic minorities and inner-city residents. Left realism inspired the development of local victimisation surveys in the UK, driven by a desire to demonstrate that people from the poorest communities suffered disproportionately from victimisation. Local studies, such as the Islington Crime Survey conducted in 1986, were critical in demonstrating the high levels of risk and fear of crime amongst those, especially women, from the poorest neighbourhoods.

Local victimisation surveys in the UK are now largely a thing of the past. They have been eclipsed by large-scale surveys such as the Crime Survey for England and Wales and the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey, which are well funded, robust and established methods of measuring public experiences of and attitudes towards victimisation. These large-scale surveys provide a valuable picture of crime at the national level which can be compared to police recorded crime statistics, thus giving us alternative approaches to measuring trends in crime. They also permit analysis at a sub-national level to some degree; however, they have limited benefit in improving our understanding of crime experience at the local level. In addition, the purpose and design of these surveys has gradually moved away from understanding the experiences of victimisation within poor or high crime communities towards measuring indicators focused on national performance targets.

In Scotland, both survey and official statistics tell us that crime has reduced significantly in recent decades. However, it is unclear whether this crime drop has been experienced equally by all elements of Scottish society. Here we build on earlier work (McVie et al 2015) which identified four typical ‘groups’ of people based on the experiences of victimisation reported to the Scottish crime surveys from 1993 to 2010/11. These included: a large group of ‘Non-Victims’ who had a very low risk of experiencing any kind of crime; a group of ‘One-Off Property Victims’ who experienced an average of one incident of crime per year, mostly motor vehicle or household crime; a group of ‘Multiple Mixed Victims’ who experienced approximately two incidents of crime per year, reflecting some combination of motor vehicle crime, household crime, assaults and threats; and a group of ‘Frequent Personal Victims’ who experienced three incidents of crime on average per year, mainly assaults and threats but also personal theft, robbery and household crime. Over the period from 1993 to 2010/11, the Non-victim group grew from 76% to 82% of the population, while the One-Off Property Victim group reduced from 17% to 12% and the Multiple Mixed Victim group fell from 6% to 5%. However, the size of the Frequent Personal Victim group remained stubbornly persistent at around 0.5% of the population. In addition, the frequency of victimisation reduced amongst all groups except the Frequent Personal Victims.

In order to determine whether change in victimisation was associated with certain individual or household characteristics, we conducted a multinomial regression model which allowed us to compare the three victim groups against the Non-Victim group. Unfortunately, our analysis was severely restricted by the lack of potential explanatory variables contained within the Scottish crime survey datasets - especially when it came to measures of poverty. It is clear that this is an area that needs to be considered within the design of the survey if we are to use it as a mechanism for understanding the experiences of different segments of the population. The variables we were able to include in our model were: gender, age, household composition, number of people in the household, tenure, length of residence, equivalised income, and number of vehicles.

We found that the likelihood of being a Non-Victim was significantly higher for women than men and that it increased with age, while young adults were more likely to be represented in all three victim groups. Adults living in single parent households were significantly less likely to be Non-Victims compared to those living in most other types of household (including those with two or more parents, and two or more adults with no children), and significantly more likely to be Multiple Mixed Victims than those living in households with more than one adult (with the exception of two pensioner households). Those who were renting social accommodation were less likely than those with other tenure types to be Non-Victims and more likely than owner-occupiers or private renters to be One-Off Property Victims. Finally, vehicle owners were
more likely to be One-Off Property Victims and less likely to be Non-Victims than non-vehicle owners. It is notable that our measure of equivalised income did not emerge as significant in the analysis; however, this is a very crude measure and we have some concerns about its validity. Overall, it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions about the link between poverty and changing patterns of victimisation at the individual or household level.

One of the benefits of the recent crime surveys in Scotland is that geographical indicators in the form of Intermediate Geography (IG) can be attached to the data, which allows multi-level analysis to be conducted. IGs are discrete spatial areas within local authorities which are designed to contain between 2,500 and 6,000 people. The maps in Figure 1 illustrate our preliminary analysis of these data by showing the IGs across the central belt of Scotland, and compare those IGs that contained above or below average proportions of respondents within each victim group. Our early analysis suggests that people living in more remote areas of Scotland were less likely to be One-Off Property Victims than those living in other parts of Scotland. However, people living in more remote parts of Scotland and those living in urban centres and some suburbs were more likely than those in other areas to be Multiple Mixed Victims. There were only a few IGs which contained higher than average numbers of Frequent Personal Victims, and these do appear to be clustered around some of the more deprived parts of Edinburgh and Glasgow; however, further analysis is required to fully explore these geographic patterns.

Figure 1: Geographical analysis of victim groups within central belt Scotland

This work is based on data provided through EDINA UKBORDERS with the support of the ESRC and JISC and uses boundary material which is copyright of the Crown and the Post Office. Using data from the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD), multi-level analyses were conducted to determine whether there was any association between individual domains from the SIMD and the victim groups at IG level (see Ellie Bates’ article in this edition page 9 for information on SIMD). We found a significant relationship between the SIMD Education domain and all three victim groups. One-Off Property Victims and Multiple Mixed Victims were less likely than Non-Victims to live in areas characterised by high deprivation on the Education Index. Frequent Personal Victims were more likely to be living in areas characterised by high deprivation on the Education Index. The SIMD Health domain was also significant, such that Frequent Personal Victims were more likely than Non-Victims to be living in areas identified as highly deprived on the Health Index. These are important findings, as they suggest that Frequent Personal Victims may be concentrated in areas that are highly deprived on both Health and Education measures.

The left realist criminologists of the 1980s highlighted the plight of the poorest within society in terms of their experience of victimisation and there is little evidence to indicate that the relationship between poverty and crime has changed significantly in the last 30 years. Research is hampered, however, by a lack of available local level data that would allow us to explore such relationships, and a lack of good quality explanatory variables contained within the large-scale victimisation surveys. Our work goes some way towards exploring the link between poverty and victimisation. If we used single parent households and social renting as proxies for poverty, we could infer that individuals in these circumstances are more disadvantaged as victims of crime. However, we must be cautious about drawing such conclusions in the absence of good measures of poverty at the individual or household level. Mapping the data geographically does allow us to see some real differences in the experience of victimisation across different communities, and there is evidence that targeting more deprived areas, especially those with significant education and health deficits, may be particularly beneficial in tackling crime amongst the most stubbornly persistent victims in Scottish society.

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