

A brief presentation on repeat victimisation

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Some are exposed to crime more often than others – repeat victimisation

A small group of offenders are responsible for a large proportion of all the offences committed. The same relationship is found in relation to the victims of crime; a small group of victims are exposed to crime repeatedly, and are therefore the victims of a large proportion of all the crime committed. Thus the colloquialism that lightning never strikes twice does not apply to the distribution of criminal victimisation.

The repeated exposure to crime experienced by a small group of victims is found in relation to several different types of offence, including assault, robbery, car-related crime, and break-ins at schools and in shops.

Knowledge for the purposes of prevention

Crime prevention work has much to gain by proceeding on the basis of knowledge about crime. Knowledge about the places and times associated with concentrations of crime, for example, allows for the more effective use of scarce resources. Knowledge that crime is also concentrated among crime victims or objects of crime may also contribute an additional dimension to crime prevention work. By focusing preventive efforts on attempting to ensure that those who have already been exposed to crime are not victimised again, resources are limited to a relatively small group of persons or objects that are at high risk of being victimised in the future. Despite the fact that the measures involved are focused on a relatively small group, they may nonetheless produce a significant reduction in crime.

Individuals that have been the victims of crime often require considerable levels of support. The measures aimed at preventing future crimes, if they are correctly formulated, may serve as part of this support process. This fact has been noted in amongst other places England. There, work is conducted to prevent crime among those who have already been victimised, and such work is viewed as having a natural place on the crime prevention agenda.

Those who have been victimised once are at risk of being victimised again.

According to a Swedish survey based on data from Statistics Sweden (*Statistiska centralbyrån*) approximately five per cent of the population are exposed to half of all offences committed (Carlstedt, 2001).

Findings from a special study of police reported offences in two Swedish municipalities are presented in the table below. The figures in the first column represent a general level of risk, for example the risk that a shop (any shop in the municipalities studied) will report a break-in over the course of a one-year period. The figures in the second column represent the risk, or likelihood, that those who have already reported a crime, will report additional instances of the same type of crime within a year. The third column presents this risk for those who have reported two previous offences. Across all types of crime, the level of risk is substantially higher for those who have already experienced victimisation.

In general, approximately half of one per cent of women reported having been exposed to threats or violence by a perpetrator with whom they were acquainted over the course of a single year. For those women who had previously reported an offence of this kind, the risk of being victimised again was substantially greater. One quarter of these women reported one or more additional offences of the same kind within a year. Nor were violent crimes where the perpetrator and victim were not acquainted with one another a one-off phenomenon. One in ten of those who reported having been exposed to this type of offence reported additional offences within a year. In turn, the risk for repeat victimisation was even greater within this latter group, with approximately one in three reporting further cases of exposure to violence by a perpetrator not known to them.

Table 1. The risk of criminal victimisation over a one-year period as evidenced by statistics over reported offences.

Crime type	Estimated general risk in per cent	Risk for those reporting one prior offence	Risk for those reporting two prior offences
Assaults and threats against women, perpetrator known to victim	0.5	25	41
Assaults and threats against women and men, perpetrator unknown to victim	0.5	10	30
School break-ins*	50	75	88
Shop break-ins*	15	28	46
Car-related crime	7	12	19
Residential break-ins*	0.3	4	-

*Includes attempted offences

Source: BRÅ, 2001

The survey also showed that certain schools report a very large number of break-ins whereas others report none at all. The same is true of break-ins in shops. Over one quarter of the shops that report a break-in report additional offences within a year.

Those who have been exposed to car crime are also at an increased risk of being victimised in the same way again. However, the pattern is not as clear in relation to this type of crime as it is in relation to many other types of offence.

In many countries, repeated residential break-ins are a common phenomenon. In the two medium-sized municipalities included in this study, however, the number of residential break-ins was relatively low, and repeat offences were not particularly common. Whether the situation is the same in the metropolitan regions of Sweden, where residential break-ins are more common, cannot be seen on the basis of this study.

Explanations for why the same victims are exposed to crime repeatedly

For many crime types, it may be rational for a perpetrator to repeatedly offend against the same crime object. Choosing the same object again may involve less effort and less risk than choosing new or less well-known crime objects. The knowledge that offenders possess about the objects of previous crimes may be useful in relation to the commission of new offences. Such knowledge may relate to routes of escape in relation to residential break-ins, for example, or to alarm systems or neighbours. One researcher has described this phenomenon in relation to residential break-ins in the following way:

A burglar walking down a street where he has never burgled before sees two kinds of house – the presumed suitable and the presumed unsuitable (by dint of occupancy, alarm, barking dog and so on). He burgles one of the houses he presumes to be suitable, and is successful. The next time he walks down the street, he sees three kinds of house – the presumed unsuitable, the presumed suitable, and the known suitable. (Farrell, 1995, p. 391)

In a study of persons sentenced for burglary, for example, almost half of the offenders interviewed answered that they had committed several offences against the same object at some point. The reasons for doing so are rational. Amongst other things, they reported that they repeated such crimes because "it was so easy the first time." Other reasons were that they wanted to "collect" things that they had seen on their first visit, but hadn't been able to take with them on that occasion. Another reason was that they counted on the fact that after a time the victim would have received compensation from the insurance company and would have acquired new and attractive goods to steal. Several also said that it is easier to commit an offence the second time because you then know the crime scene. Explanations of this kind are in general more relevant for property offences than for violent crimes, since perpetrators are usually not as rational in relation to these latter. One explanation for why certain individuals are repeatedly exposed to violence may be that they often find themselves in situations characterised by a high level of risk as a result of their job, or the fact that they actively frequent places of public entertainment where the risk is also higher. In the case of repeat violence between persons who know one another, the victim's exposure is primarily associated with their relationship to the violent individual.

Measures should be introduced where the risk is greatest

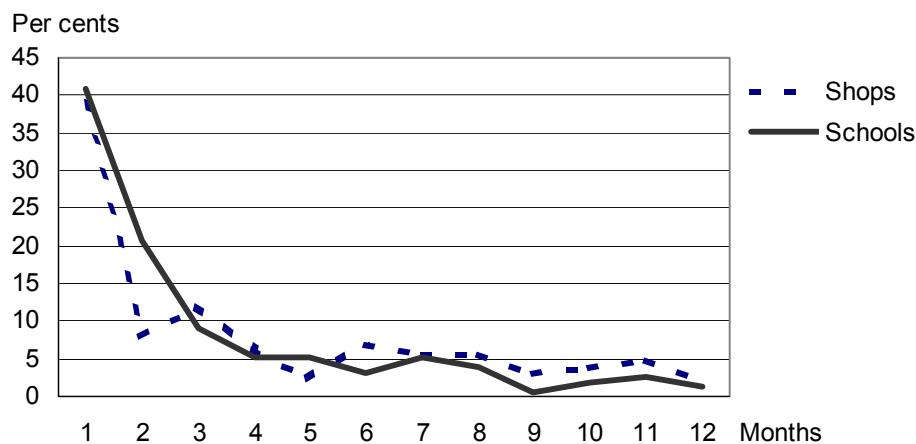
The risk for repeat victimisation is greatest in the period directly subsequent to prior offences. This is true for many different types of crime, including for example residential break-ins, crimes against schools, violent offences and crimes against businesses and cars. This knowledge may provide a basis for directing measures to the time when the risk for repeat victimisation is particularly high. The study of the reported offences in two Swedish municipalities shows for example that of the assault offences that are repeated within a year, one quarter are repeated within a month of the first offence. Repeat offences are most common within one week of the first crime.

This pattern is even clearer in relation to break-ins. Of the repeat break-ins against shops and schools that were reported within a year of the previous offence, 40 per cent were committed within a month (see Figure 1).

The fact that the risk for a crime being repeated is particularly high in the period immediately following previous crimes affects the conditions for preventing repeat victimisation in at least two ways. Firstly, crime prevention measures should be introduced as quickly as possible. Secondly, the introduction of measures for a limited period of time may constitute a reasonable option, since the need for preventive measures diminishes in line with the successive decrease in the level of risk.

Repeat victimisation is particularly common in high-crime areas. This also constitutes important information in relation to crime prevention work. Measures to prevent this kind of victimisation will to a large extent be directed at areas where the need is greatest – with no need for the areas to become stigmatised as a result.

Figure 1. Time between two break-ins reported in succession in shops and schools. Source: BRÅ, 2001.



Preventing repeat victimisation is both justified and humane

One objection to the prevention of repeat victimisation is that it involves a reaction only once someone has already been exposed to crime. Preventing the repetition of offences constitutes only one part of a crime prevention strategy, however, which should always be conducted on the basis of a number of different approaches. Against the background of

the fact that those who have already been victimised are at particularly high risk of being victimised again, efforts to prevent repeat victimisation are both justified and humane. In addition, such crime prevention efforts may also serve as one element in the provision of support to crime victims.

Bench mark measures – an aid to police in their crime prevention work

There is a major need for bench mark measures that may be used in the work of preventing crime and providing support to crime victims. One way of measuring crime involves following trends in reported offences. Since such trends are affected by a large number of factors (many of which lie outside of the control of the police for example) other measures are also required. Repeat victimisation may serve as a valuable measure in this context. The fact that objects or individuals that have previously been exposed to crime are victimised again suggests that the circumstances that caused the first offence have not been successfully addressed. A measure focusing on how common this situation is in different police authority areas may give an idea of how successful this part of the prevention work in this area has been.

The systems currently maintained by the police do not allow for measures of the frequency of repeat victimisation to be produced easily. The National Council for Crime Prevention is therefore engaged in a developmental project to investigate whether it would be both possible and meaningful to produce bench-mark figures relating to the prevalence of certain types of repeat crimes among the offences reported to the police at the county level. The project is focused on violence against women, where the perpetrator is someone known to the woman in question, but attention is also being directed at other types of crime.

References

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