**Sociology 4099: Victimology**

**Lecture Notes Week 2.2 : Victimization Surveys**

The major type of survey research utilized by victimologists has been the victimization survey. As noted last week, victimization surveys have been the preferred methodological tool of victimologists since the 1970's. These gather information directly from victims without the intermediary of the police. Generally, individuals, in a representative sample of the larger population, are sought out and questioned anonymously about their experiences of victimization, if any. Such victimization surveys essentially focus on types of crime where: (i) there is a direct and identifiable victim; (ii) a direct and potentially identifiable perpetrator; and (iii) those forms of criminal victimization for which some information is available. This, in effect, limits the focus to traditional categories of interpersonal crime, and avoids others such as, for example, corporate crime.

Victimization surveys arose for one simple reason: generally, a great deal more has been known about perpetrators of crime than about their victims. In the past, official crime statistics gave virtually no information on the victims of crime, nor on the incidence of crimes not reported to the police. Because of this, little could be said about which people were more likely to be victimized by crime, or about how many people were actually victimized.

**Canadian Urban Victimization Survey (1981)**

In Canada, the first attempt to solve this problem was the Canadian Urban Victimization Survey conducted in 1981. It looked at 7 major urban centers across Canada with a random sample of over 60,000 people. It found that there were more than 700,000 personal victimizations (i.e. sexual assault, robbery, assault, and theft of personal property), plus almost 900,000 household victimizations (i.e. break and enter, motor vehicle theft, household theft, and vandalism).

The survey found that the more serious the type of crime, the less likely for it to occur. *Gender* differences were notable. Women were 7 times more likely than men to be victims of sexual assault or personal theft. Men were almost twice as likely as women to be victims of robbery or assault. As for *age,* those under 25 had the highest rate of victimization in all categories of personal offences, which declined rapidly with age after this point. With regard to *Income* and victimization, with some qualifications, the higher the family income of urban residents, the more likely it was that they would experience some form of household victimization or personal theft. Finally, *lifestyle* was another important variable, with a strong positive relationship found between one’s number of nights spent outside the home and rates of victimization.

Fear of crime was found to be a significant issue, but more so for those walking alone in their neighborhood at night. Women and the elderly were more likely to express fear in this regard (50% and 98% respectively), compared to 18% of men. For those who have been the victim of sexual assault, these numbers increased considerably, even during the daytime - even though the incidence of sexual assault was relatively low compared to other offences.

The survey found that fewer than 42% of crimes were reported to the police, indicating that many more Canadians were victimized than official crime statistics would suggest. The most likely crime to be reported was theft or attempted theft of a motor vehicle (70%); the least likely was theft of personal property (29%). Women were found to have a higher reporting rate than males for sexual assault, robbery, and assault, and that those 65 and older were more likely to report incidents than younger victims.

The most common reasons given for failure to report an offence were that the crime was “too minor” (66%), that police could do nothing about it anyway (61%), and that it was too inconvenient/they didn’t want to take the time (24%). However, when broken down by offence category, the reasons for non-reporting by sexual assault victims varied in some important respects. Two thirds of women who had been sexually assaulted did not report the crime to the police. The most common reason was that police could do nothing about it (52%), but this was closely followed by 43% who cited concern about the attitude of the police or courts towards this type of crime (compared to a mere 8% of all victims of crime). In addition, fear of revenge is common among victims of sexual assault (33%), and female victims of assault generally (21%).

Finally, the data revealed that victims were most likely to report crimes which result in a significant financial loss, rather than those resulting in pain, injury and fear. Overall, it found that property crimes occurred more frequently than crimes of violence, that most of these resulted in low financial loss, and that victims themselves do not report them because they define the incidents as being too trivial to warrant police intervention. Crimes of violence were less frequent, and did not necessarily result in serious injuries, but there were serious issues raised about the consequences of making a report.

Since this pioneering survey, other surveys including information on victimization have been conducted in Canada. These include the 1993 Violence Against Women survey, the 1988, 1993, 1999 and 2004 General Social Survey, and the 1996 International Crime Victimization Survey. Highlights of each will be presented in turn.

**The 1993 Violence Against Women Survey:**

A random sample of 12,300 women age 18 and over were interviewed across Canada about their perceptions of crime and experiences of victimization. The results of this survey were enlightening. It found that:

\* 51% of Canadian women have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual assault since the age of 18. Only 10%, however, were victims of such violence in the preceding year.

\* Women are at greater risk of violence by men they know (45%) than by strangers (23%). Many respondents reported past violence from both.

\* 39% of women have been victims of sexual assault (5% in the previous year). 25% of these involved unwanted sexual touching, and an equal proportion a violent sexual attack. A smaller proportion of these (17%) reported physical threats or assaults by men other than spouses (1% in the previous year).

\* 29% of women have been assaulted by a spouse or live-in partner (3% in prior year). More was reported in previous relationships than current ones (48% vs. 15%).

\* There is a continued risk of violence to women from ex-partners despite a divorce or separation. 19% assaulted by a previous partner said it was during a period of separation, and 1/3 of these said the violence became more severe during this time.

\* The most common forms of violence were threats. This was followed by pushing, grabbing and shoving, slapping, throwing something, kicking, biting, and hitting with fists. While the proportion who have been beaten up, choked, sexually assaulted, or had a weapon used against them are all less than 10%, in each of these between 400,000-800,000 women are estimated to have been affected.

\* Not only do Canadian women report significant levels of violence, a majority of those who have suffered violence have been victimized more than once. This is particularly evident in sexual violence. 60% who reported sexual assault by someone other than a spouse reported more than 1 incident (26% of these were so assaulted 4+ times).

\* Women are at risk of sexual violence in a variety of locations/ situations. 46% of sexual assaults occurred in a private place, 10% at work, and were not an uncommon risk in public locations such as bars, on the street, at dances, etc.

\* Spousal assault did not merely involve low level violence such as threats, pushing, grabbing and shoving. Only 4% said they were merely threatened, and 5% said these low level assaults were the only things that happened to them. The majority of abused women were assaulted repeatedly, 1/3 more than ten times.

\* Men from previous relationships were reportedly more violent than others. 10% reporting violence from a current partner said it happened more than 10 times, compared to 41% who were assaulted by a previous partner.

As for the context behind such incidents, the survey found:

\* The percentage reporting emotional abuse is higher than those reporting physical or sexual violence (35% vs. 29%).

\* Emotional abuse was used in conjunction with violence by the majority of violent men: 3/4 of women who were assaulted by a partner were also emotionally abused. A much smaller proportion reported emotional abuse without physical violence (18%).

\* Obsessive and controlling behaviors are prominent in serious battering relationships. While present in the majority of violent relationships, the frequency of emotionally abusive and controlling behavior increases dramatically as the seriousness of the battering increases (in serious battering, it is used by 95% of abusers).

\* Controlling and abusive men often find a woman’s pregnancy a threat to his exclusivity of attention and affection. 21% of physically and sexually assaulted women were assaulted during pregnancy. Indeed, this was 4 times more frequent among women who experienced the most severe forms of violence.

Finally, the survey reported on the broader correlates of violent victimization:

\* Young women 18-24 experienced rates of sexual assault twice that in the next age group (25-34), and had rates of spousal assault three times higher.

\* The rate of spousal assault in new marriages (2 years or less) was almost three times the national average.

\* Common-law relationships showed rates of violence 4 times higher than legal marriages.

\* Single women and those with some (but not completed) postsecondary education report the highest rates of sexual assault.

\* In spousal assault, the woman’s education is unrelated to risk, but men with less than high school assaulted their partners at twice the rate as those with university degrees. Similarly, men who were unemployed committed spousal assaults at twice the rate of employed men.

\* While households with low incomes have twice the national average level of spousal assaults, those in the mid and high income ranges are about the same. Similarly, rates for sexual assault slightly decline as income rises, but not by much.

\* Witnessing violence in childhood was a risk factor that this survey found to be very important. Men who witnessed their mothers being abused were up to 3 times as likely to be violent against their own wives as men who grew up in non-violent homes. Women, as well, who were exposed to battering were twice as likely to be victims of violence as women from non-violent environments.

\* Alcohol abuse was strongly correlated with violence. Rates of violence were 5 times higher for men who were heavy drinkers compared to non-drinkers, and 2 - 4 times higher than for infrequent or moderate drinkers. Moreover, the level of violence inflicted tended to be more serious and more frequent.

\* Rates of violent victimization vary from higher levels in western Canada to lower levels in the east.

\* When all of these associated factors are weighed statistically, the most important predictors are verbal abuse/putdowns, followed by sexual jealousy, efforts to limit womens’ autonomy/social contacts, age, the man’s education, living in a common-law relationship, early exposure to violence, and the man’s unemployment. Heavy drinking and household income come in at the bottom.

Ultimately, the VAWS helped us understand violence against women in Canada.

**2019 General Social Survey:**

* According to the General Social Survey (GSS) on Victimization, more than three-quarters (78%) of Canadians were very or somewhat satisfied with their personal safety from crime in 2019.
* One in five (19%) Canadians or their households were impacted by one of the eight crimes measured by the GSS in 2019. There were 8.3 million incidents of sexual assault, robbery, physical assault, break and enter, theft of motor vehicles (or parts), theft of household or personal property, or vandalism.
* Almost seven in ten (69%) self-reported incidents were non-violent in nature. Theft of personal property, the most common crime type, accounted for more than one-third (37%) of all criminal incidents.
* Women (106 incidents per 1,000 women) were violently victimized at a rate nearly double that of men (59 incidents per 1,000 men) in 2019. This gender difference is a result of the fact that women were five times more likely than men to be a victim of sexual assault (50 versus 9 per 1,000).
* When controlling for individual characteristics, women, lesbian, gay, or bisexual people, and younger people have a greater likelihood of being violently victimized.
* Higher violent victimization rates were observed among Indigenous people (177 incidents per 1,000 population), particularly among Métis (225) and Inuit (265E).
* After controlling for other factors such as age, gender, and other lifetime experiences, Indigenous identity on its own was not associated with increased likelihood of being a victim of violence.
* Childhood maltreatment, including physical or sexual abuse, witnessing violence in the home, or harsh parenting or neglect each increased the likelihood of experiencing violent victimization as an adult.
* Residential mobility and victimization were linked, with those who had changed residences more often in the past 5 years more likely to be victimized, both personally and their household.
* In 2019, about three in ten (29%) Canadians indicated that the victimization that they or their household experienced was reported to police. Reporting varied widely depending on the type of crime, from about half of all motor vehicle thefts, break and enters, and robberies, to 6% of sexual assaults.
* The most common reasons given by victims of crime for not reporting to police was that the crime was minor, the incident wasn’t important enough, or that nobody was harmed. For household victimization in particular, another common reason was a belief that the police would not have been able to recover what was stolen.
* More than any other incident characteristic, the presence of a weapon or an injury increased the odds of reporting a violent incident to police.
* One in six (16%) victims of violent crime reported three or more longer-term psychological consequences consistent with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

**International Crime Victimization Survey**

Finally, of particular interest for victimologists is the International Crime Victimization Survey, which was conducted in 1989, 1992, 1996, 2000, 2004, and 2010. In each, Canada was one of more than a dozen participating countries surveyed in an attempt to provide comparable information on the incidence of victimization around the world (30 countries in this round). A standard questionnaire and similar techniques were used to gather information in each country. A random sample of persons 16+ were asked detailed information on 10 types of crime, including when, where and how often offences occurred over the past 5 years, whether offences were reported to the police, and whether their experiences were considered serious. Findings from 2004 (more comprehensive than 2010) include the following:

* 17% of Canadians aged 16 and over had been victims of at least one crime measured by the ICVS during the year preceding the survey. This rate was similar to the overall international victimization rate (16%)
* Victimization varied from one country to another, with Spain, Japan, Hungary and Portugal registering the lowest rates (between 9% and 10%). In contrast, Ireland, England & Wales and New Zealand were among the countries with the highest overall victimization rates.
* For most countries, the offences with the highest victimization rates were theft of personal property, theft from a car and theft of a bicycle. In Canada, the highest rate was for theft from a vehicle.
* Across all participating countries, slightly more than half the population (53%) reported a victimization incident to the police. Austria and Belgium had the highest reporting rates (70% and 68% respectively). Victims in Mexico were much less likely to report their victimization incidents to the police compared to all other countries surveyed (16%).
* Canada, along with Finland and Luxembourg, ranked relatively low, with a rate below the international average: only 48% of Canadian victims reported the incident to the police.
* While Canadians reported a lower proportion of incidents, when they did report, they were satisfied with the police response. In cases where Canadians reported theft from a car, burglary, robbery, sexual offences or assault, two-thirds reported that they were satisfied with how the police responded.
* Canada, along with Finland and the U.S., were among countries whose population was the most satisfied with the police. 86% of Canadians believed that the police were doing a good or excellent job at controlling crime in their area.
* Canada did not stand out from other participating countries - criminal victimization rates were very close to the international averages. Like the populations of the other 30 countries, Canadians were mainly victims of crimes against property. Their reporting rates were below the international average, but the findings show Canadians have a positive opinion of the job done by the police.

As can be seen, the ICVS, like the other surveys we have reviewed, provides a great deal of information on victimization, but provides the added value of placing Canada’s experiences in a broader international context.

**Victimization Surveys: Problems and Alternatives**

The chief advantages of victimization surveys over official statistics are that: (i) respondents are asked about theoretically relevant concerns; and (ii) they weed out public decisions not to report or police decisions not to record, resulting in improved estimates of crime and victimization.

Yet, there are numerous problems with these methods. First, such studies depend upon victims *knowing* that they have been victimized and offenders knowing that they have committed a crime. For example, victims of fraud may not know that they have been cheated, and some obscure criminal acts may not be recognized as such by respondents unless brought to their attention. Moreover, what some individuals would perceive as abusive, others deny and excuse.

Secondly, standardized surveys, in which researchers attempt to ask all respondents the same questions in the same way, can sometimes be insensitive to cultural factors that affect the manner in which individuals *interpret* certain matters. Gomme (1993) gives the example of child abuse, which may be interpreted differently by cultures that consider a certain amount of "spanking" in the child's best interest, and not meaning the same thing as "hitting" the child. Fixed choice questionnaires may be useful, but they depend upon interpretive inferences and context-bound judgements about what is or isn't a meaningful answer to a pre-packaged question. Many respondents are unable to "get into" or hear questions in the same way as those who made them up. This is because respondents, when asked to choose an answer, are likely to be involved in an entirely different set of interpretive relevancies than researchers."

Third, respondents may not always be honest in their answers. Some may be reluctant to confess having done bad things or having experienced them. Some may be embarrassed or ashamed of having been the victim of some forms of crime, or fear revenge.

Fourth, the accuracy of data may suffer due to the faulty memories of respondents. Respondents may either forget incidents, or "telescope" prior events forward in time to the period covered by the survey. Indeed, Gomme suggests that there may be a "class bias" in survey results due to the fact that educated people are more likely to recall events and describe them accurately. This means that lower-class persons and "disadvantaged" members of certain minority groups may give artificially low estimates of both their victimization experiences and their criminal involvements.

Fifth, many subjects will seek to give socially desirable answers or please the researcher, tempering their views in light of their beliefs about what the interviewer wants to hear.

Sixth, inquiring about only *some* offences limits the accuracy of overall estimates of crime based on these surveys. According to Gomme, self-report surveys enumerate mostly trivial offences. Victimization surveys do not ask questions about respondents' experiences with consensual vice crimes. Respondents’ involvement in "victimless" crimes such as drug use, gambling, and prostitution remain unmeasured. Other crimes regularly omitted from victimization studies include disturbing the peace and public drunkenness. Furthermore, since victimization studies confine themselves to individuals as respondents, they provide no estimates of crimes, such as vandalism and arson, that are most often suffered by organizations.

Seventh, how researchers choose respondents for inclusion in their samples may affect generalizability. Some may use nonrandom samples based on student rosters or urban households - thereby ignoring the often important experiences of dropouts, street youth, small town and rural residents, and transients.

Finally, because "serious" crime is comparatively rare, researchers must draw very large samples in order to get at the entire range of offences. This can be very expensive and time-consuming.

Despite these objections, however, so long as one does not reify survey data as "the Truth," it can bring some suggestive descriptive information to bear on existing theoretical formulations in the "big picture." The images of deviance and crime provided from official sources and surveys of victims and criminals can be likened to aerial photographs. While such snapshots offer, from distant vantage points, informative glimpses of broad and general patterns, they unavoidably leave obscure much of the finer detail regarding the nature and processes of involvement in crime and victimization. However, one must be cautious. To color in the rough sketches provided by such methods other, inductive, and more qualitative methods are required.

**One Alternative: An Interactionist Approach:**

Conventional victimology, and many programs based on its tenets, theoretically *presupposes* the objectivity of certain individuals or groups as victims, without first considering the interpretive, definitional *processes* involved in the social construction of this status. In contrast, the theoretical assumption underlying Holstein and Miller’s seminal (1990) paper is that crime victims are interactionally constituted.

If victim is analytically construed as a label that formulates reality, our notion of how one becomes a victim is radically transformed. We can conceive of victimization as descriptive practice - the interpretive and representational process for assigning victim status to ourselves and others. Victimization then becomes interactional activity that underpins victims reality status. Describing someone as a victim is more than merely reporting about a feature of the social world: it constitutes that world (Holstein and Miller, 1990: 105) (Emphasis in original).

By thus dropping this unexamined premise, researchers are freed to look at victims from a new angle, enabled to analyze the specific interactional dynamics, the subtle victim assignment practices involved when initially confused, traumatized, and vulnerable individuals either learn to adopt, or resist being cast into the crime victim role. Specifically, by focusing on those practices that are seen but unnoticed (Garfinkel, 1967, much may be learned about victims cope which may not be apparent otherwise. Essentially, what Holstein and Miller are saying is that we have to refocus on the social processes through which persons become “victims.”

Holstein and Miller argue that people become, or are “produced” as victims, by engaging in, or co-operating with, practical political activity that is abetted by a “rhetoric of victimization.” They argue that it is important to consider how such “victim assignment practices” operate to assemble and assign meaning in everyday life. Specifically, they argue that “if deviants are constituted through public definition and dramatization of evil, then we might also view the production of “victims” as the public articulation and dramatization of injury and innocence.” Engaging in descriptive practices of this sort may be seen as forms of purposeful social action that meaningfully organize aspects of persons’ everyday lives.

Holstein and Miller argue that a person is “victimized” when s/he is nominated for membership in the “victim” category. Calling someone a victim organizes understandings of that person as a particular *type* to whom certain characteristics are attributed and orientations are taken. Specifically, calling someone a victim encourages others to see how the labeled person has been harmed by forces beyond his/her control, simultaneously establishing the “fact” of injury and locating responsibility for the damage outside the “victim.” This discourse of “victimization,” if validated by others, is this practically situated social action that promotes practical definitions of everyday circumstances. An act of interpretive reality construction, it advises persons how they should understand persons, circumstances and behaviors under consideration.

Of course, there are practical consequences to all of this. As parties to a troubling situation negotiate its definition, sources, and resolutions, the trouble is consolidated around understandings of who is responsible and who has been injured, processes which often involve victimization. Most generally, the interpretive instructions implicit in the label of victim involve procedures for deflecting responsibility, assigning causes, specifying responses and remedies, and accounting for failure:

1. *Deflecting responsibility*: Accepting the label of victim is a method for absolving persons of responsibility. When trouble emerges, an “innocent” party – the object of injury or trouble – can be specified by assigning victim status to one or more persons, thus exempting them from blame. This emphasizes particular aspects of person’s conduct and character while glossing over others that might paint them in a less favorable light.

2. *Assigning Causes*: Categorizing a person as a victim also instructs others to identify the sources of harm. Assigning victim status, then, implicitly designates a victim’s complementary opposition – a perpetrator or victimizer – at the same time. This can actually work both ways. A victim and a victimizer go hand in hand in our commonsense discourse, and the dramatization of innocence and evil happen when either is posited in respect of a problematic situation.

3. *Specifying Responses and Remedies*: Troubles are typically described for the purpose of doing something about them. Designating victims not only contributes to the specification of trouble, but is also central to the formulation of responses and remedies. Specifically, victimizing someone suggests that the person deserves help or compensation, while indicating that others should be sanctioned or provide restitution for the harm. Indeed, failure to sanction wrongdoers and/or provide restitution may be portrayed as a second victimization increasing the harm done to innocent persons.

4. *Accounting for Failure*: In addition to denying responsibility for particular actions, designating oneself or another as a victim provides an economical way of telling others that the performance or activity at hand should not be taken to exemplify the nature, quality or potential of either the actor engaged in it, or the activity itself. In this way, we may legitimately account for failures, oversights, or other unsatisfactory performances (e.g. work). Victimization is thus a rhetoric for preserving good intentions and ideals by discounting failures in their realization. It does not deny failure; rather, it invites such a conclusion while maintaining the person’s integrity. A sense of competence is maintained by portraying persons as dissatisfied, yet helpless in relation to the circumstances militating against their success.

As a result of the potential practical benefits above, some individuals make an effort to engage in “victim contests” to control the definition of the situation when a troubling situation is before them. Essentially, in many cases claims to victimization are not easily established. Resistance is common, sides form up, and each tends to make claims that they are the “real” or the “biggest” victim in the situation. As such, portrayals of victims and the causes of victimization become topics of open disputes and negotiation. Moreover, victim status may be assigned and then withdrawn in response to changing circumstances, understandings, or political considerations (e.g. criminal trials or restorative justice sessions).

Essentially, this shows that victim status is dependent on the interpretive enterprise of those reporting and describing events. Such instances also epitomize the political character of description. If “victim” is regarded as a claim about the world, then belief in the “factual” status of the description depends upon such things as credibility, influence, and warrant for honoring one set of claims over another. The version that is treated as real is this a product of Foucault’s (1972) politics of description, with victim status depending as much on the identities, bases of influence, rhetorics and counter-rhetorics of contesting parties as it does on the characteristics of the candidate “victims” themselves. These all represent analyzable topics for an interactional analysis.

In the end, Holstein and Miller argue that a theoretical and methodological focus on victimization as social action avoids many of the pitfalls found in earlier victimology (e.g. simply studying persons who are commonsensically and non-reflectively assumed to be victims). This has:

-The potential for exciting research at both the micro (interactional/observational)

level and the macro (social problems/public discourse) levels

-It opens up questions not adequately addressed by official statistics and

victimization surveys

-It requires more inductive, qualitative research strategies (ethnographic

observation and interviews, discourse analysis)

Such a theoretical and methodological shift, while not ruling out the possible utility of other methods in a broader contextual sense, will help victimologists look at issues of victimization in a more comprehensive fashion. Such processual analyses, when triangulated or “cross-checked” with other methodologies, will ultimately help us to develop far more comprehensive, well-rounded understandings of victims and victimization than have hitherto been the case.