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The Impact of Police on Victims

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INTRODUCTION

Victims traditionally have been the "forgotten participants" in the criminal justice system, valued by the police only for their role in reporting crimes when they occur and appearing in court as witnesses. Studies of the police have highlighted the extent to which their function is to deal (often inadequately) with victims' problems rather than "fight crime." Police officers who respond to calls represent the sole contact that the majority of victims have with the criminal justice system, for most crimes are never solved and many do not even warrant a follow-up visit from a detective. As responding officers provide the primary link between victims and the state, any attempt to improve the lot of crime victims inevitably will depend on the active assistance of these officers.

There is little systematic information on how the police deal with victims and what the effect of that treatment is. Surveys indicate that most Americans have a favorable opinion of the police before an emergency contact, but many come away from the experience unhappy. Past research suggests that victims want information, recognition, advice, support, protection, and reassurance and that they often do not get these from the police.

Lack of information is one of the biggest complaints. Victims feel frustrated by a lack of feedback about progress in their case or its probable disposition (Kelly, 1982). They know very little about police or court procedures and may have unrealistic expectations about the capacity of the police to solve their case. Several studies indicate victims have little knowledge about programs available to them or where to turn for assistance with practical problems (Elias, 1983; Ziegenhagen, 1976).

Victims want recognition of their status as injured parties and they want their situation to be taken seriously. This highlights the importance of the rituals of police work—listening to the victim's story, questioning neighbors, searching for physical evidence and fingerprints, and filling out forms. Victims also need advice on what to do, assistance with pressing problems, and sympathy. Shapland (1984) found that "caring and supportive attitudes [on the part of police] were the main subject for victim praise." Ironically, many "professional" responses by the police to those with whom they come in contact are at odds with the

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needs of victims. Police officers often appear impersonal, if polite. They can be preoccupied with technical efficiency and unwilling to venture an opinion outside of their traditional area of expertise. Victims, on the other hand, tend to rate police officers by the amount of time and trouble the officers take to help them (Maguire, 1982). Patrol officers can be under pressure to complete incident reports quickly and get back "in service"—surely not a victim-oriented criterion of police service.

Finally, victims need reassurance and protection, and the police are important symbols of the provision of protection. It appears that important general sources of fear are isolation and the feeling that nobody will come to one's aid. The rapid appearance of the police, considerate attention by them, and (perhaps) their continued visibility may help alleviate the fear of crime which follows victimization.

This paper examines the impact of variations in some of these aspects of police treatment of victims. It utilizes data from a two-wave panel survey which identified a sample of crime victims, inventoried their contacts with the police, and gathered their impressions of the quality of service they had received. The interviews also gathered data on two potential consequences of their treatment by the police: (1) their fear of crime and their perceptions of neighborhood crime problems, and (2) their general assessment of police service. The impact of the police on these victims seems to have been salutary. The findings support the contention that what the police say and do for victims makes a difference in how victims view their predicament and enhances their support for the police.

Because this was a panel study, it was possible to take into account both the personal characteristics of the victims and their fear and perceptions of the police *before* the crimes took place. This increases our confidence in the conclusions concerning the causal consequences of variations in the way in which they were treated by police.

THE DATA

Data to assess the impact of policing on victims were gathered in personal interviews with 1,738 residents of seven selected neighborhoods in Newark, New Jersey, and Houston, Texas. The neighborhoods had relatively high crime rates and featured a mixture of single family homes and rental apartments. Respondents were virtually all black; in Houston, blacks, whites, and Hispanics were represented in all of the areas. Households were randomly selected from lists of all residential addresses in each neighborhood. Individual respondents were then chosen at random from among household residents 19 years of age and older. The data are available from the Criminal Justice Data Archive at the University of Michigan.

Victimization was measured by yes-no responses to 17 "screener" questions. Each question asked about a specific recent experience, and together they covered both completed and attempted incidents in a variety of crime categories. This analysis is based on all 299 panel members who were victimized between the two waves of interviewing and who also had contact with the police during this period. These 299 victims constitute 38% of the 792 interwave victims identified in the survey; as in all victim surveys, the majority of incidents were not reported to the police. In this group, 82% were interwave victims of property

crime and 18% were victims of personal crime. The most frequent form of property victimization was simple theft (57%), followed by burglary (36%). Among personal crimes, robbery and actual assault (as opposed to threats of assault) were most frequent (6% each).

Four indicators of fear of crime were employed in this analysis. Two concerned personal crimes. *Worry about personal victimization* was measured by combining responses to questions about the extent to which respondents were worried about being robbed and assaulted in their neighborhood. *Concern about area personal crime* was measured by responses to questions about "how big a problem" robbery, assault by strangers, and sexual assaults were in the area. Two other measures focused on property crime. *Worry about property crime* was measured by combining responses to questions about how worried respondents were about being burglarized and having their car stolen or damaged. *Concern about area property crime* was measured by responses to questions about "how big a problem" burglary, auto vandalism, and auto theft were in the neighborhood.

There were two measures of general attitudes toward police officers active in the study areas. Assessments of *police demeanor* were measured by combining responses to questions about how polite, helpful, and fair local police were; assessments of *police task performance* were measured by two questions concerning "how good a job" area police did in preventing crime and keeping order.

The critical explanatory variable in this study—the perceived quality of the treatment received by these 299 victims from the police—was measured in the following fashion. In the second wave of interviews, respondents were asked whether or not they had initiated any of six different types of contacts with the police. Those who had were asked a series of follow-up questions regarding the experience. If they reported more than one type of self-initiated contact during the period, they were asked about the most recent of them. Responses to four follow-up questions were combined to form the *quality of treatment* measure for this study:

1. Did the police clearly explain what action they would take in response to your contact?
2. Did you find the police . . . ("very helpful" to "not at all helpful")?
3. When you talked to the police were they . . . ("very polite" to "very impolite")?
4. How fairly were you treated by the police that time? Were they . . . ("very fair" to "very unfair")?

The only follow-up item excluded from this measure was a hypothetical reporting-in-the-future question, which was not related to the other responses.

All of these multi-item scales were single factored. Their reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha) ranged from .75 to .82 and were very similar for the two waves of the survey. The reliability of the quality of treatment measure was .79.

An important aspect of the study is that these data were collected in two interviews with each respondent, spaced 10–11 months apart. The "panel" feature of the data helped solve a key methodological problem, namely, that there are multiple, confounding determinants of victimization, people's willingness to call the police, and people's attitudes toward crime and the police. These include race, class, age, and gender. This makes it risky simply to correlate measures

of police contacts with indicators of their apparent consequences, for any observed correlations could be due to the joint effects of other factors. As in past research, it would be possible to develop measures of some of those confounding factors and control for them statistically. However, since there are many of them, some factors may inadvertently be left out of the analysis, others may be poorly measured, and some are doubtless unknown. A useful (if inevitably only partial) solution to the "confounding" problem was to interview the respondents twice. The first interview established "baseline" information on fear and general perceptions of the police. Then, a second wave of interviews remeasured these things to assess *changes* in attitudes during the intervening period. Changes between Wave 1 and Wave 2 then could be related to the respondent's experiences with the police between the interviews. Panel data are not a perfect solution to the confounding problem. A special difficulty is that the consequences of other events which take place between the two waves of interviews can be confused with "victimization effects," especially if they co-occur to some extent with victimization. Further, because there is inevitably error in the measurement of variables, the Wave 1 data do not fully adjust the Wave 2 data for their "true" levels during the first period, and some variance in the Wave 2 measures really reflects their prior levels.

These panel data were collected as part of an evaluation of areawide policing projects in the two cities. To control for the possible confounding effects of the programs, the multivariate analyses presented below include measures of the treatment or control condition of each respondent.

FINDINGS

By and large, the impact of the police on these victims seems to have been somewhat beneficial. Between Wave 1 and Wave 2, their opinions of the police serving their area grew more favorable. This is documented in Table 7-1, which indicates that, on average, they were more likely to think the police were polite, helpful, fair, and doing a good job on second questioning. All but one of those shifts were statistically significant, and all were in a favorable direction. The same differences appear when victims residing in the evaluation treatment and control areas are examined separately. In both cases, victims as a whole were more favorable toward the police after being victimized.

Table 7-2 resembles Table 7-1, but it reports before-and-after levels of worry and concern about crime. Unlike Table 7-1, it does not point to any dramatic changes in levels of fear attendant upon victimization. Scores on measures of worry and concern about personal and property crime evidenced only one significant change, and that was in a more fearful direction. The same minimal differences appear when victims residing in the evaluation treatment and control areas are examined separately. However, it may be instructive that this apparent stability runs counter to the general pattern in these data. Victimization *was* related to increased worry and concern among all victims in the Houston and Newark panel survey, and it led them to adopt more personal and household precautions (cf. Skogan, 1987). However, this pattern did not hold among the minority of victims who came into contact with the police. Thus, the pattern of "nondifferences" reported in Table 7-2 hints that those contacts may have had positive consequences.

Table 7-1 Changes in victims' general attitudes toward the police

Measures of general attitudes	Mean scores		Two-tailed significance	N
	Before	After		
Demeanor				
In general, how polite are police in this area when dealing with people? (1–4)	2.97	3.22	.001	227
In general, how helpful are police in this area when dealing with people around here? (1–4)	2.74	2.92	.04	236
In general, how fair are the police in this area in dealing with people around here? (1–4)	2.98	3.09	.10	222
Task Performance				
Now, let's talk about the police in this area. How good a job do you think they are doing to prevent crime? (1–5)	2.71	3.10	.001	269
How good a job are the police in this area doing in keeping order on the streets and sidewalks? (1–5)	2.73	3.11	.001	267

Note that all items were scored in a "positive" direction, e.g., higher scores indicate the police were perceived to be polite, fair, doing a good job, etc.

To this point, we have seen that victims who came into contact with the police were more favorable toward them afterward, and, counter to the general pattern in the same surveys, they were not more fearful despite their recent experience with crime. The critical question remains, Can this stability or change over time in victims' opinions of the police and perceptions of vulnerability to crime be attributed to the character of the service these victims received?

Table 7-3 examines this problem by relating the quality of treatment scale described above to measures of fear and assessments of police performance. The partial correlations presented in Table 7-3 indicate how strongly variations

Table 7-2 Changes in victims' worry and concern about crime

Measures of worry and concern	Mean scores		Two-tailed significance	N
	Before	After		
Worry about personal crime victimization	2.13	2.06	.25	291
Concern about area personal crime problems	1.76	1.69	.09	290
Worry about property crime victimization	2.32	2.40	.05	251
Concern about area property crime problems	2.18	2.20	.54	298

Note that all items were scored in a "positive" direction, e.g., higher scores indicate the higher levels of concern and worry. All of the scale scores have a range of 1–3.

Table 7-3 Impact of the perceived quality of contacts with the police

Measures of consequences	Correlation with quality of treatment scale[a]		
	Partial correlation	Two-tailed significance	N
General police performance			
Police demeanor	+.45	.001	263
Task performance	+.36	.001	283
Personal vulnerability			
Worry about personal crime victimization	−.12	.04	291
Concern about area personal crime problems	−.11	.07	290
Vulnerability to property crime			
Worry about property crime victimization	−.05	.41	251
Concern about area property crime problems	−.04	.46	298

[a]Controlled for Wave 1 scores, age, race, housing tenure, household composition, gender, residence in a program or control area, and city.

in the manner in which victims perceived they were treated are related to those consequences. The partial correlations take into account the perceptions of respondents *before* the incident, as well as their age, race, gender, and other personal characteristics, their treatment or control condition in the project evaluation, and their city of residence.

Table 7-3 indicates that good treatment made somewhat of a difference. Victims who thought the officer(s) they talked to were helpful, fair, polite, and informative were more likely to think that the police in general were the same way and performed their job well. They also were less likely than those who thought they were treated badly to feel vulnerable to personal crime. However, only about one-half of the fear-of-crime measures were significantly related (or nearly so) to the quality of treatment measure; there was no apparent effect of police contacts on perceptions of area property crime. Perceptions of property crime were linked to the quality of treatment by the police in the hypothesized fashion, but the correlations were not significant. The most dramatic effects of contacts with the police were reserved for attitudes toward the police.

SOME CAVEATS

The data presented above constitute only an indirect test of the frequent contention that police actions at the scene of the crime affect victim perceptions of their fate and shape their assessments of how effectively the system can function in their behalf. The principle problem with the data is that we cannot directly link the victimizations recalled in this survey with a specific follow-up contact with the police. Rather, we only know that during the period between the two waves of interviewing these residents of Houston and Newark both were victimized and initiated a contact with police in their city. The two actions were

not necessarily linked, although probably the bulk of the contacts examined here did involve calling the police in response to the crime. However, it is also possible that *other* supportive contacts with the police may also influence a victim's perceptions, not just contacts immediately following a crime. In any event, the findings here support the notion that what the police say and do for victims makes somewhat of a difference in how they view their predicament and enhances their support for the police.

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