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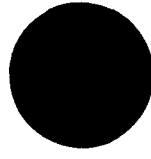
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Investigating Repeated Victimization with the NCVS

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Introduction

The study of repeated victimization has captured the imagination of the criminal justice and criminological community as a tool for understanding the occurrence of crime and for allocating crime control and crime prevention resources (Pease, 1998). A decade of pioneering work in England emphasizing repeated burglary victimization found that prior victimization is the best predictor of subsequent victimization and that the subsequent burglary victimization generally occurs shortly after the first (Pease, 1998; Pease and Laycock, 1997; Ellingsworth et al., 1995; Polvi et al., 1990). These findings have been used to allocate police resources to prevent subsequent burglaries (Chenery et al., 1997; Bridgeman and Hobbs, 1997). They have also lead to the development of theories of crime that emphasize the direct role of entering into the victimization state as the source of subsequent victimization (Sparks, 1981; Osborn et al., 1995; Pease, 1998). Presumably this occurs because the initial burglary provided the offender with information on available goods or means of access.

While this research and subsequent intervention programs are promising there is reason to be cautious about the use of repeated victimization as a tool for resource allocation and as a means of building criminological theory. With respect to the research on repeat burglary, the data sources used were highly selected subsets of the burglary population. Most of this work is based upon police records which tend to over represent repeated victims because they represent a more heavily victimized segment of the population than other sources of data on victimization. There is also some evidence that the British Crime Survey data used to support theories of repeat

burglary overstate the amount of repeated victimization (Lynch and Titus, 1996). These potential biases in the data could result an overestimate of the predictive power of prior burglary on subsequent burglary (Osborn and Tseloni, 1996). If this is the case, questions arise about using repeated victimization as a tool for allocation and theory building.

The empirical work on repeated assaults is much less developed than it is for repeat burglary. There has been some investigation of domestic violence and spouse abuse, but this work has not emphasized the repeat nature of the violence ; rather it has focused more on the prevalence of the phenomenon than its persistence over time (Browne,1993; Frieize and Brown, 1989; Gelles and Strauss, 1988). Those studies that have examined persistence have been conducted with highly self-selected samples from police records of victim service agency records (Gelles, 1976; Herbert et al., 1991). Again, this raises questions about the applicability of these findings to the universe of repeated assault. Moreover, it is unlikely that theories of domestic violence will be appropriate for other types of repeated assault.

Given the importance and promise of repeat victimization for allocation and theory building, it is important to confirm both the assumption that prior burglary victimization is the best predictor of subsequent burglary and that the findings on repeated assaults from agency records hold true for the broader population of repeated assault victims. The work described here attempts to do this by examining both repeated burglary victimization and repeated assault victimization with data from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). These data should be less selective than police records because they include events not reported to the police. The survey also employs a rotating panel design which affords some longitudinal data on persons and households. The NCVS has a different error structure than the cross-sectional

surveys previously used to examine repeat burglary victimization. If the results of these analyses are consistent with those found with these other data and methods, then we can be more confident in the worth of repeated victimization for building theory and guiding allocation.

Describing the NCVS as a Source of Data on Repeat Victimization.

The NCVS employs a multi-stage cluster sample of 50,000 households and over 100,000 people. It is a rotating panel design. Housing units remain in sample for three years and occupants twelve years of age or older are interviewed at six-month intervals for a total of seven interviews. The first interview is used for bounding purposes, not estimation, and subsequent interviews are used to produce annual estimates of the level and the change in level of victimization in the non-institutionalized residential population of the U.S. Each respondent receives a personal screening interview which is designed to elicit events that may be crimes within the scope of the survey. One member of the household is designated the household respondent and is administered a household screening interview that asks about crimes involving the theft of household property. If a positive answer is given to a question in the screening interview, then an incident form is completed that asks for details of the event, including the date it occurred. The information on the incident form is used to exclude out-of-scope incidents and to classify incidents within the scope of the survey.¹

The analyses discussed below exploit some of the unique advantages of the NCVS for exploring repeat victimization. First, the NCVS collects data at six-month intervals over as much as a three year period. This relatively short reference period provides more accurate data

on victimization experience and interviewing respondents over a three-year period offers a more complete view of a given person's victimization history. The cross-sectional surveys with long reference periods that have been used to explore repeat victimization heretofore have none of these advantages. Second, the survey has repeated measurement of independent or predictor variables so we can assess the effects of change in various attributes on the risk of victimization. This too is not possible with cross-sectional surveys which seriously inhibits the ability to test arguments that victimization at one time affects subsequent the risk of victimization. Without information on changes in other states or conditions, it is difficult to demonstrate that correlations between prior and subsequent victimization are not due to changes in these other states. Finally, the NCVS introduced a procedure in 1992 to collect information on high-volume repeated victimizations reported in the survey. This procedure asks the respondent whether the repeated victimizations involve the same persons and places or whether they are different across events. This is a very different approach to exploring repeat victimization than has been used in the study of burglary victimization where inferences are drawn from correlations and not the direct statements of victims. This alternative approach can provide valuable insights into why repeat victimization, and particularly repeat assaults, occur (Pease, 1998).

Repeat Burglary in the NCVS

The analysis of repeated burglary victimization examined the risk of burglary in housing units over a three-year period in the NCVS. The victimization experience of persons in these units was assessed at six-month intervals. The dependent variable in the analysis was the number

¹ For a more extensive discussion of the design of the NCVS and its precursor, the NCS, see Biderman and Lynch

of burglary victimizations experienced in a six-month period. This variable was included in mixed random effects models with other attributes of the housing unit and the households that occupied those units. Some of these characteristics were relatively fixed such as the race of the household head, family income, whether the housing unit was a single family or a multiple unit dwelling, marital status of the household head, and whether the housing unit was in the central city of an SMSA or elsewhere. In addition to these relatively fixed characteristics of the housing unit and its occupants, the model also included a number of other attributes that were more likely to vary over time. One of these time-varying characteristics was household composition, i.e., whether the housing unit lost members or gained members since the last time it was interviewed. The other characteristic was the number of burglaries experienced by the household in the previous interview. Finally, a number of variables known to be related to response errors in the survey were included in the model to account for these errors.

The lagged burglary variable is the most crucial variable for testing the predictive power of prior burglary victimization for subsequent victimization. If this variable is the best predictor of subsequent burglary victimization, then the premise underlying much of the work done in England would be supported. If prior burglary has little predictive power, we must question whether prior burglary victimization is the best predictor of subsequent victimization and whether prior victimization should figure so prominently in theory building and resource allocation.

The other variables in the model are important in telling us whether they will be useful in predicting subsequent burglary risk. It is possible that variables in the model other than prior

(1991) and Rand and Taylor (1995).

victimization are better predictors of subsequent risk. These variables also help in “holding other things constant so we can be sure that the relationship between prior and subsequent burglary is not due to these other factors. This is more important for building theories of victimization than it is for allocating police resources. The inclusion of other time-varying variables is particularly important because cross-sectional surveys have not been able to assess the effects of these variables on burglary risk.

The results of this analysis confirm that prior burglary victimization is positively related to subsequent burglary victimization, but other attributes of housing units and their occupants are much stronger predictors of burglary risk than prior burglary victimization. Age of the household head, location of the housing unit, and whether the household head is married are much better predictors of burglary and other attributes such as changes in household composition and size of the household have about the same predictive power as prior victimization.

These findings suggest there are predictors other than prior burglary victimization that may be better used in guiding resource allocation. They suggest further that explanations of burglary that rely upon “entering into the victimization state at time one ” may not be that useful for understanding the risk of burglary.

We must be cautious with these results, especially in light of the enormous body of good work that has been done in England on this topic. More work using self-report surveys with repeated measures designs must be done to ensure that these results are accurate and broadly applicable. It could be that the differences between these results and those in the British research are real and not due to methodological artifacts. English burglars have different offending patterns than those in the U.S.. More likely, it is the fact that police data overrepresent repeated

victims and therefore the contribution of “state dependence to explanations of burglary victimization.

If indeed police data are highly selective, is it necessarily bad to use prior burglary to build theory and to allocate resources? For theory building, this selectivity is definitively a serious flaw. A relatively small and atypical subset of the burglary victim population should not be used to understand the general population of burglary victimization. It is not clear, however, that selectivity is that consequential for allocation. For these purposes, anything that distinguishes low- from high-risk persons is useful regardless of whether the predictive trait “causes” the subsequent victimization. The preoccupation with prior victimization as a predictor can, nevertheless, be damaging in several ways. The selectivity of police data focuses prevention resources on a restricted subset of potential victims and unintentionally ignores all others. Allocation models based on other, less selective sources of data would include more of the at-risk population and would be more fair. Second, the focus on prior victimization as a predictor of risk can inhibit the search for better predictors. The data on prior police reported victimization are conveniently available. It is very tempting to stay with these familiar but flawed data rather than begin to explore or create other data sources that may provide better methods for resource allocation as well as better data with which to test theories.

Repeat Assaults in the NCVS

Repeated assaults are different from repeated burglary and they need not be investigated the same way. In the case of burglary, the victim often knows very little about the offense and

the offender and so it is not very useful to study repeat burglary by asking the victim to associate the events or to indicate how these events may be interrelated. The best way to proceed is to find regularities across repeated burglary events and formulate hypotheses as to why they occurred (Polvi, et al., 1990; Forrester et al., 1988). In the case of assault, the victim generally knows much more about the offender and the event and it is useful to ask the respondent why these repeated assaults occurred or to ask the victim about commonalities across these events. This can shorten the search for patterns and guide our interpretation of same. Unfortunately, most available victimization surveys did not, until very recently, include such questioning.²

In 1992, changes in the way the NCVS handled “ series incidents ” provided some limited but very valuable questioning about how high-volume repeated victimizations may be related. “Series incidents” refers to a procedure invoked when respondents have six incidents or more in a six -month period that are similar and for which they cannot provide details on the individual events. When this occurs, interviewers collect detailed information on the most recent event and record the number of events. The new questions added in 1992 elicited whether the repeated events involved the same offender or different offenders, whether they occurred in the same place or in different places, and whether the situation ended or continued. This information was used in concert with other information to suggest whether and how repeated events may be related. If we know that events share the same offender, for example, “state dependence ” explanations of why victimization occurred become more plausible.

The analyses of the data exploited this new information in two ways. First, the analyses were used to test the integrity of prior classifications of repeated assault by determining whether

² The BCS added questioning on the inter-relationship of repeated events in 1992 (Pease, 1998).

these classifications involved the same offenders and locations across all events. To the extent that these classes include events that are very different, other classifications must be considered. Moreover, this descriptive analysis can suggest reasons why this high-volume repeated victimization occurs. Second, persons experiencing high-volume repeated assaults within two of the classes were compared to persons experiencing only one victimization during the same period in a multivariate analysis. This was done to suggest factors that distinguish repeated assault victims from those less frequently assaulted.

Classifying High Volume Repeat Assaults.

The descriptive work done by Dodge (1984; 1987) as well as the analyses done here suggest that our efforts to understand the source of repeat assault should focus on three domains or institutional arrangements--work, school, and domestic violence. Because it is in these settings where the bulk of high volume repeated assaults occur, it must be something in these settings that promotes repeated assaults.

We examined the unity of persons and places within these settings to determine if there might be sub-types within these three classes that could be usefully distinguished. Our assumption was that repeat victimizations that involved the same offender over time would be quite different from those that did not. Those that involved the same victim and offender may be more "personally motivated" than those that did not. In these incidents, the victim was singled out for who they were not because they were an attractive target based on universalistic standards.

Using this standard, there appeared to be two modal types of repeat assault at school. Approximately one-half of the series incidents at school involved the same offender and one-half did not. This suggests that a substantial portion of the high volume repeat assaults at schools may be personal vendettas, while another substantial portion are less personal. This latter type of victimization could be the result of racial or ethnic conflict or gang activity and, indeed, the data suggest that this is the case. A much larger proportion of series incidents that involve different offenders across events are cross-racial than are events that involve the same offender. Similarly, a much larger proportion of these events involve gang activity than events where it is the same offender in every instance.

There is also some evidence that repeat assaults at home could be usefully divided into those that involve intimate partners and those that involve other familiars such as siblings, parents or children. Moreover, there is some evidence presented here that high-volume repeat victimization involving intimate partners is different from that between spouses.

The evidence for different subclasses of repeated assaults at work is less clear. The vast majority of offenders are not known to the victim and are not the same across events. However, this is not necessarily the case for occupations that are less concerned with order maintenance, e.g., transportation workers or retail sales persons. There is also a small but noticeable proportion of the repeated assaults at work that involve intimate partners. These are not so much assaults on the job as they are domestic assaults that happen to occur on the job.

Multi-Variate Models of High Volume Repeated Assaults.

The fact that repeat assaults are prevalent in schools, intimate relationships, and work suggested that we focus more analytical investigations on these domains or institutional arrangements. In so doing, we picked the two most populous classes of high-volume repeated assaults--those at work and those between intimates--and compared repeated assault victims in these domains to those victimized only once in the same domain during the same period. Following the work done on domestic violence, our analyses of repeated assaults by partners explored the issue of persistence. The difference between the singly victimized and the repeatedly victimized in a given unit of time is persistence. In the case of repeated assaults on the job, we interpreted the difference between the singly and multiply victimized as simply a difference in the frequency of assaults, since most of these events did not involve the same offender. In this context, the concept of persistence seemed less appropriate.

Understanding the Persistence of Assaults Among Partners. The single best predictor of whether assaults among intimates become chronic is whether they are reported to the police. Episodic violence between intimates does not become persistent when the event is reported to the police. The relationship between persistent assaults and arrest is not as robust, but it too is negative. Arrests are more prevalent among victims of episodic assaults than among victims of chronic repeated assaults. These results compliment the findings of the experiments done to test the effects of arrest on duration (Sherman and Berk, 1984). While these experiments examined the effects of arrest on persistence in the population of events reported to the police, these data also address the effects of reporting to the police in the wider population of intimate assaults, including those not reported to the police. These data suggest that in this wider population,

reporting to the police (independently of the action that the police take when they arrive) has a negative effect on persistence. This is true for partner violence and for violence between spouses, i.e., those who are formally married. All of this suggests that efforts should be taken to promote the reporting of partner violence as a means of fostering desistance.

It is interesting to note that arrest has a significant negative effect on persistence of intimate violence in the wider population of partner assaults, but not when the focus is restricted to violence among spouses. This warrants further inspection. It may be that arrest works among partners because the relationship is terminated after the arrest, while the relationship among married folks continues and so do the assaults.

Understanding High Volume Repeated Assaults at Work. In the case of high-volume repeated assaults at work, involving third parties such as the police has little effect on the volume of assaults. Further, occupations that involve order maintenance functions are more at risk of repeated assaults. For example, being a law enforcement officer substantially increases the risk of high volume repeated assaults on the job. The same is true, but to a lesser extent, for persons in medical occupations, mental health work, and teaching. All of these jobs involving maintaining order to some degree. Working in retail occupations and transportation, e.g., taxi driver or bus driver, had no significant effect on the risk of repeated assaults on the job.

Persons in these roles can protect themselves by performing the job at times (daytime rather than night time), and at places,(central city versus elsewhere) where it may be less dangerous. Regardless of the occupational role, persons working at night have a greater risk of repeated assaults on the job than people who work in the daytime. Likewise, persons working in

central cities have greater risk of high volume repeated assault than people who work elsewhere.

Attributes of the assaults themselves also seem to have an effect on the volume of repeated assaults. If the assaults are serious it appears that steps will be taken to end them, but it is not clear what these steps are. Events that involve guns or result in time lost from work, therefore, are more likely to be single rather than repeated assaults..

Attributes of the individuals who occupy these roles have little effect on the risk of repeated assaults on the job. Men are at some greater risk of repeated assaults than women, and older persons are at greater risk than younger persons, but these effects are not very strong relative to the influence of the occupational role, the work environment, and the attributes of the assaults.

It is clear from these analyses that whatever intervention is taken, it cannot be offender-oriented; it must be situational. This is true because events at work seldom involve the same offender across all events. Hence, any intervention based upon specific deterrence is unlikely to be effective. This would explain why reporting to the police does not discriminate between episodic and persistent assaults at work. Situational intervention could include having persons work in teams or having those in order maintenance roles avoid confrontation until they have overwhelmingly superior force so as to discourage assaults.

What more do we need to know?

With respect to burglary, we must confirm the relatively limited utility of prior burglary victimization as a predictor of subsequent burglary. This can be done with additional analyses of

victim survey data in which special attention is given to the use of shorter periods between incidents and separate models are estimated for events reported to the police and those not reported to the police. The analyses described here used the number of burglaries in a six-month period to predict the number that will occur in the next six-month period. Analyses of police data suggest that repeat burglaries happen very quickly after the first incident (Polvi et al., 1990). If such is the case, the current analysis may underestimate the predictive power of prior victimization. These analyses should be repeated with shorter reference periods, say burglary in one month predicting burglary in the next month. If the predictive power of prior burglary remains weak in these models, then models should be run separately for burglaries reported to the police and for burglaries not reported to the police. And if the selectivity of police data accounts for the greater predictive power of prior burglary, then the predictive power of prior burglary should be greater in the model using cases reported to the police in the NCVS relative to cases not reported to the police.

If these studies confirm that prior burglary is a poor predictor of subsequent burglary, serious efforts to predict burglary should be undertaken using victim survey data. These data could be collected on a jurisdiction basis and not in omnibus surveys like the NCVS. They could include much more specific information on housing units and their occupants as well as some information on geographic areas. Because more and more local police departments are using victim surveys as part of the move to community policing, these surveys could be used to model burglary risk. Ideally, this research could be conducted within the context of a partnership between a local university or research institute and a local police department. The department could sponsor and administer the survey while the researchers engaged in an iterative process of

survey development, data collection, modeling, and further development. This process could lead to a method of resource allocation that is better and more equitable than using prior burglary victimization.

Our understanding of repeat assaults would benefit from a more systematic questioning of victims about the inter-relationship among events repeated events. At present the NCVS asks about the relationship of events only for very high volume repeat victimization. These types of questions should be asked whenever a respondent reports multiple events.³ This would permit the investigation of the full range of repeat victimization and not simply the very high-volume repeat victimization examined here. The questioning about the inter-relationship among events should be more extensive and it should include direct questions about perceived motive.

We should take advantage of the fact that repeat assaults seem to take place in specific domains. First we should confirm that the clustering by domain we see among high-volume repeat victimization adheres throughout the entire range of repeat victimization. Second, we should engage in more focused studies of each domain following the leads suggested by the foregoing analyses. In the work domain, for example, we would want to have detailed information about the occupational role. So, for law enforcement officers, we would want to know the nature of their specific assignment was-- e.g., vice versus patrol. We would want to know more about the specific environment in which they work.--do they work in dangerous or safe places and do they work alone or with co-workers? In school, we would want to know about the roots of apparent vendettas and ask specifically about whether more impersonal assaults are taking place in the context of gang activity and racial or ethnic strife. Finally, we would want

³ This was the approach taken in the 1992 BCS.

true longitudinal data from a self-report survey so we could begin to separate the "state dependence " from " heterogeneity ." This type of information would permit the actual measurement of persistence, rather than approximating persistence as we have done here.

Repeated victimization has captured the imagination of criminologists and criminal justice practitioners alike. It has the potential to inform theories of crime and to guide resource allocation for crime control and prevention. The foregoing analyses of burglary suggest that while the study of repeated burglary has much potential our enthusiasm must be tempered by the limitations of existing data. The predictive power of prior victimization relative to other potential predictors must be more extensively tested on data not as dependent upon reporting to the police. These data should also provide for repeated measures on possible predictor variables. The NCVS has these capabilities and more should be done to bring these data to bear on the issue of repeated burglary. More attention should be given to repeated assaults. This attention should be supported by data collection methods that more fully exploit the victim's ability to explain the source of these repeated assaults.

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