10
Multiple victimization

Hazel Genn

Victims surveys and multiple victims

In the 20 years since the first major victim surveys were conducted for the President’s Commission in the United States a wealth of information has been accumulated at national and local levels about the volume of crime, patterns of criminal victimization and victims’ experiences of crime (see, for example, the overview by Gottfredson 1986). However, despite the evident achievements of victim surveys, there remain technical and theoretical difficulties involved in the ‘measurement’ of crime which mean that some survey findings must be interpreted cautiously (Skogan 1986). In addition, there are some important issues on which victim surveys have tended to raise more questions than they have so far been able to answer. This chapter deals with one of those problem areas, that of ‘multiple’ victims.

Information from victim surveys on patterns of criminal victimization has shown that becoming a victim of crime is a misfortune which is suffered unevenly in society. Survey data reveal that specific groups are at greater than average risk of being criminally victimized and, further, that within groups there are particular individuals who may be termed ‘chronic’ victims as a result of the frequency with which they report having had crimes committed against them. Those victims who appear to suffer many crimes tend to be concentrated in poor – and in the United States predominantly black – residential areas (see Sparks et al. 1977; Skogan 1981; Hough 1986). Although the experiences of multiple victims ought in theory to represent an important part of the total picture of criminal victimization and might provide useful insights into the conceptualization of ‘crime’, victim surveys have largely failed to provide any detailed information on multiple victimization. This failure stems primarily from the general orientation of victim surveys and partly from the inherent limitations of the social survey method as a means of understanding complex social processes.
In asking respondents about their experiences of crime, victim surveys have tended to use an approach which Skogan has termed ‘the events orientation’: that is, one which conceptualizes crimes as discrete incidents. Questions designed to elicit information about respondents’ experience of crime have typically been phrased as follows: ‘During the last six months did anyone physically attack you or assault you, in any way? Did anyone hit you, or use any other kind of violence against you?’ If the response is ‘yes’, then the respondent will be asked how many times and in which week or month this occurred. Implicit in this type of questioning is a characterization of potential victims as people who lead relatively crime-free lives which may, if they are unlucky, be punctuated by becoming the victim of an assault, a burglary, a theft or some other crime. For the majority of the population this characterization may be an accurate reflection of their experience of crime, but for a criminologically significant minority circumstances may be very different.

This ‘events’ orientation of surveys can be traced back to one of the original primary objectives of victim surveys: the estimation of the ‘dark figure’ of unrecorded crime for direct comparison with police statistics. In order to accomplish this comparison satisfactorily, information obtained from victims had to be accommodated within a rigid ‘counting’ frame of reference. Although isolated incidents of burglary, car theft or stranger attacks may present few measurement problems, for certain categories of violent crime and for certain types of crime victim, the ‘counting’ procedure leads to difficulties. It is clear that violent victimization may often be better conceptualized as a process rather than as a series of discrete events. This is most evident in cases of prolonged and habitual domestic violence (cf. Stanko, Ch. 4), but there are also other situations in which violence, abuse and petty theft are an integral part of victims’ day-to-day existence.

This phenomenon of multiple victimization has presented two problems for victim surveys. The first is that victims’ experiences of crime may be so common, or individual incidents so similar, that respondents to survey questionnaires cannot recall dates or details of the relevant events to be recorded. The second problem is that if respondents can remember sufficient details of the many crimes they have suffered, their experiences will inflate gross victimization rates and greatly increase estimates of the probable risk of becoming a victim for the population as a whole.

These concerns have led to the adoption of a number of different strategies in the analysis of victim survey data to reduce the counting problems posed by multiple victims. Some surveys – such as the US National Crime Survey – largely exclude them, while others impose an arbitrary upper limit on the number of offences any one person can be deemed to have suffered. Thus, the Canadian Crime Survey gives so-called ‘series’ offences an artificial value of one, while the British Crime Survey imposes an upper limit of five (Hough 1986). As a result of these practices, information about the incidence and circumstances of criminal victimization derived from victim surveys is based chiefly on those incidents which conform to the ‘discrete events’ notion of crime. Victim surveys have to date substantially underestimated multiple victimization and excluded the
experiences of these victims from our knowledge about the nature of crime, despite the fact that they suffer an inordinate amount. Certainly, there are difficulties in accommodating multiple victimization within conventional survey design. But to devote less attention to those people who for some reason are repeatedly victimized, than to those who suffer an isolated incident in an otherwise ‘normal’ crime-free life, results in a blinkered view of social reality. It is also clear that this failure must account, in part, for the misleading findings of surveys that violence is perpetrated more frequently by strangers than by non-strangers (cf. Gottfredson 1986; Skogan 1986).

Multiple victimization – a case study

In a victim survey conducted in three London boroughs some years ago (Sparks, Genn and Dodd 1977), a number of multiple victims were identified, several of whom were concentrated on a run-down council estate in North London. One victim in particular reported some 13 different offences which she had suffered during the twelve months preceding her interview, as well as several others which had occurred earlier. The offences were all reported in some detail and occasionally precise dates were given. Many were of a quite serious nature; some, but not all, had been reported to the police.

When we examined our figures on survey reported crimes, we discovered that the contribution made to the total by this woman and the other multiple victims whom we had interviewed, was very high, particularly for violent crimes. It seemed necessary to adopt a positive policy on the question of how to deal with these cases when constructing our gross victimization figures. The method used by the National Crime Survey in the US at the time was to exclude such cases (unless the victim was able to recall dates and details of each crime) in order to avoid the ‘undue’ inflation of survey estimates. We were reluctant to adopt this strategy on the grounds that the experiences of multiple victims were potentially too important and too interesting to ignore. It was decided that if we could be satisfied that the events reported by multiple victims had actually taken place during the twelve month reference period, they would be included in the survey and the events given a value which reflected the frequency with which they had occurred.

I therefore visited a number of multiple victims in one area of North London to carry out repeat interviews. The purpose was initially to discover whether the crimes which had been reported to our survey interviewers would be reported a second time to me with consistent accounts of the details. Re-interviews produced information which confirmed the original interviews and, often, further details were provided.

Becoming interested in what appeared to be examples of ‘victim-proteness’ in one geographical area, I visited one particular block on a council estate over a number of months, tape-recorded interviews with several families, their neighbours and friends, and eventually moved in for a short period with the woman who had suffered the greatest number of victimizations in our survey. The views which I formed after this period of intensive observation have a
substantial bearing not simply on the experiences of multiple victims, but on the limitations of victim surveys as they are currently designed. After some months of association with this group of people I found it no longer surprising that a structured questionnaire administered to one household should uncover some thirteen incidents of ‘victimization’. Indeed, it became evident that these incidents could have represented only a small part of the total volume of crimes (as defined in our survey) which had been ‘suffered’ during the previous twelve month period. What also became apparent was the fact that the events reported to us in the survey were not regarded as particularly remarkable. They were just part of life.

The following vignettes, extracted from interviews with residents on one council estate and from contemporaneous field-notes during my period of residence are presented in order to provide some illustration of these points. No attempt is made here to analyze the underlying social or psychological factors which help to produce the way of life and kinds of victimization described. Rather, the intention is to point out the need for fresh thinking in the design of crime surveys, to take account of the social context in which much inner city crime occurs.

The physical environment

Bleak House is comprised of approximately eight blocks of red-brick flats. The blocks stand in a square in the centre of which are threadbare patches of grass on which numbers of children, mostly black, kick balls around and fight with one another. The farthest block on the right, where the Lawson household lives, smells of urine, vomit and disinfectant. The flat is at the top of six long flights of littered stairs. There is no lift.

MAUREEN LAWSON

Maureen is 32-years-old, of English and Asian parentage. She is medium build, has short, untidy black hair, and not a tooth in her head. She looks at first sight at least 45-years-old. She has been married for 14 years to Jim who is West Indian. They have five children. Maureen is a sick woman. She has chronic epilepsy and suffers fits every day. She is highly strung, has had a thrombosis in her leg, and has suffered a minor stroke. She chain-smokes and has frequent chest infections. She says she has both claustrophobia and vertigo. These phobias, combined with a painful leg and the six flights of stairs up to her flat seem to keep her almost permanently confined to the flat. Maureen was born in England and was training to be a nurse when she met her husband. She became pregnant at the age of 19 and was thrown out of her mother’s house. She then moved in with Jim and married him. She had a child every two years from then until she was sterilized five years ago. She has not worked since she was married and cannot work now because of ill health. She lives on the money which she receives from social security, supplemented by rent given to her by the other women who live in her flat and by money Jim gives her for the children. She was moved into Bleak House
by the Council because she had previously been living in a flat which was overcrowded. She insists that the problems that she has now with her children and with her health are a result of living in Bleak House and has been trying ever since she arrived to be moved to a newer estate. Two years ago Jim got himself a room elsewhere in the borough in the hope that his leaving might make it easier for Maureen to be rehoused. She has had no luck, and since she is in massive rent arrears there seems little likelihood of her being moved in the near future. The flat is in a chronic state of disrepair. It is dirty and untidy. She makes no effort to keep it clean.

In common with the other women in the block, Maureen is subject to sudden fits of violent temper, directed mainly in her case against Jim and the children. Although the children are used to violent beatings from her they still seem affectionate. She is a gossip and argumentative, and her temper and manner have made her unpopular with those on the estate who are not in her ‘circle’. She presides over an extremely noisy flat which is full of people day and night. The unvarying thump of reggae pours out of her doors and windows at high volume from early morning until well into the small hours, resulting in abuse from neighbours and warning letters from the Council. She greets such complaints with contempt. Her sole aim at the moment is to be moved from Bleak House. She believes that this would radically change her life: that her nerves would improve and that her epilepsy would disappear. She has made several half-hearted attempts at suicide, in the form of minor overdoses, which generally conclude with a short period in hospital. This sort of action, which seems to be a common manner of expressing despair among the regular visitors and inmates of the flat, serves only to convince welfare workers that she is unfit to care for her children. Maureen and the women with whom she spends her days are subject to rapid changes of mood – from almost abandoned gaiety to hysterical and violent temper in seconds. The women seem to shout not only because they feel angry, but also as a physical form of release, and because everyone else around is shouting. Expressions of frustration from Maureen are common. She is angry about her physical environment, the people who live on the estate, the police, the social workers, the social security officers, the doctors, the psychiatrists. In short, she is angry with everyone for not doing enough about her problems.

In the original interview conducted with Maureen by a survey interviewer she reported six violent offences and seven property offences during the previous year. The property offences consisted of the house being broken into and meters emptied, as well as property being stolen from outside the flat. The offences of violence related to an argument with a neighbour which resulted in the neighbour attacking her with a coat hanger; another occasion when a different neighbour entered the flat and began to attack her (this was eventually stopped when the police arrived); an attempted robbery; and some apparently unprovoked attacks. When she was subsequently questioned about one of the cases of assault which she had reported to the police, it became clear that this was one of the frequent fights that take place between women on the estate – one which she had ‘lost’. Her assailant on that occasion was Marilyn, a regular visitor to her flat who continued to visit after the event despite the intervention of the police. Indeed, on
the first occasion when I reinterviewed Maureen asking for details of crimes committed against her, Marilyn was present in the flat. Whenever Maureen was asked about other incidents of violence she remembered many, but when questioned at length she did not appear to attach great importance to any one event.

RELATIONS WITH THE POLICE

When asked attitudinal questions about the police in the original questionnaire, Maureen expressed consistently negative attitudes towards them. However, her responses to those questions are a poor reflection of the complexity of her relationship with the police. Maureen, her family and the other people living around her do not have 'contact with the police' in the way in which it is visualized by designers of victim survey questionnaires. The police are a part of her life and perform diverse functions for (and against) her and her family. They are mediators, friends and enemies. They defuse explosive situations and they are called to help in times of trouble. They also interfere in Maureen's social life and are perceived as persecuting the children of the household:

This big boy, he's in trouble with the police. He's only eleven. He broke and entered places because he's got nothing better to do. They put him away until he's 18. He just comes home for holidays. They said I can go back to the Court and apply for him if he goes a full year without getting in trouble, but he hasn't as yet because every time he comes home he finds something to do. And there's that one. She was only seven and a man tried to rape her. It upset her mind. I've got two maladjusted children you know. They go to special schools. The police don't help you. Once they find out you're a coloured family — boom — that's you. The police are after my son because he's been in trouble. They're not going leave him alone until they get him under lock and key. I've sent him back. He was supposed to be here until Sunday but I've sent him back for his own safety from the police — not from other children but from the police because they do pick on him. They won't give him a chance. They see him in the street and they say 'Dave, what are you doing?' and he's not doing nothing.

On one occasion when I called, however, Maureen and her friend Kath had been out trying to get Kath's boyfriend to move out of her flat. When they arrived he had refused to leave. Kath went into the street, saw a policeman and called him to assist her. He and another policeman from a passing car came up to the flat and ordered the boyfriend to leave and warned him not to return. Maureen and Kath said that the police were very helpful and sympathetic. In fact, on that occasion, they had nothing but praise for the police.

DAILY LIFE

Mid-June

Great excitement when I arrived. The police were on the landing asking questions about a robbery in the local post office. Maureen was in high spirits. She was
detained by the police yesterday. She says they called on her in the afternoon and told her to come with them to the station because she had failed to pay her fine for not having a television licence. She was taken to the station and was locked in a cell for some hours until her husband came to bail her out. She was angry with her social worker who had been informed of what the police were going to do before they came round. Apparently they had phoned the social worker to ask if he would pay the fine for Maureen and he had refused. Maureen’s attitude is that it is his duty to look after her and her children and that he ought to be making a better job of it. She was also angry about the fact that Marilyn had been taken to the station at the same time and had been locked up with her two young children. Marilyn arrived later and corroborated this story expressing extreme anger over the whole event. Marilyn is a very large, imposing black woman. She is unpredictable and often hostile and abusive. She has a bad heart and despite this is forced to sleep on the floor because her social worker advised her to sell her furniture to pay the electricity bill. She has no beds and no other furniture.

Late June

(Present Maureen, Kath, Denise, kids, new woman, others in and out). They had a party last night which was a success but the next door neighbour complained to the police about the noise and the police subsequently called and warned Maureen that she must keep the peace. She then retaliated with a complaint that the neighbour’s husband had come on to the landing recently in the nude ‘holding himself’ which Maureen said was exposure and indecent. She says the neighbour just wants to cause trouble.

Next excitement – Kath’s boy enters with minor injury to arm and Kath follows in near hysteria saying that he has been hit by a small girl. Kath had gone downstairs and found the girl’s father holding her son. She hurled abuse at him and warned him that she would kill him if he laid a finger on her child. She says his children are always picking on her son. She said if she had had the walking stick with her she would have beaten him (I believed her). She was in a highly emotional state, shouting all the time and unable to calm down.

Observation in Residence

Late July

Unspectacular day. Twelve hours of reggae. Watched silent TV screen with reggae full blast. During the day the women sat around talking and drinking many cups of tea while the men (on holiday) sat in another room. The women constantly nag the men and children and pass the day gossiping.

Endless stream of neighbours coming in and out. Aggression is very noticeable. There are many mock fights both between women and between men and women. There is some pride displayed in the extent to which the women are
knocked about by men. During the afternoon when Kath mentioned the new bruises on her arm, a neighbour took down her trousers to reveal a sizeable bruise on her thigh.

There is a great deal of shouting and aggression in their speech. The women seem very neurotic. They are perspiring heavily and constantly discuss all the pills they are taking.

Marilyn came in again for a while and behaved very strangely. She had had a big win on the horses today and was in good spirits. Did not see much of her, but heard her at 11 p.m. laughing and shouting hysterically in the courtyard.

Evening. House is full of white women and black men, all drinking and dancing.

_Early August_

7.30 a.m. Tea. Breakfast cooked by Jim and eaten by various women in nightwear. Maureen was still in bed and we ate sitting around the room where she lay. The children had eaten odd scraps and were already playing outside or running in and out of the flat demanding money for sweets. By 9.30 we were smoking and drinking tea prior to the ritual sweeping of the floor and emptying of ash-trays which comprised the only visible housework attempted in the course of a day. Dressing was disrupted by Maureen having an epileptic fit. Taking charge of the situation and defying medical logic, Kath ordered everyone to grab hold of the nearest convulsed limb in an attempt to constrict Maureen’s movement. When the attack had passed a pot of tea was made and we sat around the bed smoking and chatting while Maureen slept. After a while she began to have another attack. The cups and cigarettes were put down and we resumed our previous positions. Eventually we all dressed and went into Denise’s bedroom/sitting room where the record player and television were. Our characteristic position is a half-slouch, cigarette in right hand and tea cup balanced on lap, with ash-tray within stretching distance. We sometimes maintain this position for a period of fifteen hours, disturbed only by taking turns in the unwritten but accepted tea-making rota.

The main excitement today was a letter from the Council complaining about the noise in the flat. Marilyn rang up the Council and shouted abuse down the phone. Maureen then took over and had a loud argument over the phone with the Council. She insists that racism is the reason for the complaint.

Otherwise the day consisted of crushing, excruciating boredom. As yesterday, the women sat around gossiping and taking pills while the men went elsewhere or sat in another room. As the day wore on the women became more and more agitated and restless. They kept joking about ‘feeling like a good fight’, and it is easy to see how fights occur. The women are bored and become angry with the children, so that by mid-afternoon everyone is dying for something to happen. Thus if a potential conflict arises it is grabbed and often provoked into full scale war. The household is noisy. Male friends are mostly outsiders but many women from other flats come up during the day. Maureen is very hospitable until crossed. There was a great deal of bickering and squabbling today. They gossip about everyone and are constantly watching out of the window for more material.
Thirteen hours of non-stop reggae today. Cliff and Brenda had a fight in the middle of the night. Cliff lives with Brenda and Sue, and spends his time running between the two who live in the same block. He tried to push Brenda out of the window.

Next day

Morning mostly spent discussing last night’s fight. Everyone was very excited and positively delighted with something new to talk about. Sue came up to the flat to talk about it.

KATH: I heard the screaming and I said ‘Oh she’s off again’ and I turned over. I thought ‘I’m not going to bother this time’. He’ll roll out later on laughing — you watch — as if nothing has happened.

SUE: Brenda likes her drink too much. I mean I feel guilty in as much as she’s got a beating, but I mean it’s not my fault. She should keep her mouth shut. I suppose she must have said something to him about me and he’s started. Well, I mean it’s nothing to do with me.

KATH: He’s probably told her to keep her mouth shut and she’s kept it up.

SUE: He did hit me once — I bloody shit myself. He slung me from the bedroom to the bathroom and then back to the bedroom and I did a somersault over the bed.

MAUREEN: He’s done that to Brenda you know. I’ve seen him do it.

HG: Why does she put up with it?

KATH: She likes him.

SUE: You know when you get cut with glass the blood spreads and you think it’s more than what it is.

MAUREEN: I don’t know if it was the glass because they said he had some kind of hammer or axe with him. Marilyn was screaming up here ‘He’s gonna kill her. Oh God Maureen, quick.’ It’s madness though, isn’t it? Fucking two o’clock in the morning. Might get it again over the weekend. Any time there’s a party and Cliff wants to feel a bit free, bam bam bam on her and that’s it.

Later Maureen had a series of fits. After she came round we all resumed our sitting positions and continued until 3 a.m. The women began the day by discussing last night’s fight. Then they moved on to nagging their men. They then started sniping at each other.

As the afternoon turned to early evening the women become even more bored and restless. Tempers become perceptibly frayed as the day wears on. The children are little trouble. I have not yet seen them sit down to a meal. They are not cooked for. They play downstairs until bed-time.

During the day the women began to have pretend fights between themselves, hitting each other quite hard and constantly looking out of the window hoping for trouble. The slightest provocation is relentlessly provoked into a major row. The flat is very noisy, the children are noisy and the neighbours complain and become angry.
You can’t live as a community, that’s why I don’t like living here. It’s from when we first moved in here, as we walked up the stairs we were called ‘wogs’. The basis of the trouble is there’s more (as they call them) ‘niggers’ in here than whites now. You get into fights with all kinds of people. With old people and with working-class people. They feel they’ve got more right to the place than I have because I don’t go to work. I’d be only too happy to work. You can’t be friendly with people around here. The only time they’re friendly is if they need anything. You’ve got a band around here that know Bleak House like the back of their hand. You’ve only got to say number 100 and they’re on to you.

(Maureen)

The challenge to victim surveys

The extracts presented above illustrate the difficulty of reflecting the complexities of multiple victimization by means of survey data, and demonstrate the ways in which underreporting and undercounting of violent events in surveys may occur. Although Maureen reported a very large number of incidents when she was originally interviewed in our survey, it is evident that these represented only a fraction of the number of ‘crimes’ (as defined by the survey) that she could legitimately have reported. The failure of multiple victims to report many events to interviewers is not simply a function of poor memory. It results in part from the demands of surveys that continuing states be conceptualized as individual events, and the extracts illustrate the difficulties which may be involved in isolating those events which are to be counted as ‘crimes’ for survey purposes from the normal course of day-to-day existence of these multiple victims. Our approach could not adequately record or reflect conditions of life where fights, verbal abuse, sexual assault and property theft were commonplace, and where the use of violence in the resolution of conflict was virtually automatic. In these social situations, questions like ‘Have you been threatened with violence during the last 12 months?’ or ‘When did you last have any contact with the police?’ become, frankly, an embarrassment.

Underreporting of violent offences by multiple victims may also be a result of the way in which daily events are defined by those involved. There is a huge variation in the experience of crime among people living in different social situations, and this affects their perceptions and definitions of crime in ways that have not yet been adequately explored. These issues are not merely technical matters which might be overcome by the refinement of question-wording in surveys. They involve fundamental theoretical questions about what constitutes ‘crime’ and the circumstances in which aggression and violence are properly defined as being of a criminal character. Finally, the data also raise questions about the meaning of the label ‘victim’ and how it is to be applied in the kinds of situations described above.

The evidence of this small-scale, in-depth study of multiple victims illustrates the importance of social context to analyses of criminal victimization. It suggests that on the margins of English urban society there are people who suffer almost continuous criminal victimization as it is defined by victim surveys, and the mere
recording of criminal events which multiple victims experience tells us little about the quality, or rather lack of quality, of their lives or of the processes which produce chronic victimization.

The difficulties involved in quantifying the volume of multiple victimization and in adequately reflecting the experiences of multiple victims do not justify their exclusion from survey data, neither do they justify denying their experiences of crime by imposing arbitrary upper limits. What is needed is a far more flexible approach to the design of victim surveys and greater creativity on the part of researchers in this field.