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# VICTIM CAREERS AND "CAREER VICTIMS"?; TOWARD A RESEARCH AGENDA

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by

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***Abstract:** Whereas there is a mature body of work examining criminal careers that has been established over the course of several decades, the study of victim careers is in its infancy. While there has been recent growth in the study of repeat victimization, the natural extension of this work into studies of the life course remains to be undertaken. The present paper suggests why the study of victimization over the life course may prove important for criminological theory and practice, and explores ways in which it might be taken forward. A rich vein of criminological enquiry remains to be exploited that promises to inform theories of criminal victimization as well as crime prevention practice. The paper also proposes the utilization of an accelerated longitudinal design to enhance the study of victim careers. Such designs are rich in promise but typically extremely expensive to conduct. In theory, a study of victim careers using such a design may be possible from extant data sources,*

*which would make it cost-effective. However, even if the design proposed herein did not reach its full potential, theory and practice may be greatly informed through the pursuit of a research agenda that incorporates longitudinal studies of victim careers.*

When Blumstein et al. published their classic 1986 work to which the title of this chapter pays tribute, they left the question mark off. They already knew the answer. Criminal careers have an established knowledge base that has been built up over a period of decades. In contrast, victimization experiences through the life course, here termed "victim careers," are largely a criminological black box, both theoretically and empirically. There is little previous use of the term "victim career" or substantive longitudinal analysis of the related concepts and their potential implications. It is proposed herein that criminological enquiry and crime prevention practice may be informed by the study of victim careers. In many ways it seems that a natural extension of recent studies of repeat victimization is into the investigation of life course studies of victimization.

The present paper outlines some of the concepts that would be relevant to the study of victim careers. It places these concepts in the context of the burgeoning literature on repeat victimization, and presents a research agenda. A large part of the paper details how a study utilizing an accelerated longitudinal design of victim careers might be constructed utilizing extant data from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). It is concluded that regardless of whether the suggested accelerated longitudinal design bears fruit, research into the nature of victim careers should be more widely adopted utilizing an array of research strategies.

## **WHAT ARE VICTIM CAREERS AND WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?**

A victim's career is the existence, frequency, duration and seriousness of victimization experiences across the lifetime. Victimization can be drawn more or less broadly. Much criminological evidence related to victimization has been amassed since the advent of the large-scale crime victimization survey. There are tremendous differences in victimization risk by age, gender and ethnicity. Yet we lack a longitudinal perspective. How to account for short-term repeat victimization in the context of life-course studies is one of the issues that needs to be addressed.

There is anecdotal evidence relating to some of "life's victims." However, we do not know if the people who are frequently bullied at school are the same people who are victimized as adults in bar fights, robbed in the street and burgled. A recent Dutch study seems to have begun the empirical study of victimization over the life-course. Karin Wittebrood and Paul Nieuwbeerta's (1997) pioneering study of long-term victimization experiences charts new criminological territory. In this retrospective victim survey, people reported on victimization experiences over periods up to 50 years. The study was framed in terms of routine activity and lifestyle theory and recent studies of repeat victimization. The main finding was that individuals were not prone to experience victimization over the life course. If true, the concept of a victim career would be a misnomer. However, people forget about crimes. They may block particularly bad experiences from memory. They may deliberately avoid reporting embarrassing experiences such as rape and domestic violence, and they may forget the less serious criminal victimizations and crimes suffered long ago. Recall of victimization experiences deteriorates exponentially even over the relatively short period of a year (Skogan, 1990). The recall of victimization experiences from many years, and sometimes several decades, ago will be poor. There may be a means of evaluating this by comparing changes in recorded crime rates in the Netherlands with changes in the rate of crime reported by survey respondents. If these diverge significantly, particularly if the survey crime rates increase significantly more dramatically than the recorded crime rates over time, then there may be a *prima facie* case to suggest that memory decay has had a major effect upon the study.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR CRIME PREVENTION**

If predictors of victimization over the long term can be developed, the possibility exists of developing interventions to prevent future victimization. Work to date suggests that victims are generally receptive to interventions that empower them. Unlike predictions of offending, there is little or no ethical problem related to over-prediction of victimization. Those predicted to experience further victimization, but who did not experience it, would not lose out. If anything, they would benefit.

## TERMS AND SENSITIVITIES

Table 1 shows the terminology of studies of offenders' criminal careers in parallel to what we suggest may prove to be preferable theoretical constructs for the study of victim careers.

**Table 1: Proposed Terminology of Possible Theoretical Constructs for the Study of Victim Careers and their Counterparts in the Study of Offender Careers**

<b>Proposed Term and Concept for Study of Victim Careers</b>	<b>Parallel Term and Concept in Study of Offender Careers</b>
“Victim careers”/Victimization across the life course	Offender careers
First victimization	Onset
Repeat victimization	Persistence/repeat offending/recidivism
Frequency of victimization	Frequency of offending
Within-crime type victimization	Specialization
Across-crime type victimization	Generalization
Freedom from victimization	Desistence/termination

Table 1 does not imply that the victim makes a series of conscious decisions and choices about whether to be victimized. It may be that the terminology should be changed for reasons of taste to avoid that impression.

### WHAT TYPE OF "CAREERS" WOULD WE ANTICIPATE?

We expect that the same persons, households, businesses and other locations will be repeatedly victimized over a long period of time. Risk heterogeneity suggests that some targets are more attractive than others. They may remain more attractive over a long period of time, perhaps the duration of their existence. State dependence suggests that victimization increases the probability of further victimization. Simpler terms proposed are "flag" and "boost" explanations of repeat victimization (Pease, 1998). Heterogeneity is a flag of

increased long-term risk. Event dependence boosts victimization risks in the short term. Victimization through risk heterogeneity may cause further victimization due to event dependency. Serial victimization by abuse may illustrate this. Within each relationship the victimization is event-dependent (if repetition is based on a learned experience of "success," impunity and derived power on the part of the offender). If abuse recurs across several relationships, this would suggest some element of risk heterogeneity.

Victims of one type of crime are also more likely to be victims of other types (Reiss, 1980; Hindelang et al. 1978). Victims who experience primarily the same type of victimization (as was suggested in the example of domestic violence above) could be said to be specialists, while those victimized by different types of crime are generalists.

### **VICTIM CAREERS AND REPEAT VICTIMIZATION**

The study of victim careers is essentially the study of repeat victimization over the life course. It is now commonly accepted that, with variation by crime type and context, repeat victimization typically constitutes a significant proportion of all victimization in a given period, and appears robust across methods of study. In fact, a range of studies in the U.S. have demonstrated this over more than two decades, several of them utilizing National Crime Survey (NCS) data. Since this chapter proposes a research agenda to study victim careers, and a specific study using the data set of the NCVS, it is necessary to recognize the role of the NCS to date in the study of repeat victimization. Some of the earliest pioneering studies of repeat victimization were based upon the NCVS or its predecessors. These include the work of Hindelang et al. (1978), in which they develop the lifestyle theory of criminal victimization, as well as the work of Albert Reiss (1980), Steven Fienberg (1980) and James Nelson (1980).

More recent use of the NCVS data set (since 1992, the National Crime Survey [NCS] has been known as the National Crime Victimization Survey [NCVS], to reflect its redesign), has promoted the understanding of repeat victimization and set the scene for the current project. Brian Wiersema recently constructed a three-year housing unit panel from different years of NCS data, which Richard Titus (1997) showed produced clusterings of repeated burglary around address segments. This data structure is one of the proposed staging points for the accelerated longitudinal design, and hence it is again important to document its existence as a means of demonstrating feasibility.

There are several ways of studying events over a long time period. The accelerated longitudinal design is one such way. In the study of victim careers, the design should have several advantages. NCS data could be utilized to construct an accelerated longitudinal study of victim careers. The accelerated longitudinal design provides a way of constructing a longitudinal study using data drawn from a shorter period of time. Repeated measures over a few years are taken, using cohorts of different starting ages. The results are then combined to generate a single life course. The most comprehensive and compelling arguments for the use of the longitudinal research design are those developed by Farrington et al. (1986) and Tonry et al. (1991). The advantages are:

- The longitudinal survey can provide information on key features of victim careers, most notably, age of onset and/or whether the concept of onset is relevant for explaining: different types of crime, age of cessation of victimization (the parallel here is with termination of an offender's career), and the length of a victimization career (and, indeed, whether or not the concept is truly relevant).
- Only a longitudinal survey can provide information on phenomena such as the cumulative prevalence of victimization after a certain age.
- Only a longitudinal survey can provide information on sequential patterns of victimization careers such as escalation in seriousness or "specialization" (whether a victim is prone to a particular type of crime).
- A longitudinal survey is needed to investigate continuity and stability over time. For example, the relative rankings of individuals in the frequency and seriousness of victimization, or the absolute value of victimization frequency or seriousness, may be consistent over time.
- A longitudinal survey facilitates the study of developmental sequences (what precedes victimization?), and can throw light on different manifestations of the same underlying construct (e.g., victim precipitation) at different ages.
- A distinctive use of the longitudinal survey is to investigate how well later events can be predicted from earlier ones.
- Longitudinal surveys are needed in situations where aggregate trends differ from individual trends. For example, do some repeat victims peak and decline in their victimization at different

rates compared to others along the age-crime victimization curve?

- Perhaps the greatest advantage of the longitudinal study is its ability to evaluate the same person at different points in time, and hence to permit within-individual analyses of individual change. The cross-sectional study only allows the analysis of variation between individuals, whereas the longitudinal survey allows both. Unfortunately, this has limited application in an accelerated longitudinal design, and this point is discussed further below.
- Longitudinal surveys are superior to cross-sectional ones in establishing an order of events. They can demonstrate causal effects by showing that changes in one factor are followed by changes in another, or in demonstrating the effects of a specific event.

The advantages of the acceleration aspect combined with a longitudinal design are primarily to disentangle three types of problems that are encountered in longitudinal and cross-sectional research. These are: (1) cohort; (2) period; and (3) aging effects. They are defined as follows:

*Cohort effects* follow from membership in one cohort rather than another; for example, people born at the peak of a baby boom might suffer more intense competition for resources at all ages and in all periods.

*Period effects* refer to influences specific to a particular historical period; for example, a period of high unemployment...

*Aging effects* refer to changes that occur with age; for example, aging leads to the physical deterioration of members of all cohorts across all periods [Tonry et al., 1991:29-30],

The significance of these concepts is that "cross sectional data confound aging and cohort effects, while longitudinal data confound aging and period effects" (Tonry et al., 1991:30). When the other practical aspects are added, the list of advantages of the accelerated longitudinal design include the following elements:

- The design is capable of disentangling aging, cohort and period effects.
- An accelerated design is quicker to conduct. Data collection periods are shorter, results are obtained sooner and have greater

current relevance, and researchers do not necessarily have to devote many years of their life to a single project (some longitudinal studies do take a lifetime, or more).

- Using the existing NCS data set would be extremely cheap compared to initiating a new survey of victims. There is no requirement for extra data collection. It should also add value to the existing NCS data set.
- Problems of long-term panel attrition are minimized (loss of subjects from refusal, tracing difficulties, etc.). The specifics of this issue are discussed further below.
- The influence of repeated testing of the same subjects is minimized (cumulative testing effects, whereby subjects learn about the survey and begin to adapt their responses for various reasons).

The design would technically be cross-sequential as opposed to a cohort-sequential or time-sequential. But in keeping with the fashion of Bell (1953), we continue with the phrase "accelerated longitudinal design."

The principal limitation of the accelerated longitudinal design over the longitudinal design noted by Tonry et al., (1991:31) is that "within-individual developmental sequences are tracked over shorter periods." An accelerated longitudinal study using NCS data would not be able to monitor actual individuals through their lifetimes. Instead, it would involve constructing what amounts to "synthetic" individuals, from a number of individuals with similar characteristics but of different ages. Any one individual is only interviewed in the NCS for a maximum of three and a half years.

The other main limitation of accelerated longitudinal research designs compared to a single cohort survey is that it is harder to draw conclusions relating to onset and termination as well as phenomena such as cumulative prevalence. This is a general limitation rather than one inherent to the design proposed here. It is possible that once the methodology of the accelerated survey is further established, future NCS rotations could include some retrospective questions to all respondents to elicit information relating to these areas.

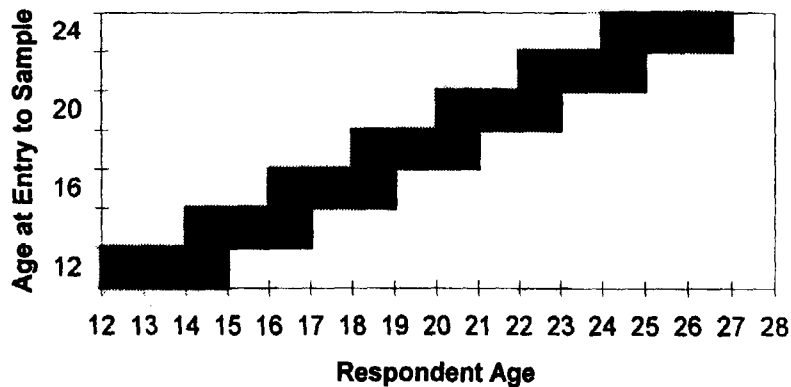
A common significant limitation of the design is that small sample sizes are common due to the high costs of data collection. This limitation does not apply here due to the massive NCS sample size and the absence of any primary data collection costs. In addition, we propose that sample sizes could be boosted by combining cases from sequential rotations of the NCS, as detailed below. A single individual



cannot be traced throughout his or her lifetime. What exists are approximations based on similar characteristics — a form of synthetic population. However, as noted above, the accelerated design is also the only way of disentangling age, cohort and period effects that would be encountered in tracing a single individual throughout his or her life, and so there is a trade-off of design benefits and limitations.

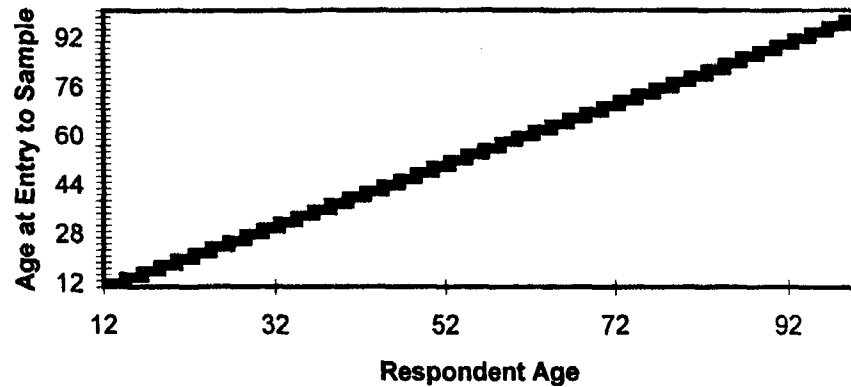
The NCS includes respondents aged from 12 onward. It would be possible to take three-year sets of respondents from one NCS rotation with a one year overlap between them, which are then linked together by the overlapping year's data. Starting at age 12, this would mean partitioning the sample into a three-year age group. To illustrate one specific overlap, imagine the set of 12- to 15-year-olds and the set of 14- to 17-year-olds interviewed in the NCS. The two sets would be linked by the overlapping year to make an accelerated 12-to-17-year-old data set. This is illustrated in Figure 1 for the section of the sample covering the age range 12 to 27.

**Figure 1: The NCS Accelerated Longitudinal Design of Victim Careers ~ Example of Matching Age Cohorts for Ages 12 to 27**



The same structure as Figure 1 is shown in Figure 2, but this time from age 12 to age 96. In both figures, age of entry to the NCS sample is shown on the vertical axis.

**Figure 2: The NCVS Accelerated Longitudinal Design: Matching Across Cohorts Aged 12 to 100**



As with all longitudinal surveys, the NCS embodies attrition problems (see Biderman and Cantor, 1984; Biderman et al., 1982; Biderman and Lynch 1981). One of the authors undertook some preliminary analysis of the 1994 NCVS as part of her ongoing multi-level modeling work using NCVS data. It was found that 33% (3,127 out of 9,556 cases) of newly introduced housing units appeared in all three interviewing periods between January 1994 and June 1995 — half the period covered by the survey for a single rotation. However, the sample size could be boosted by using seven full NCS rotations, taking all households who participated in the survey for a three-year period.

One of the authors has recently constructed such a data set that warrants further specific description. It is possible to take six years of NCS data, for the period 1989 to 1992, where the data set is consistent. This would avoid any problems encountered by incorporating the 1992 redesigned survey. However, the exclusion of more recent data would not be problematic since we would be aiming to develop a longitudinal study and not a cross-sectional snapshot of what is currently occurring. From the six years, data would be taken from the seven rotations where the same household was present in the sample for three years. Other cases would be discarded from the main data set. This would leave six cases per household on the data file (six interviews over the three-year period). A single file can then be constructed that uses the household rather than the interview as the

case level. Table 2 below shows the panel and rotation combinations that can be used to construct the data set. The presentation format of the table is similar to that in the NCVS codebooks, with "p" and "r" representing "panels" and "rotations" respectively. For example, p1r1 is sample panel 1 of rotation 1, and p2r1 is panel 2 of rotation 1. Panel-rotation combinations to be excluded from the data set are shown as empty cells in the table.

**Table 2: Extracting Seven Three-Year Rotations from Six Years of NCS Data (1986-1992) to Provide Sample for Development of Accelerated Longitudinal Design**

(Panel)	Rotation						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
JUL 1986	p1r1						
JAN 1987	p2r1	p1r2					
JUL 1987	p3r1	p2r2	p1r3				
JAN 1988	p4r1	p3r2	p2r3	p1r4			
JUL 1988	p5r1	p4r2	p3r3	p2r4	p1r5		
JAN 1989	p6r1	p5r2	p4r3	p3r4	p2r5	p1r6	
JUL 1989		p6r2	p5r3	p4r4	p3r5	p2r6	p1r1
JAN 1990			p6r3	p5r4	p4r5	p3r6	p2r1
JUL 1990				p6r4	p5r5	p4r6	p3r1
JAN 1991					p6r5	p5r6	p4r1
JUL 1991						p6r6	p5r1
JAN 1992							p6r1

From the household-level data, person-level data can be constructed. Information relating to several people may exist for each household. To the person-level data set, incident data could be added from the incident data file to produce a file that includes victimization information at the person level, through the use of a series of filter or screener variables, as well as non-victim information. Where an individual was not present for interview in a household for all six interviews, imputation could be used to complete cases missing one or two interviews. A range of imputation possibilities now exists that minimize the problems introduced by missing data.

Sampling biases inherent in the NCS would remain in any design that was constructed. In particular, sample bias would be created by the unequal probabilities of the presence of housing units (see Lee et al., 1986; Kish and Frankel, 1974).

## DISCUSSION

From the British tradition in which three of the authors became criminologists, the non-use of the accelerated longitudinal attributes of NCS seems terribly wasteful. The British Crime Survey is wholly cross-sectional, and frustrates attempts to examine the persistence of victimization hazard. While the account above is partial and largely superficial, it has been fleshed out by the authors and is practicable. Not to make the most of unique data expensively and painstakingly gathered seems a form of conspicuous criminological consumption that one would only find in the U.S.



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