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Like taking candy: why does repeat victimization occur?

by Graham Farrell, Coretta Phillips and Ken Pease

An analysis of different types of crimes give some explanations as to why such crimes are repeated. Repeated crimes examined include domestic violence, racial attacks, child sexual abuse, fights, burglary, car theft, shop theft, credit card fraud, and robbery. Common factors show these crimes are repeated because the first offense is not made known to someone in authority, risk of other offenses being detected are low due to victim response, criminal methods used are specific to individual victims, and there is a high probability that there will be other offenders.

Research into the extent and policy implications of repeat victimization has outpaced understanding of why it occurs. This paper argues that repeating a crime against the same victim can be seen as a rational choice on the part of the offender. Specific crime types are addressed in turn, from the more obvious repeat crimes such as domestic violence, racial attacks, and child abuse, to the less obvious such as car crime and burglary. Advantages to the offender of repeat offending against the same target are advanced. Reasons for repeat victimization are sought in terms of risk heterogeneity predating a first offence, and state-dependence, whereby a first offence makes a subsequent victimization more likely. A speculative typology of crime types inviting repetition of one or other kind is presented, and suggestions for further research advanced.

That repeat victimization contributes substantially to crime counts has come to be recognized over the last two decades (see Johnson et al. 1973; Zeigenhagen 1976; Sparks et al. 1977; Hindelang et al. 1978; Feinberg 1980; Reiss 1980; Gottfredson 1984). The scope for prevention which repeat victimization affords has been the focus of more recent attention (for reviews see Farrell 1992, 1994; Pease 1993, 1994; Farrell and Pease 1993). This work suggests that preventing repeat victimization would prevent a large proportion of all crime. Scarce resources may be more efficiently allocated given some predictability of crime at the level of the individual victim.

Little attention has so far been devoted to the reasons why offenders repeatedly target the same victim. In 1981, the late Richard Sparks offered a general victim-oriented typology of reasons why repeat victimization occurs. The Sparks paper stands alone as a serious and prescient attempt to understand the dynamics of repeat victimization. The present paper considers offender-decision factors which may influence the probability of revictimization and is intended to complement the work of Sparks. For many crime types it emerges that the extent of, and variations in, levels of repeat victimization, are those that would be expected to be the work of a reasoning offender. An underpinning for repeat victimization is sought in theories of rational choice and routine activity. Crime types will be considered in turn. This is prefaced by a brief outline of the underpinning theories. This paper was written not because its reasoning is profound, but because of the almost total absence of consideration in the literature of the attractions of offending repeatedly against the same target. The plausibility of offenders repeatedly offending against the same target has received surprisingly short shrift from leading analysts in the field. Nelson (1980), referring to the phenomenon as contagion, contended that 'The simple contagion model has little intuitive appeal as an underlying explanation of multiple victimization' (p. 875). Since the negative binomial model he used could not distinguish between contagion and prior differences in transition probabilities between victimizations, this terse dismissal effectively closed the door on consideration of the possibility that victimization itself increases the likelihood of further victimization. Sparks (1981) is similarly dismissive. He wrote:

For example, perhaps a burglar breaks into a house or store and finds many things worth stealing and few precautions against theft. He tells other burglars about this or plans to go back himself, thus increasing the probability of second or subsequent burglaries. Perhaps a man who has been assaulted may become paranoid and belligerent, take lessons in self-defence and so on, thereby increasing his probability of being assaulted in the future. These examples are pretty far-fetched, and not many more suggest themselves (p. 767).

Repeat offending has a voluminous literature. The body of work on repeat victimization is growing. The links between repeat offending and repeat victimization have scarcely begun to be forged. In particular, the possibility that victimization is contagious has been dismissed where it has been seriously discussed.

Theories of Routine Activity and Rational Choice

In 1979, Cohen and Felson postulated that a crime occurs upon the convergence of three elements: (1) a motivated offender, (2) a suitable victim, and (3) the absence of a capable guardian. They sought to account for crime-rate movements in terms of social and physical changes influencing the number of interactions in which the three
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elements were all present. For example, decreasing supervision of young people means more situations from which capable guardians are absent. The widespread ownership of small and desirable things to steal increases the number of suitable victims. While initially dealing with violent offending, the Cohen and Felson approach proved readily generalizable to acquisitive crime.

In line with their emphasis upon the mundane and the routine in criminogenesis, their seminal article was entitled ‘Social Change and Crime Rate Trends: A Routine Activities Approach’. Their theory has strong links with lifestyle theories of victimization whereby risk of victimization is affected by exposure factors (see e.g. Hindelang et al. 1978), thereby explaining why able-bodied young men who frequent pubs and clubs have higher rates of assault by strangers than do more physically vulnerable people.

In their 1986 book The Reasoning Criminal, Cornish and Clarke developed rational choice theory. Drawing on works from economics, law, sociology, psychology, and criminology, its contributors show how offender decisions are often characterized by at least limited rationality. For example, Bennett (1986) suggests that opiate use is often a conscious decision by users, and that addicts can make rational decisions about how much drug they use according to circumstances. Marcus Felson contributed a brief chapter to the book, which tied together routine activity and rational choice theories. It is rational for offenders to choose to target properties where they can see highly portable TV and video equipment (suitable targets), and where there is no sign of occupancy (less guardianship), since this increases the chance of a high reward, and decreases the level of risk.

The rapprochement of theories of routine activity and rational choice has recently been taken further by the production of a second book of readings (Clarke and Felson 1993). In brief, the link is that sound judgments of victim suitability and guardian proximity defines a reasoned choice. In so far as these factors are neglected, offending cannot be deemed rational. Routine activities theory thus supplies, in broad terms, the criteria by which an offence may be judged rational. In what follows, an offender’s motivation to commit crime is assumed.

Types of Repeated Crime

A person or place may be victimized by the same offender, or by different offenders. In so far as a victim has enduring characteristics which make risk of further victimization high, repeat victimization by different (rational) offenders is likely. This will be referred to as the risk heterogeneity component of repeat victimization. This provides a general background of variation in risk against which the more interesting issue of victimization-induced, or state-dependent risk may be considered. In what follows, both heterogeneity and state-dependency will be considered, with the emphasis on the latter. This emphasis derives from the fact that such variation has been less often considered and is more contentious. With the weight of criminological evidence, no one is likely to challenge the existence of risk heterogeneity in contributing to levels of repeat victimization. In the context of revictimization presumed to be state-dependent, the basic question concerns reasons for the choice of the same perpetrators offending more than once against the same target in preference to other targets. We will consider the sense in which an offender repeatedly victimizing the same target may be said to be acting rationally, in that the repeated offence required less effort, and had fewer risks and more advantages than the available alternatives (see Clarke 1992 for the typology of crime prevention approaches that informed this way of considering the issue).

Repeated domestic violence

Victimization by partner violence is often frequent and chronic (e.g. Dobash and Dobash 1979; Genn 1988; Hanmer 1990, 1991; Sheptycki 1993; Sherman and Berk 1984; Sherman et al. 1991a, 1991b, 1992; Sherman 1992). Repeated violence (at least during the lifetime of a relationship) is the work of the same perpetrator. Likewise, there is only one possible victim. Why is partner violence repeated rather than new targets sought? This is almost a silly question, since the choice of other targets means that the offence is no longer partner abuse. The question determining repetition is merely whether the only possible victim is suitable, and whether a capable guardian exists. The prevalence of chronic domestic violence is eloquent testimony of how rare capable guardianship is inside victims’ homes.

As for effort, the perpetrator of partner violence requires less than the perpetrator of almost any other offence. He has access to the place of the offence. There is no other location to which a perpetrator’s entry is subject to fewer restrictions than his own home, the site of most partner violence. The need to expend effort in preventing the victim from escaping is slight, primarily because the obvious place to which to escape, the home, is the place where the offence takes place. The reason why the refuge movement has developed as it has was to provide somewhere to which escape is possible. Given the initial allocation of men of varying degrees of aggressiveness to home, and given the poverty of restraints on the expression of their violence in the privacy of the home, factors of risk heterogeneity would themselves generate substantial levels of repeat victimization.
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As for state-dependent repeats, necessary effort becomes less as the number of repetitions increases, in that the victim realizes she is physically overpowered and is less likely to fight back as the offence recurs. Risks to the perpetrator of partner violence are essentially risks of a capable guardian appearing. These are minimal in the home. A point which will recur in discussion of other offence types is that a first victimization establishes the likelihood of capable guardianship. If during the first attack the neighbours do not intervene, if the police are not called, if the victim’s brothers do not come round to exact retribution, the perceived risks are lower on subsequent victimizations. As for rewards, analyses of partner assault stress the importance of assertions of power. If the victim leaves after the first offence, she was not a suitable victim. The assertion of power did not work. The rewards (of a cowed and fearful partner) are more certain the more often the offence recurs.

In summary, obstacles to the repetition of partner assault are lower than to its first occurrence. Against that, it may be that seeing the consequences of violence will serve to demotivate some offenders. Except for that possibility, effort and risks decline, and rewards may increase with the repetition of the offence. In the violent relationship, the offender learns that he can offend with relative impunity. Once this is established, the fact that the victim and offender (typically) cohabit means that when the offender is motivated, the victim is usually 'available', and there is little chance of intervention from elsewhere.

What about 'domestic' violence between estranged or separated people? Men return to the location from which they might have been forced to move, or track down a woman to her new home. The volume of repeated calls to the police where 'he’s back again' and 'he’s trying to get in the house' is considerable. This situation has been the focus of recent efforts at prevention (Lloyd et al. 1994). These prevention efforts made clear to the writers the low levels of effective intervention by capable guardians. However, it is certainly more effort to assault an ex-partner when her home has to be entered first. As for rewards, if the disruption of a normal life for the ex-partner is the payoff, repetition is essential. Thus repetition can occur with relative impunity, and may be essential to the 'reward' of disrupting the victim’s new life. This may offset the extra effort in travelling to and entering the victim’s home. It may also be that the behaviour involves some repetition compulsion of actions which served the offender’s interests during cohabitation.

Exactly similar dynamics apply to elder abuse within the home, and to repeated violence in nursing homes or long-stay hospitals or prisons. Offending by criminal neglect, either in relation to humans or in causing unnecessary suffering to animals, offers an interesting comparison. Here it is continuing inaction which is culpable. Offending must continue over time for its consequences to become so apparent as to activate a response. Presumably the effort of neglect is less than of action, the risks are minimal until neglect is gross (since the capable guardianship of regulatory bodies will not come into play earlier), and the rewards of other activities outweigh those of fulfilling duties of care. Whether continued inaction can be properly regarded as repeated offending is a matter of taste. If it is, the same explanatory framework can plausibly be applied.(1)

Repeated racial attacks

Racial attacks are treated next since, along with partner violence, they are now commonly recognized as repeated crimes. Ethnic composition of an area determines levels of repeats via risk heterogeneity. The arithmetic of multiple victimization by racial attacks is particularly interesting. When a majority substantially outnumber a minority, only a small proportion of the majority population has to offend for the victims to experience repeated incidents. In a group of 11 people, 10 of ethnic group A and one of ethnic group B, if all 11 people commit one racial attack against someone from the other ethnic group, each person in ethnic group A has a 10 per cent chance of experiencing one racial crime. The person in ethnic group B experiences ten crimes. Individual victimization risk thus differs by a factor of 100 between the groups. The frequency of interaction between the motivated offenders and suitable victims in the absence of capable guardians, and variations in the levels of each, determine the risk differentials. Victims of racial attack are more likely to be repeatedly victimized by unrelated incidents. As well as being the focus of attention by a group of 'known' offenders, they may be the target of offenders whom they do not know, when in an area they do not normally frequent or if offenders they do not know are passing through their neighbourhood.

Racial attacks have been referred to as ongoing or 'processual' crimes (see e.g. Bowling 1993). They can take the form of harassment, 'wearing down' the victim(s) through incidents which may appear minor when viewed in isolation. Thus a single racial insult may seem trivial, but its repeated occurrence transforms the experience into a much more damaging form of psychological victimization.

In racial attacks, victims are a subset of people defined by ethnicity. Since any member of the victimized racial group is equally despised, in the nature of racism, those closest will be as suitable as victims as those further away. They may be more suitable in so far as part of the offender’s motivation is to get them to move away. A first
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victimization may establish where a victim lives or works or shops, thereby diminishing the effort necessary to repeat the offence. There is no reason for preferring less accessible victims over those already victimized, and possibly some for preferring to attack the same victims. It is clear that the perpetrators of racial attacks often live in close proximity to the victims (see Sampson and Phillips 1992). If the offenders know where the victims live they can victimize them almost at will. The opportunity cost of failing to find an intended victim is low if the offender did not travel far in the search. A special case of this is racial bullying in school, where little effort need be expended to locate a suitable victim. (Indeed in many ways bullying generally conforms to the analysis of racial attacks presented here).

As with domestic violence, attackers may feel that they need not fear intervention by capable guardians. Success in avoiding such risks at first victimization instils confidence that the risks are low in repeat attacks. Confidence that capable guardians will not intervene is likely to be well founded. Reasons include language problems between victims and the police; the apparent lack of seriousness of some of the crimes considered individually; the belief of the victimized group that its members will not be taken seriously by the police (a belief which may also be held by the perpetrators) leading incidents to remain unreported.

As for the rewards of racial attacks, there are presumably either intrinsic to the expression of racist sentiment, or instrumental—for instance in inducing members of the victimized group to move away. In either case, repeated victimization of those living closest to perpetrators will be most frequent, either because of their availability, or because they are the people the attacker wants to drive away.

In summary, repeat racial victimization is understandable in terms of the sheer arithmetic of minorities. Repeat offences by the same perpetrator involve little effort, less risk, and at least as much reward as offences against new victims.

Repeated physical and sexual abuse of children

A distinction must be made between abuse by strangers and abuse by adults known to the child. Estimates of the proportion of child sexual abuse perpetrated by strangers varies from 14 per cent to 20 per cent (see Bagley 1989; Kelly et al. 1991; Martin 1992). Clearly the effort required to be in a position where abuse is possible is considerable, and much greater for strangers. The characteristic of typical abuse of this kind is that it has a motivated offender masquerading as a capable guardian. For incest victims in particular, the masquerade can go on for many years (see for example Finkelhor 1984).

The effort required to repeat a crime of this kind is clearly less than for a first victimization, since a precedent has been established for what is tolerated by the child as normal (particularly if that is what he or she is told by the adult), and the ‘grooming’ which precedes an offence need be less elaborate in advance of its repetition. The diminution in effort necessary to commit a first and a subsequent offence will be particularly great in offenders who started the process as strangers or as little known to the victim, for whom risk clearly diminishes dramatically after a successful offence. If the child does not speak out on the first occasion, he or she will be unlikely to do so at least in the short term thereafter. The perpetrator may make the abuse into ‘a secret’ between himself and the child, thereby reserving an opportunity for the act to be repeated. A child wishing to report incidents may not find anyone to confide in. Even if someone is found, the child may not be believed. Abused children may be reluctant to report due to a sense of allegiance to a parent or other whom they do not want to see punished. For instance, incest offences often come to light only when an older child, who has been abused for years, finds that a younger brother or sister is being offended against.

In general, the motivated offending adult has, after a first offence, a suitable victim almost ‘on tap’, with a low probability of a capable guardian being either alerted or taking action if alerted. Self-evidently, the rewards of this kind of behaviour do not diminish quickly enough over time to offset the reductions in risk and effort which characterizes repeat offending.

‘Looking for a fight’

Some public places at some times are much more liable to be the scene of attack. Some going there may do so with the willingness to be involved in fights. Others may be engaged in business whose conduct carries the occupational risk of violence. Such people include nurses in the Accident and Emergency Departments of hospitals, publicans, and drug dealers or receivers of stolen goods in certain public houses. A third group comprises naive newcomers, who happen upon dangerous public places by accident.

How does effort, risk, and reward for the offender change as experience in public places accrues? Taking the example of the public house, as a ‘hard’ reputation grows, a pub’s clientele changes to contain larger proportions of those prepared to be involved in violence (or, on the margins, to accept the risk of violence for the reward of being seen to be ‘hard’ enough to drink in pubs like that).
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The naive newcomers find somewhere else to go, and even the receivers prefer somewhere quieter in which to conduct business. In such pubs, willing adversaries are plentiful. The risk of a capable guardian appearing is low. Because violence is expected, there is less chance of people calling the police, or of intervention by other customers and bar staff. The rewards of repeat victimization for the perpetrator are that, while violence against an unknown opponent has an uncertain outcome, violence against someone previously defeated has not. Those victims/losers of fights who continue to visit the pub after a first beating stand increased risks of victimization. Those whose occupation requires their persistence in dangerous places (like casualty nurses, publicans, and police officers) share those risks.

Repeated burglary

It is perhaps easy to see the relative ease and lack of risk attending repetitions of offences against the person. Similar arguments could have been advanced in relation to conflict between gangs, between neighbours, soccer violence, and witness intimidation. Sexual offences as diverse as domestic rape and obscene telephone calls have in common reduced effort and risk in their repetition. It may be more difficult to contemplate the advantages of repeated property offending against the same target. However, a case can be advanced that repetitions involve less effort, lower risk, and equivalent reward when compared to first victimizations.

Buildings are located in places which vary in their crime risks. Thus, even if burglars did not tend to return to the scene of previous crimes, some buildings would be repeatedly burgled, by dint of risk heterogeneity. In so far as burglaries confer additional risks in their wake, there would be a greater tendency for repeat victimization to occur. 'Burglary' is a generic term for several different types of crime. Burglary by artifice is inherently different from break-and-entering (B&E), the more normal image of a 'burglary'. The events are united only by the offender's entry as a trespasser. Burglary can be part of an ongoing dispute, for example where cohabitees have split and property is taken to which a disputant claimed a right. Opportunistic break-and-enter, professional break-and-enter, and burglary by artifice, of residential and commercial properties respectively (and of different sub-categories of commercial properties) may each have distinctive probabilities and time courses of repeat victimization. Regarding the extent of repeated burglary of different types, and the likelihood of a swift repeat crime, readers are referred to Forrester et al. (1988, 1990), Polvi et al. (1990, 1991), Tilley (1993a), Shapland et al. (1991), Skogan (1990), Mayhew et al. (1993:49), and Shapland (1994).

Polvi et al. (1991) offer three reasons why repeat burglary is likely, and likely to be soon, after victimization:

1. The same offenders return, perhaps upon recognition of neglected crime opportunities, or the anticipated reinstatement of goods.

2. The first offenders tell others of the house and what it still offers. The others then burgle it.

3. Features of the house are such as to mark it out as a compellingly attractive target to those tempted to burgle it, leading to repeat victimization linked only by the seductiveness of the target. (1991:414)

From this they conclude that

The first and second alternatives are difficult to distinguish (although we regard the second as not likely to be a frequent occurrence). The proportion of revictimizations of the third type will be high to the extent that dwellings vary in their seductiveness as targets. It is difficult to think of a city with less such variation than Saskatoon [the site of the study]. It may be that what is shown is the limiting case, where repeat victimization is as near exclusively of type (1) as is anywhere to be found. This makes it particularly important that the analysis should be repeated elsewhere, since the notion of area or dwelling characteristics as long-term determinants of risk of victimization stems from studies which neglect the phenomenon of repeat victimization. It is conceivable that while these characteristics determine a first victimization, it is more what is found inside which induces an offender to return. (1991:414)

In the vocabulary of the present article, hypotheses 1 and 2 of Polvi et al. concern state-dependency. A burglar walking down a street where he has never burgled before sees two kinds of house--the presumed suitable and the presumed unsuitable (by dint of occupancy, alarm, barking dog, and so on). He burgles one of the houses he presumes to be suitable, and is successful. Next time he walks down the street, he sees three kinds of house--the presumed unsuitable, the presumed suitable, and the known suitable. It would involve least effort to burgle the house known to be suitable. The burglar is aware of its layout. Factors which may cause the offender to return to the victimized house may include the ease of access and egress as much as the value of the property known to be there (see Maguire 1982). If the last burglary was very recent, it may be that the window or door through which entry was gained has not been properly secured, making the necessary effort minimal. The risks are also less, particularly if return is swift. There is known to be no sleeping Rottweiler on the bed, escape routes are known,
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and the neighbours did not intervene last time, so there is no reason for them to do so now. As for rewards, things may be taken to complement what was taken last time. In a recent pair of burglaries in one of our research areas, a television set was taken. A few days later, the remote control device for the television was taken! Goods may be taken which could not be carried the first time. Goods seen during a first burglary for which a market has now been established can be taken during a second, and so on. If a burglar has a regular receiver or set of receivers, this kind of pressure towards repeat burglary will be even greater.

Research by Van Althes (cited in Winkel 1991) who interviewed detained burglars, found that whilst two-thirds always return to the same neighbourhood to burgled, around a third return to the same properties. The reasons can be as basic as the burglar not having a car. One burglar explained 'If I can’t get it all that time, say I haven’t got a car or something, then I will go back in a week or something and get the rest' (Matthews and Trickey 1994).

Repeated car crime

Theft of cars is typically divided into taking without consent (which further divides into joyriding and taking cars as a temporary means of transport), and permanent theft (which subdivides into ringing cars for resale and taking cars to be stripped for parts). That gives four main categories of car crime with different underlying motivations, without even considering theft from and damage to vehicles. As with the different types of burglary, the probability of repeat victimization and the length of time to a repeat may differ in each case since the underlying reasons are different. Indeed, cars taken for ringing or stripping will not be available for repeat victimization at all, although owners replacing stolen cars with similar models may risk repeat victimization. In so far as the replacement cars are similar to those lost, they have similar attractions. Factors of ‘eligibility’ for revictimization are considered in Farrell and Pease (1993:20). The discussion below assumes the target to be available for revictimization.

Models of car are differentially attractive to the car thief (see Houghton 1991). If there are only a certain number of desirable cars in an area, they are likely to be repeatedly victimized by the same or different offenders. A slight change at Polvi et al.’s hypothesis (3) for burglary becomes: ‘Features of the car are such as to mark it out as a compellingly attractive target to those tempted to steal it, leading to repeat victimization linked only by the seductiveness of the target.’ The arithmetic which concentrates racial attacks on minorities and which was described earlier also serves to concentrate car crime on particular vehicles. A Sierra Cosworth parked in a sea of Rover Metros in a high-crime area is arithmetically ripe for repeat victimization. Other factors contributing to risk heterogeneity include:

(1) the area the owner lived in (perhaps influencing the supply of motivated offenders and levels of car ownership);

(2) the location the car was normally parked in (on the road, on the drive, in the garage, up a back alley) which influences its suitability and guardianship;

(3) surveillance of the car (either formal, e.g. being parked in a private car park with security, or informal, e.g. being overlooked by neighbours’ windows);

(4) the presence, visibility and effectiveness of a car alarm could have two effects–if visible, an initial deterrent or deflection effect (and certain types of alarm may have better reputations than others) and upon activation a further effect of increasing surveillance and guardianship;

(5) the presence, visibility, and effectiveness of other target-hardening measures (such as one or more of a hand-brake lock, a clutch-lock, a steering wheel lock, an ‘immobiliser’, car door deadlocks);

(6) the frequency with which the owner leaves the car unlocked.

A car has a ‘lifestyle’ which reflects that of its owners. Identical cars will have differential probabilities of both victimization and repeat victimization if they have different ‘lifestyles’. If a car is taken to the city centre each day it may be more susceptible to victimization than its twin which resides in a quiet residential neighbourhood in a garage with the alarm and steering wheel lock on. Whilst linked to factor 2 (location when parked) other lifestyle factors come into play at different times of the day. The type and extent of surveillance differs between car parks (see Tilley 1993b, for example) and between other areas where people park at work: the average daily length of stay of a car in a car park will influence the probability of it being victimized, as will the time of day at which it is parked in different locations.

The familiar steep time course of repeat victimization is found for car crime, both theft/taking and theft from cars (Anderson et al. 1994). The same curve is evident when attention is restricted to cars taken only twice. Why would a car be taken more than once in a short time? If a car is desirable and is conveniently located, why would an offender not choose it? The alternative would be to wander the area looking for an equally attractive vehicle, and inviting suspicion. Keys may be available to the previously stolen car. If not, the ignition has been activated illegally at least once before. The process can be completed even
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more quickly than it was the first time, thus diminishing risk. The rewards (pleasurable and convenient travel) are arguably undiminished. Presumably revictimization is limited by the actions of some owners in installing security measures, or because the car comes to seem boring or unfashionable, or is less fun to drive because of diminished performance after being driven hard.

Repeated shop theft

Because of the near universality of theft suffered by most types of shop, it makes more sense to talk of rates of shop theft then the presence or absence of revictimization. Considering risk heterogeneity, certain types of shop, and shops with certain internal layouts are more prone to shop theft. The nature, availability, size, concealability, and value of a shop’s goods are clearly critical, as are the number of customers, the presence of security guards, security cameras, store detectives, and property tagging.

As to state dependent risks, individual shop thieves may establish a market for a certain kind of goods from a particular store. Repeats will then be inevitable because of market forces operating on the thief. For more occasional thieves, the first experience of theft will confirm or disform presumptions about the effort and risks required to steal from a particular store. As with burglary, stores presumed to be suitable victims have that status verified as a result of a successful first theft. One of the good things for the repeated shop thief is that the victim never runs out of things to steal, i.e. rewards do not diminish. This is in contrast to the situation of the repeated burglary victim.

Repeated credit card fraud

When a cheque book or credit card has been stolen, it makes sense for the offender to use the card repeatedly until it features on lists of suspect cards. The same victim can therefore be revictimized in separate fraudulent transactions using a stolen card several times within a short period. There is an extremely low likelihood of a capable guardian (the shop assistant for example) recognizing a crime as taking place. The effort of a second fraudulent transaction with the same plastic is miniscule in comparison to getting in a position (by acquiring the plastic) to commit the first. The rewards (until the retailer is notified and within the limits of the spending style) are undiminished, and the effort to commit the crime may be less as a result of the staff being more willing to give up money having been given guidance to do so after the first robbery.

The reasons for repeated street robbery of the same people seems less obvious. An offender could choose anyone, so why choose the same victim? To some extent this is speculation—the only evidence that repeated street robbery occurs is based on Hough’s (1986) analysis of the British Crime Survey, which showed robbery incidence to be greater in relation to prevalence than for other types of violent crime. Area, social, and demographic characteristics may again be important in determining the number of offenders. Other factors such as income may be determinants in some way. Someone who is robbed on the street may not have the option of travelling by car to reduce the chances of repeated attacks, but may look unlikely to resist and may be well dressed. As with racial attacks and the theft of exceptionally desirable cars, the sheer arithmetic of rare targets in high-crime areas will generate repeat victimization. Robbery merges into the payment to crime organizations of protection money, which is by definition a repeated event, a kind of insurance against harm, which the insurer would otherwise inflict.

From the robber’s point of view, each successful robbery diminishes the perceived risks of the next. Effort and reward may or may not diminish.

Cross-crime-type repeat victimization

The link between experiencing one type of crime and another has been demonstrated elsewhere, mainly showing that the same people are much more likely to experience both personal and property crime (Hindelang et al. 1978; Reiss 1980; Feinberg 1980; Farrell 1992; Matthews and Trickey 1994). Ellingworth (1994) introduces motorvehicle crime into the relationship using British Crime Survey evidence. The main explanation forwarded has been via lifestyle theory—that going out more often leaves a person more prone to personal crime through increased interaction with other people, and that while they are out, their property has a lower level of capable guardianship.
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Anderson et al. (1994) speculated that car crime might be more likely to follow in the wake of a burglary if car keys were taken, though the recorded crime data from West Yorkshire police did not support the speculation. Conversely, receipts for goods left in a car may give an indication of the potential reward of goods in the house, were it to be burgled. It must be acknowledged that the dynamics of cross-type victimization are almost completely obscure at the time of writing, and they are particularly important, as Sparks (1981) notes, in determining the contributions of state-dependency and risk heterogeneity to crime incidence.

Heterogeneity, state-dependency, repeat victimization, and future research

It has been established that repeat victimization occurs disproportionately in high crime areas (Trickett et al. 1992). Farrell et al. (1994) suggest that repeat victimization may play a pivotal role in explaining the relationship between individual and area crime rates using a routine activities approach, a point first considered by Bottoms (1994). They developed a model to provide a simple analogue of rates of repeated victimization. High rates of repeat victimization could be the effect of coincident increases in the contributing criminogenic variables—motivated offenders, suitable victims and absence of capable guardians. An area with double the number of suitable victims, double the number of motivated offenders and half the number of capable guardians will experience much more than a twofold increase in crime incidence. In this approach, rates of repeat victimization could be a product of area and individual risk factors that precede the crime, i.e. repeats are a function of the heterogeneity of pre-crime risk factors. The more complex model they developed introduces a revised likelihood of victimization based upon a first experience. This is the state-dependent approach. More colourfully, victimization increases the victimization probability of a proportion of those victims, who then become 'supervictims'.

The modelling process remains unsatisfactory. The number of occasions on which a repeat could occur is a crucial variable, which must be large. The level assigned to it is pretty arbitrary. What is the maximum number of robberies that one could do per time unit? The choice of a high maximum would preclude the need for any change of victimization probabilities after victimization, and make the simpler model acceptable. The writers intend to persist with the modelling enterprise, using a Bayesian approach.

The writers believe strongly that, for many offence types and in many cases, victimization changes the probability of future victimization. While speculative, many of the accounts above suggest that the rational offender is bound to reconsider his future offending in the light of his experience during the first offence against a particular target. However, the balance between heterogeneity and state-dependence of risks as determinants of repeat victimization must be addressed empirically. Work imminent is the analysis of admitted offences by the same and different offenders. Offences taken into consideration, and offences cleared through prison visits will be considered. To the extent to which repeat offences against the same target feature frequently in the same offender’s admissions, and infrequently in the admissions of different offenders, state-dependence of victimization risk is implied. To the extent to which repeats are spread across offenders’ admissions, heterogeneity of risk is implied. Our speculation is that the state-dependence factor will be high when offences have the following characteristics.

(1) The first offence does not come to light in a disaggregated form, as in offences like embezzlement, many fraud types such as insider trading, in pollution and shop theft.

(2) The effort and/or risk of a second offence is clarified by victim response to a first offence. This would include most sexual and violent offences, and blackmail.

(3) The criminal method requires a degree of skill which is to some degree specific to individual victims. Some burglary, and much robbery and car crime would fall into this category. Repeats will incorporate lessons learned on a first victimization.

(4) Levels of co-offending are typically high, as in racial attacks, soccer violence, and ‘casual’ robbery, including ‘taxing’. The reason for this speculation is that information gained at a prior victimization may be used by any of the co-offenders, either alone, in the same group or in different groups, in offending further against the same target.

In contrast, state-dependent repeats are expected to be rare when the first act destroys a condition of the victim necessary for the offence’s recurrence. For example burglary by artifice will make the victim aware of the offender’s appearance and suspicious of his associate’s similar approach.

Other empirical work which must be urgently undertaken involves offender accounts of their repeated offending against the same target. Why, in their view, did the repeat events occur? In this way, we can clarify how state-dependence of victimization risks works, and explore the tentative typology advanced above.
Like taking candy: why does repeat victimization occur?

Conclusion

There need be little extraordinary in accounting for repeat victimization. Most of the explanations forwarded here are commonplace. For a large number of the types of crime committed, the explanation for repeats becomes obvious as the nature and circumstances of the crime are described.

The rational choice theory of offender decision making seems to apply particularly well to repeat victimization. Offences against the same target by the same offender are based on the experiences of the previous victimization, and perception of known risk and rewards. This rational choice is based upon the motivated offender’s greater knowledge of the victim’s suitability and the likelihood of the absence of capable guardians. For repeat crimes against the same targets committed by different offenders, the ‘rational’ decision factors influencing target selection (perceived victim suitability, perceived likelihood of capable guardianship) will be those which prompted previous offenders to target the same victim. As the title of the article suggests, the same or different offenders may easily take candy from a baby, until the baby runs out of candy, grows out of wanting candy, or until a candy guardian arrives.

REFERENCES


Like taking candy: why does repeat victimization occur?


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(1)The consideration of neglect as repeated offending was stimulated by Braithwaite's (1993) review of the nursing home industry and its regulation.

(2)Most of the Polvi et al. three hypotheses will undoubtedly prove applicable to other types of crime in addition to residential break-and-entering.

(3)Empirical evidence may make possible some analysis based on Bayesian probability theory, whereby the likelihood of repeat victimization is influenced by revised expectations taken from experiences of previous victimization of the same target (e.g. expectations revised downwards decrease probability of repeat victimization, expectations revised upwards increase probability etc.).