How victim-oriented is policing?

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How Victim-Oriented is Policing?

Graham Farrell

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Introduction
What follows proposes a means by which to improve and accelerate police work so that it has an emphasis upon the rights and needs of victims. Using a term such as victim-oriented policing sounds like a proposal to compete with community policing or problem-oriented policing, but it is not. As proposed here, it would be entirely compatible with such perspectives and their related activities, but would emphasize the fact that the concerns of victims should underpin a great deal of police work — more so than they do at present. It would be a complement to, rather than a substitute for, such approaches to policing.

The main proposal of this paper is that a simple means to promote victim-oriented policing (the term is broadly defined later) may be via an emphasis upon the policing and prevention of repeat victimization. For present purposes, repeat victimization is defined as the repeated criminal victimization of a person or place, or a target however defined. It is now well known that a small proportion of victims experience a significant proportion of all crime because they experience repeat victimization (see e.g. Skogan 1999; Friedman and Tucker 1997; Davis, Taylor and Titus 1997; Pease 1998). Hence, to cut a long story short, preventing repeat victimization holds the potential to prevent crime. It helps victims in a practical and fundamental manner: Ezzat Fattah suggests that “Healing, recovery, redress, and prevention of future victimization are the primary objectives of most crime victims” (Fattah 1997: 270).

The focus here is upon the implications for police work with victims. While the phenomenon of repeat victimization presents a potentially wide range of implications for research and practice, for different areas of the criminal justice system, the work of community agencies and individuals, these areas are not the focus here.

The Structure and Scope of this Paper
This paper has four empirical sections that are drawn together into a final section of discussion and conclusions. Prior to these, the next section outlines why repeat victimization seems to be proving an attractive focus for police crime prevention efforts. The four empirical sections are fragments of a bigger picture. It is hoped that
they are illustrative of a whole that is greater than the sum of their parts. Each section is an abbreviation of work in which the writer has recently been involved.

Here is an overview of the four short studies: The first gives a glimpse of rates of repeat victimization around the world, showing that it is widespread. It uses Canada, France, Australia, and the United States as examples. The attention of the second study is the UK, since that country has a national police policy based on preventing repeat victimization. It illustrates that police practice can change, and over just a few years. Note that this is far from saying that things are being done perfectly in the UK – they are not. The third study is also at a national level but shifts away from repeat victimization. It looks at victim assistance units in police departments across the United States. This gives one, albeit imperfect, indicator of how victim-oriented are that nation’s police departments. The fourth study concentrates upon a single crime type – stalking – in a single police department. It is intended to demonstrate that much work remains in relation to particular types of crime and victimization at the local level.

Following the four studies, the discussion that ensues is partly an attempt to paint the larger picture of which the four fragments are part. The conclusion suggests the potential for developing victim-oriented policing.

**Why the Police Like Preventing Repeat Victimization**

Agencies are typically driven by self-interest. One of the beauties of preventing repeat victimization as a policing strategy is that it can be good for the police as well as for victims. As such, the policing of repeat victimization holds the potential to act as a spearhead that could progress the more general rights and needs of victims in policing.

The reasons that prevent repeat victimization should be liked by police officers can be split into things liked by police managers and things liked by patrol officers. For police managers, preventing repeat victimization as a policing strategy should be attractive because:

- It is a crime prevention activity, and hence pursuant to the most fundamental of police mandates

- Targeting repeat victimization is an efficient means of allocating scarce police resources
• Police managers can utilize repeat victimization as a performance indicator (Tilley 1995)

• Targeting repeat victimization naturally allocates resources to high crime areas and to the most victimized targets.

For beat officers, line officers, or patrol officers however they are termed, preventing repeat victimization may be attractive because:

• Police officers are empowered to do something tangible and constructive to help crime victims.

• By their efforts to prevent and encourage the prevention of repeat victimization, police officers can receive positive feedback from victims. This is still often a welcome surprise.

• Preventing repeat victimization can sometimes – but not always – use off-the-shelf prevention tactics rather than requiring inventive problem-solving.

• Preventing repeat victimization also fits into a problem-solving approach to preventing crime

• Preventing repeat victimization can be combined with and used to enhance offender detection efforts. Police officers like detecting offenders.

• Offenders committing repeat victimization may be the more serious and prolific offenders. Police officers like detecting them even more.

There are many reasons why preventing repeat victimization may be beneficial for victims as well as for victim service organizations (VSOs). For the most part, other than the symbiotic relationship that the work may foster between police and VSOs, these are not covered here for reasons of brevity. Similarly, the now growing body of research showing the extent of repeat victimization and its more general attractions as a crime prevention policy will not be covered here. The next section details the four empirical studies relating to victims and policing.

Four Empirical Case Studies

The next sections are four case studies that are intended to shed light upon repeat victimization, victims and policing from different angles.
**Case Study 1: Repeat Victimization around the World**

The International Crime Victimization Survey (ICVS) is the only methodologically standardized survey examining victimization rates in different countries. At the time of this work, the most recent publicly available ICVS data relates to 1996. All countries studied to date with methodological adequacy have demonstrated high rates of repeat victimization across a broad array of crime types. This is not to say that rates and patterns of crime are uniform. They are not, and crime varies massively between as well as within countries and crime types.

The crime rate measure used here is termed the rate of repeat victimization. It is the percentage of crimes that are repeats against the same targets over a one year period, not including the first crime of the year against a given target. If that were included, the resultant rates would be far higher.

The rates of repeat victimization for Canada, France, Australia and the United States are shown as Figures 1 to 4. The data for Australia relates to 1992 since data for 1996 were not available. Close to half of all sexual incidents reported to the survey were repeats against women who had already experienced a sexual incident that year (the sexual incidents question was asked only of women). In general, rates of repeat victimization as reported to the survey seem to be higher for personal crimes than for property crimes. However, since property crimes are sometimes easier to tackle, much of the work to prevent repeat victimization to date has been focused upon property crimes (including commercial burglary and other commercial and business crimes which are not covered here but often exhibit high rates of repeat victimization).

**Figure 1: Repeat Victimization in Canada**

![Bar chart showing the percentage of repeats for different crimes in Canada]
Figure 2: Repeat Victimization in France

Figure 3: Repeat Victimization in Australia
Figure 4: Repeat Victimization in United States

It is important to note that these rates of repeat victimization are underestimates. This is because some people who are very frequently victimized will forget some crimes, but it is also because of the survey method. The survey covers only a one-year period. This means that crimes against the same target that occurred before or after that year that year are excluded. The effect of this time-window is to make more crimes appear to be ‘single’ than is really the case. In addition, in high crime areas where prevention efforts should take place, rates of repeat victimization are typically far higher than the national average (Trickett et al. 1992). This means that these survey-based national averages are underestimates of the true extent of repeat victimization, particularly that in high crime areas.

Rates for these four countries were presented by means of illustration rather than because they were unusual. A more lengthy study showing rates for eleven industrialized countries suggests that, in general, they have fairly similar rates (Farrell and Bouloukos 2001). That study also contains greater discussion of the method, findings, and implications.

So what? The main reason for showing these data is to suggest to an international audience that repeat victimization is widespread, and likely to be even more so than demonstrated by the limited number of studies conducted to date. The important implication is that policing in many, perhaps most, countries might begin to develop crime control strategies that target repeat victimization. Although developing countries have not yet been examined, it might be expected that rates of repeat victimization would be high even if there is greater variation in the prevalence of different types of
crime. Consequently, if the policing of repeat victimization can serve as a spearhead for a more victim-oriented policing, then the result may be a general improvement in the service to victims.

**Case Study 2: Policing Repeat Victimization in the U.K.**

As of 2000, it seems reasonable to state that the UK has the most widely implemented police efforts to prevent repeat victimization of any country. Based upon a program of action research developed since the early 1980’s (see Laycock 2001 for the full story), repeat victimization was introduced into national policing policy in the mid-1990s. It was introduced gradually to allow the police time to develop policies and responses as well as the information technologies with which to track repeat victimization. The manner in which this was done varied between police departments. The data in this section are gleaned from a preliminary process evaluation published in full elsewhere (Farrell et al. 2000).

As of 2000, all UK police forces had a repeat victimization policy against burglary (Figure 5). Around two-thirds had policies to tackle repeat violent crimes: in Figure 5 this is the sum of the second and fourth columns since violent crime is also part of ‘all local crime’. Around a quarter had a policy to prevent repeat criminal damage, and around one in five had a policy aimed at preventing the recurrence of all types of local crime.

**Figure 5: Police Policy on Repeat Victimization in United Kingdom**

![Figure 5: Police Policy on Repeat Victimization in United Kingdom](image)

The survey of police forces looked at how they defined and measured repeat victimization. The question often arises as to how repeat victimization should be defined. For example, should repeat car crimes be identified as repeats linked to the owner, to the vehicle, to the household, and to just one of them or all three? What if
the car changed ownership? The guidance from the government justice ministry, the Home Office, was that the definition should be whatever is most appropriate for the circumstances to prevent crime – hence if the car crime occurred near the household and there was something that could be changed to prevent it (clear out the garage and start using it; start parking on the driveway) then this is what mattered. If it was different owners, but there was something about the car that facilitated the crimes, such as a broken door lock, then this is what should be addressed. Ken Pease long ago proposed that the philosophy to tackle repeat victimization should be prevention by all locally appropriate means.

While police forces across the UK have their own operational definitions of repeat victimization, for the most part they are similar (since it is a fairly straightforward notion). Police forces also differ in the manner in which they collect and analyze information relating to repeat victimization, since while many use computerized identification, many also use manual identification (sometimes as a supplement in order to reduce the imperfections of tracing repeats on computers). Many police forces improve their information by simple measures – by having officers ask victims about previous crime experiences.

With respect to the response adopted, most police in the UK have developed a form of graded or tiered response. This means that victims who have been victimized more times receive a higher level of response since their likelihood of further victimization is even higher (see Anderson et al. 1995). The graded response is a mechanism to further improve resource allocation.

At present, the ranges of tactics that UK police have adopted to tackle repeat victimization varies greatly in quantity and quality. Whereas some police forces reported using two dozen different tactics, some reported only a handful. More worryingly, the types of tactics reported did not always seem relevant to the issue. Sometimes it appeared as if the police were identifying any general crime prevention activities as relevant to preventing repeat victimization when they were clearly inappropriate – an example of such being neighborhood watch schemes (as opposed to focused cocoon watches which would be more appropriate if based around victims and immediate neighbors).

In short, there is quite a lot of ongoing police activity relating to preventing repeat victimization in the UK. However, its quality and impact remain largely unknown. The survey for the preliminary process evaluation suggested that widespread implementation has taken place and that repeat victimization is now part of national policing practice. However, there has been no assessment of the impact of these efforts and, with the exception of the evaluations of a few projects, there is scant documented
knowledge of what is happening on the ground: What are police officers doing on a
day-to-day basis? It is theoretically possible that the policies could be no more than
paper policies with poor or sparse practices. More optimistically, there could be an
array of excellent practices and lessons for elsewhere. It would be a lasting shame if
the opportunity were not taken to follow through to assess this crucial aspect of the
program and to take remedial measures if things are not going as well as they might.
Such assessment could also determine if victims are truly benefiting from the work.
Part of an impact evaluation could tease out whether, in what ways and to what
extent, there have been beneficial effects upon victim-police relations, and in what
ways the police are finding it a fruitful policy (or not). Some effort to measure
improvements in procedural justice – to determine if victims feel they have been
fairly treated by the procedures of the formal justice system, in this case by the police –
is an exciting possibility. In addition to measuring the key indicator of the amount
of victimization prevented, this latter point may be the key indicator that victim adva-
cates would like to be made available.

**Case Study 3: Victim Assistance in Police Departments in the United States**

This third case study steps away from repeat victimization and looks at victim assis-
tance by the police in a single country, the US. The data is taken from the Law
Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics (LEMAS) survey, a national
survey of police overseen by Brian Reaves of the Bureau of Justice Statistics. The
data presented here relates to all large police departments in the country, that is,departments with over 100 sworn officers (the relevant questions were not asked of
smaller departments).

Some indicator of the extent to which policing is victim-oriented is given by
the level of victim assistance supplied by police departments. An imperfect indicator
of this is the number of victim assistance units and personnel specially designated to
victim assistance. While the information presented here clearly does not give an indi-
cator of the quality of service, it may provide an indirect overview of the state of
affairs. This analysis was undertaken for the present study. The analysis relates to
1997 since that is the most recently available data at the time of writing (and in addition,
these questions were not asked on the 1999 LEMAS survey).

Key findings for large local police departments in the US are as follows:

- Less than half of police departments had any personnel working on victim
  assistance. One third (33%) have a victim assistance unit and 16% have
  personnel assigned to victim assistance (Figure 6).
• One in five (20%) of all large local police departments in the United States reported that not only did they do not have any officers assigned to work with victims but they also did not have any policy relating to victims or victim assistance (Figure 6). There was little variation in these findings by type of police department (sheriffs, county or municipal police).

Figure 6: Types of Victims Assistance in Large Local US Police Departments (n=651)

Among police departments where nobody had victim assistance duties, some reported having some form of policy for victims. This was reported by 31% of all large local police departments in the country. From the LEMAS survey, it is impossible to determine the nature of this ‘policy’ for each department. However, the absence of any personnel working on it may suggest that the survey allows this response as an option that lets many departments ignore the fact that they do little or nothing in relation to victim assistance.

The above could suggest that most large police departments do very little work to assist victims, other than to record that a crime has occurred. However, clearly other police activities such as making arrests and recovering property can assist victims, though it seems more likely that formal victim assistance means these activities are brought to the attention of the victim. Further, it is also possible that some departments practice a range of victim assistance activities without having any formal victim assistance unit or personnel and without a policy.

The 651 large police departments across the United States reported having a total of 631 personnel assigned to Victim Assistance Units (Table 1). Of these, only 20% (130) were sworn police officers. Hence victim assistance work is 80% civilianized. This may suggest it is not viewed as ‘real’ police work. The 130 police officers who
do work in victim assistance units (most likely on a part-time basis), are from police departments which reported having 327,301 sworn officers between them. This suggests that:

**Table 1: Number of Police Officers per Victim Assistance Unit (VAU):**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Officers per Victim Assistance Unit</th>
<th>Total Police Departments per</th>
<th>Total Police Officers in VAUs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>44</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>70</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>48</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10+</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>651</td>
<td>631</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The nature of the data on victim assistance in US police departments does not lend itself to the development of firm policy conclusions. The limitations of the information collected by the survey could mean that this small amount of information is misleading. If it is not, and if the current interpretation is correct, the implication is that few police resources are allocated to victim assistance. In the literature relating to victim assistance and the victims movement, the US seems to pride itself on its progressive policies and practices. It is quite possible that this is justifiable when compared to other countries or in relation to other areas of the criminal justice system. However, the strong initial suggestion from the information available from this national survey is that US policing is not particularly oriented towards victims.

The above analysis should not be misinterpreted as a statement that more victim assistance units are necessarily better. Quality is the key. It is also far from clear that it should be VAOs that deliver crime prevention efforts to prevent repeat victimization: they may well not be the most appropriate location for this work. If those victim assistance units that do exist do not benefit victims, then more is not better. On the assumption that victim assistance units work to the benefit of victims, then more
would be better if quality is maintained. However, the work of victim assistance units varies widely. In the writer’s experience, for some police personnel, the notion of victim assistance involves no more than sending a letter to a selection of victims who are deemed most needy. Further in-depth investigation into the working practices of victim assistance units would be required to take this discussion any further.

To incorporate the prevention of repeat victimization into the practices of Victim Assistance Units, or to allow them to monitor its general application across the police department, would require significant changes from current practices. It is not necessarily the case that VAUs are the most appropriate place in which to locate this crime prevention activity. However, due to their focus upon victims it may be a natural starting place, particularly if it can be combined with the work of crime prevention units and the VAUs are allowed a role relating to monitoring and quality assurance. This may also allow work to prevent repeat victimization to be incorporated into a broader array of activities relating to victims and policing.

**Case Study 4: Stalking in a Large City**

This last case study zooms in on a single city. It switches to examining the issue of victims and policing in relation to a single crime type – stalking. Stalking is a crime that has been largely neglected by research and practice until relatively recently, or, where it has been recognized, has been subsumed under the general rubric of work relating to domestic violence. There are now a range of increasingly sophisticated studies examining the extent and nature of stalking, including Budd and Mattinson (2000); Tjaden and Thomas (1998); and the edited volume of Frieze et al. (2000). The specifics, extent and severity of stalking are taken as ‘given’ here for brevity’s sake, in order to turn to the issue of how stalking is addressed in policing.

The author recently directed a survey of police officers in one large city with respect to aspects of their knowledge of stalking (see Farrell, Weisburd and Wyckoff 2000). The aim was to gather a snapshot of police officers’ knowledge about policy and practices relating to stalking. The survey found wide variation in how police officers defined an incident that was potentially stalking. It was apparent that many officers could find it difficult to distinguish between stalking, domestic violence, and harassment. Police officers were asked if their police department had a written policy on stalking. Of almost 300 patrol officers asked, 18% replied that the department did not have a stalking policy, 34% replied that it did, and 48% replied that they did not know (Figure 7). Some confusion is apparent. Officers were also asked how well their police department is at responding to stalking. Over two-thirds of officers replied that the police response to stalking was either ‘poor’ or only ‘fair’, and only 2% thought that it was excellent (Figure 8). This responses may be an honest reflection of both the confusion and lack of knowledge apparent elsewhere in the survey.
Figure 7: Does Your Police Department Have a Written Policy on Stalking?

- Yes: 34%
- No: 18%
- Don't Know: 48%

Figure 8: How Effective is Your Police Department at Dealing with Stalking

- Excellent: 2%
- Good: 29%
- Fair: 46%
- Poor: 23%

The survey of police officers suggested a general need for police officer training on how to recognize and respond to stalking. This would be one step towards improving the response for victims, since officers may begin to recognize the crime.
However, while some general basic training might be needed, the appropriate strategic response might be more targeted. Stalking is the archetypal repeat crime, and a strategy aimed at preventing its repetition would seem appropriate.

This preliminary study of police in one city may have broader implications for police responses to stalking. It seems likely that victims of stalking are currently being neglected due to police officers’ ignorance of the crime itself as well as the appropriate response. This is not isolated to this single city or country, and so an approach targeting repeated stalking may be appropriate for more widespread development.

**Discussion and Conclusions**
Policing still has a long way to go until it can be said to adequately cater for the needs of crime victims. It is likely that insufficient incentive or drive is given to police officers simply through awareness training. Tangible police activities that are directly focused upon improving the situation of victims will prove a more effective means of furthering the needs of victims in policing. Preventing repeat victimization presents a potential spearhead for such activities. When a crime is reported, a portfolio of potential responses should be consulted, and a response developed and implemented that is appropriate to the specific crime. It may be logistically difficult to do this for every crime, but a graded response focused upon high-risk cases should put scare resources where they are most useful.

Four angles from which to view the relationship between policing and victims were presented in this paper. The first showed the extent of repeat victimization in an international context. Even with these conservative survey under-estimates, repeat victimization is widespread, and for all crime types that have been adequately studied to date. The second case study showed that efforts to prevent repeat victimization have been introduced at a national level in one country. It suggests a model, from which lessons can be gleaned, for elsewhere. It suggests that widespread change is possible! The third gave a quick national snapshot of victim assistance in police departments. It suggested it is severely lacking even in a country that prides itself on its relatively advanced response to victims. The fourth case study examined a specific crime type at the city level. It suggested that much work is needed at the local level to develop appropriate responses to stalking victimization, and that preventing repeated stalking might be an appropriate strategy.

While each of the case studies may make an individual contribution to knowledge, there was a purpose to placing them side-by-side in this paper. Together, they present part of a larger and multi-dimensional picture. That picture consists of a global picture within which there are many different countries. It consists of many different types of crime, for which there are some common elements apparent, particularly
with respect to their tendency to be repeated: repeat victimization. It was intended that studies of different geographical scope allowed our lens to zoom from international to national and then down to the local level. This reflects the fact that work in relation to victims and policing needs to take place at different levels. Theoretically, the most intense level of magnification would be a case study of a single crime, an individual police officer and crime victim. Putting the different levels side-by-side hopefully showed that, while grasping the big picture, there is a need to maintain the micro-level, which is where the work takes place. Although they may derive from the same strategy and portfolio of prevention techniques, police crime prevention efforts need to be tailored to specific crime types, to individual victims living and to different contexts and settings.

Towards Victim-Oriented Policing
So what would victim-oriented policing look like? In terms of a philosophy, policing would acknowledge that victims are core consumers. Crime prevention, as one of the key mandates set by Robert Peel when he began professional policing, has remained a key mandate for police everywhere. Hence preventing repeat victimization appropriately places the victim towards center stage in the police mission. That should promote aspects of procedural justice, ensuring that victims receive a positive and beneficial response in the wake of crime, via the police as society’s designated agents. The range of services offered by the police to victims should also include automatic, perhaps automated, notification with respect to various aspects of a case and its progress, and the whereabouts of ‘their’ offender. The increasing prevalence of e-mail may assist this process in some areas more than others. The approach should also include the routine provision of advice on how to obtain other services in the community, such as legal advice, advice on housing and welfare. At the local level, community policing could incorporate consultation with victims and, possibly, annual needs assessments. The police should also continue to find ways to share information and work with victim service organizations, particularly since VSOs may have skills and expertise that the police do not have. Victims would benefit from prompt property return procedures, perhaps from being involved in investigations to a greater extent, from being routinely informed about the availability of compensation and criminal justice legal advice or advocacy. Many if not all of these elements could be introduced as part of or alongside efforts to prevent repeat victimization. Efforts to prevent repeat victimization might be thought of as requiring a portfolio of crime-specific responses that can then be tailored to specific crimes. Since preventing repeat victimization should be in the interests of the police as well as victims, then it may serve as a practical foundation upon which to build.
Notes

1. This list draws heavily upon the second chapter of the report New Directions from the Field: Victims Rights and Services for the 21st Century by the U.S. Department of Justice, Office for Victims of Crime, 1998.

References


