Responding to the unequal distribution of crime

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INTRODUCTION

‘Social justice’ has recently become something of a political badge of honour, each political party claiming its principles as a core to their manifesto. Although this term can be qualified differently in different contexts, it remains an important public policy framing concept. Social justice is not just about the distribution of material goods. Freedom and well-being are just as important to equality and life chances. The experience of crime and the concern about crime have profound impacts on well-being and opportunities in life, and yet this has largely been overlooked by those who speak up for social justice. In a new report by ippr, we highlight that the most disadvantaged are not only more likely to be victims of crime, but that the impacts of crime perpetuate disadvantage.

There has been growing recognition that certain groups are unfairly subject to crime, young, black and women for example, and that criminal justice agencies often do not do enough for protection or to aid recovery. Victim needs have become much more prominent in the criminal justice system – funding for victim support grew from £12 million in 1997 to £30 million in 2005, a Victims Fund and Code of Practice for Victims of Crime were established and there have been campaigns to reduce violence against women and vulnerable groups. Indeed the current government has made a concerted effort to move away from the traditional image of the party having more concern for the offender, with talk of being ‘tough on crime: tough on the causes of crime’ (Blair, 2002), whilst talking up the consideration of those subject to crime. At the same time it is often presumed that a greater recognition of ‘victim rights’ will fuel retributive demands, which do little to counter re-offending. One answer to this is presented by the community justice movement (arguing for a criminal justice system that is more responsive, with a human face). This movement shows evidence that those who have experienced crime actually want justice, protection and help with recovery rather than vengeance. The current government has implemented a whole programme of measures to tackle crime in worst-off areas and to improve responsiveness to victims in the criminal justice system. However, ippr’s research shows the need to go further in viewing crime as a social justice issue, with a more systematic investigation of the impact of crime and the fear of crime, and strategies to minimise crime’s role in sustaining injustice.

UNEVEN DISTRIBUTION OF CRIME

There has been a substantial fall in crime since 1995, with a 44% drop in all crime between 1995 and 2004/05, domestic violence falling by 59% and the risk of being a victim down from 40% in 1995 to 24% in 2006. Yet victimisation and concern about crime still fall more heavily on disadvantaged groups. People on low incomes (less than £10,000) and those living in the most deprived neighbourhoods are much more likely to be mugged, burgled and feel ‘very unsafe’ walking...
Responding to the unequal distribution of crime

alone after dark, when compared to households on higher income (more than £30,000 a year) and those living in least deprived neighbourhoods (Figure 1). This seems to be largely due to the simple fact that affluence buys protection, as well as the fact that those on low income are more likely to live in areas of high crime (offenders tend to commit crime in close proximity to their area of residence).

As well as income and area inequality in the distribution of crime, certain ethnic groups are more likely to be victims of crime. Those of mixed ethnicity were most likely to experience and fear crime, and this is the fastest growing group in the population (Figure 2). We couldn’t draw conclusions from the research available as to why this might be, but the worrying aspect of ethnic inequality in terms of the impact of crime is that the type of crime most experienced by this group – ‘hate crime’ – has profound impacts within the victim’s family, wider community and society cohesion generally.

Age and gender are also defining factors in the risk of victimisation, with young men being at greatest risk (Figure 3 page 32). Although lifestyle choices, such as going out at night, will be contributing to this risk, young people also face additional risk from peer bullying. Furthermore, the chance of repeat victimisation is also considerably higher for the young (aged 10–16 years), which can have sustaining and complex impacts on development. Women are less at risk from all crime than men, and this risk does decline with age, however they are at greater risk of domestic violence and repeat victimisation from violent crime. Knowing the offender and suffering repeat victimisation can have a much greater impact as it is harder to avoid repetition of the crime, harder to report the crime for fear of reprisal and harder to recover if the offender is still around as a reminder.

**IMPACTS OF CRIME**

It is clear that not only does crime occur more frequently for disadvantaged groups in society, but that different types of crime have different impacts – sexual or violent assault will have a greater impact than say property theft. And crimes can be particularly traumatic

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**Figure 1** Inequality in concern and risk of victimisation, by income and area

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Source: Author’s calculations, based on British Crime Survey, various years.

Note:
- Poor neighbourhood compares households in ‘hand pressed’ or ‘struggling’ areas to households in ‘wealthy achiever’ or ‘thriving’ areas (ACORN definitions).
- Low Income compares households with incomes of less than £10,000 per year to households with incomes of more than £130,000 a year. Income data from 2004/05, area data from 2003/04. Concern about crime data by area is from 2002/03.
Responding to the unequal distribution of crime distribution of crime

Figure 2 Proportion ‘very worried’ about violence, by ethnic group

for the victim when they appear to be deliberately done to them, affecting their sense of identity, fear of repetition and loss of confidence. To illustrate, 20% of victims of wounding subsequently avoided certain places, compared to four per cent of all victims of crime. And we know the effects of ‘hate crime’ can be particularly damaging.

Those experiencing crime report long-term impacts on well-being (physical, psychological, social and financial well-being) and vulnerability for a considerable time after the offence (Figure 4 page 32). For example 40% of victims of serious physical assault suffer social and psychological effects 30 months after the offence.

The implications of this are clearly far reaching, with knock-on effects on other areas of life, beyond the immediate financial and physical damages. Loss of earnings, moving home and changing jobs as a direct result of victimisation are just some of the reported effects. For 52% of women who have been seriously sexually assaulted, this experience led to depression or other serious problems, and for one in 20 led to suicide. 64,000 women living in England and Wales today have attempted suicide as a result of sexual assault.

When the impacts of crime are calculated as costs (property damage, physical and emotional damage), they show an annual total that reaches half the annual budget of the NHS (£36.2 billion). This is not just a cost for individuals but for society as a whole. When we compare these impacts to the crime rates, we find that the costs of crime have not fallen at the same rate as the fall in crime rate. So it appears that perhaps crimes with less impact have been targeted, at the cost of more damaging crime. The reason for this could, arguably, be the influence of Sampson’s famous ‘broken window theory’ (Sampson, 1999) which showed that low level crime and signs of disorder (broken windows, abandoned cars) in a neighbourhood indicate a lack of social or organised order and control to potential offenders, thus encouraging more serious crime. The current programme of ‘crime and grime’ initiatives is testament to this approach – by having clean and visibly
Responding to the unequal distribution of crime

distribution of crime

**Figure 3** Risk of victimisation for violent crime, by age and gender

![Graph showing risk of victimisation for violent crime, by age and gender.](image)

- **Legend:**
  - Stranger
  - Acquaintance
  - Mugging
  - Theft from the person
  - Domestic

- **Source:** British Crime Survey 2003/04

- **Note:** The British Crime Survey does not provide victimisation rates for children and is not directly comparable with the Offending Crime and Justice Survey.

**Figure 4** Persistence of effects over time for serious physical assault

![Graph showing persistence of effects over time for serious physical assault.](image)

- **Legend:**
  - Any effect
  - Physical effects
  - Social effects
  - Psychological effects
  - Possible financial need
  - Financial loss

- **Source:** Shapland et al (1985): 99-100.
orderly neighbourhoods, social signals are sent that there is a strong collective presence to tackle crime at all levels. This in itself is a logical approach, and it has been shown that social norms and indicators are very effective in changing behaviour, but perhaps this has come at a cost to the bigger picture of inequality.

**COMPOUNDED BY DISADVANTAGE**

Not only are disadvantaged groups more likely to experience and have concern about crime, but the impact is amplified by disadvantage and repetition. The impacts of crime are not just the immediate financial, physical and emotional effects but can also have long-term, knock-on effects in other areas of the victim’s life, which are amplified by disadvantage. Figure 6 (page 34) shows that those living in the poorest households were nearly three times as likely to report a range of emotional effects following victimisation, such as depression, anxiety, panic and insomnia. The effects of, for example, moderately serious physical assault, can last for years (Shapland et al, 1985) and in our study 40% of victims were still suffering social and psychological effects 30 months after the offence. The spill over into other areas of a victim’s life can include a change in people’s attitudes (being more fearful, avoiding certain places) adversely affecting employment, wealth, housing, mental health and well-being. In one recent survey, 71% of victims reported making lifestyle changes as a result of their experience and 23% said they had started drinking, smoking or using drugs more often (Hodgson, 2005). Our research showed that across England and Wales as many as 49,000 people started to avoid certain places, 850,000 losing earnings, 180,000 moving home, and 32,000 changing job each year. These are not insignificant numbers and they may represent a significant underestimation of the real impact of crime.

There are many reasons why poverty and disadvantage will amplify the impacts of crime. Paying for insurance, being able to replace stolen goods, and spending on repairs to ensure safety, are all harder for those on lower incomes or with no assets, and may lead

**Figure 5** Reported direct impact of experiencing crime, by crime type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact</th>
<th>Theft of vehicle</th>
<th>Burglary (of dwelling)</th>
<th>Wounding (including sexual)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Changed job</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moved house or flat</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost earnings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoided certain places</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

0 5 10 15 20 25
Proportion of victims

Source: British Crime Survey 2002/03, IPPR analysis.
to greater debt trouble. Poor health is also associated with greater impact on victimisation. Fourteen per cent of victims of crime who said their health was ‘very good’ reported being ‘very much’ affected compared with 27% of those who said they were in ‘bad’ health and 41% of those who said they were in ‘very bad’ health. Lastly, where you live and your neighbours can make a huge difference to the impacts of crime on your life. For example, your ability to move away from crime is hindered if in social housing and you are at greater risk of crime when living alone (which may be due to adverse circumstances rather than free choice).

WITNESSING CRIME

Living in a high-crime area or being exposed to crime will have an impact on anyone, but children are most vulnerable in this respect. Exposure to violence or trauma before the age of five can alter the developing brain. Pre-school children who are exposed to domestic violence are at significantly higher risk of developing emotional, behavioural, speech and language problems. Maltreated children perform less well at school, having controlled for socio-economic background.

CONCERN ABOUT CRIME

Finally, it is not just the experience of victimisation that compounds impacts on disadvantage. The perceived risk of crime (what we tend to call ‘fear of crime’ or ‘concern about crime’) has financial and social consequences. It encourages people to take expensive security measures, discourages socialising, enjoying public spaces, and can prevent moving to jobs or areas, or other life decisions. This in turn will have knock-on effects on families, the local community and the wider economy.

IMPACTS OF CRIME ON PEOPLE’S TRUST AND CONNECTEDNESS – ‘SOCIAL CAPITAL’

Living in close proximity to, or being at higher risk of crime will have impacts on trust and social networks when there is a high worry about crime. There are two levels to this impact on ‘social capital’ (Halpern, 2005)
Responding to the unequal distribution of crime

distribution of crime

– people’s trust and networks, and abilities to co-operate with one another for mutual advantage. First, the damage to individuals, who become less trusting and sociable on a personal level, and second, undermines trust and co-operation across communities resulting in what social scientists call ‘neighbourhood effects’.

Social capital has been shown to have many benefits: facilitating good career opportunities through connections and networks, maintaining good health (less anxiety, better mental health and therefore general health) and for practical considerations (sharing childcare, looking after property etc) (Halpern, 2005; Sampson 1999; Fukuyama, 1999; Putnam, 2000). On the individual level our research showed that those who have a very high worry about crime were much more likely to be unemployed. At the neighbourhood level many have argued that concern about crime can actually be a unifying force (Skogan, 1990), forging associational bonds through participation in schemes such as Neighbourhood Watch. However, when we consider that offenders and victims predominately live in close proximity, neighbourhood trust and co-operation is negatively affected by the concern about crime in high crime areas (Fukuyama, 1999). Studies have shown that those in the most deprived areas are less likely to be trusting of their neighbours – one of the key measures of social capital.

The neighbourhood effects of crime resulting from high levels of the experience and concern about crime can contribute to tipping neighbourhoods into a spiral of decline, frustrating attempts at regeneration. A lack of collective efficacy, due to low neighbourhood trust and co-operation induced by a fear of one’s neighbours, so encourages further crime. Residents do not want to invest in an area that they have low social and economic investment in, due to this ‘pulling up the drawbridge effect of crime’ (ibid), and market driven investment will be deterred by high crime levels.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Although the current government recognises that crime falls heaviest on disadvantaged groups and concentrates greater resources in these areas, government and related agencies could work towards targeting the impacts of crime rather than crime rates per se – for example, by concentrating on the type of crime rather than overall crime – and by better supporting victims with services beyond financial compensation.

Possible solutions:

• Impact-based targets – those that focus on reducing the crime that most seriously impacts on people’s life chances, rather than the current quantity of crime target. This would focus resources in a socio-economically progressive way, and prioritise support for people’s practical and emotional needs, as well as demonstrating the value of crime reduction and victim support in achieving broader policy concerns for equity and well-being.

• Research priorities – crime surveys that focused on the types of services needed by victims and how these vary according to crime type, area and victim, could be a useful resource for victim support services.

• Resource allocation – focusing public spending on priority groups according to impact of crime.

• Improved support services – for those worse affected by crime. The Rebuilding Lives: Supporting Victims green paper (Home Office, 2005) shows moves in this direction, but more work could be done to look at the types of services needed by different groups.

• Addressing the support gap – evidence in ippr’s report supports the government’s proposal to move from low-level financial compensation for relatively minor crimes, to quicker, tailored and practical help. As the research shows, financial needs are greatest immediately after the crime but at the moment payments are very often delayed and do not come in regular instalments.
CONCLUSION

These suggestions are just some ways to move towards a greater recognition and handling of the unequal distribution of crime and its negative impacts. The criminal justice system and victim support charities do not have sole responsibility for reducing crime. A change in mindset is required by all, but they can certainly take the lead. The current Home Office targets are partly distributive, with aims to ‘reduce crime by 15%, and further in high crime areas, by 2007/8’ (HM Treasury 2004:19) and (what was) the ODPM target to ‘narrow the gap in health, education, crime, worklessness, housing and liveability outcomes between the most deprived areas and the rest of England, with measurable improvement by 2010’ (Ibid:17). The IPPR report suggests that impact-based targeting of resources, which focus on practicalities behind the effects of crime, would go further towards encouraging services to tackle the very harmful categories of crime and so support the vulnerable groups.

Ultimately, tackling the impacts of crime should be seen as an essential pillar in the welfare support system. Without really getting to the roots of the impacts of crime all other support for moving out of deprivation will be undermined. Now that social justice has become part of the rhetoric for all the main political parties, the concept is being qualified and refined. And during this process it will be important for crime to be considered as an underlying driver behind deprivation and social mobility.

References