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On Being Unemployed and Being a Victim of Crime

The results of the first Australian National Crime Victims Survey concerning the socio-economic status of victims of crime in Australia are discussed. While the findings on occupational status and household income are somewhat equivocal, the data show a strikingly higher rate of criminal victimization among the unemployed for a number of types of crime. The unemployed, spending a large proportion of their lives in public rather than private space, may paradoxically be more likely to be both victimized by criminals and victimized by the police.

While there is considerable dispute in the criminological literature over whether crime rates go up historically during periods of high unemployment, there is little dispute that at any one point of time unemployed people are more likely than people with a job to commit traditional criminal offences such as homicide, rape, robbery, assault, theft, and breaking and entering.¹

There is a long tradition of radical criminology which advances the argument that capitalism creates crime by the brutalization of the proletariat and the unemployed, and that the bourgeoisie then act to protect themselves from the crime of the embittered proletariat by engaging police forces and building prisons. In more recent times it has been suggested that the community action programs of the United States War on Poverty of the 1960s were motivated by the fear of middle class America at rising crime perpetrated by the largely black unemployed. Implicit in so much of this speculation is the assumption that it is the middle class who have most to fear from the crime of the proletariat. Such an assumption can be traced back to the first radical criminologist, Frederick Engels, in his work on crime and the condition of the working class in England:

There is therefore no cause for surprise if the workers, treated as brutes, actually become such; or if they maintain their conscious-

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ness of manhood only by cherishing the most glowing hatred, the most unbroken inward rebellion against the bourgeoisie in power.²

In the present paper the results of the National Crime Victims Survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 1975 are used to establish whether it is in fact the middle class who have most to fear from criminal victimization, and, more specifically, to compare the extent to which the unemployed become victims of crime with the victimization rate for people with jobs.

METHOD

The Sample

Dwellings for inclusion in the stratified multi-stage area sample were selected from all parts of Australia excluding the Northern Territory, rural regions, and locations with a population of less than 500 people. Of 10,500 dwelling sites originally selected, 9,200 contained effective households, of which 8,414 provided data for the survey. These households contained 18,694 persons aged 15 years and over, each of whom supplied some data. The remarkable household response rate of 91.5% was only possible, of course, in a survey which has the legal authority of the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

The Crimes

Interview data were gathered on all victimizations during the previous 12 months for ten types of crime:

- *Break and enter*: breaking and entering a dwelling and then committing or intending to commit a crime in that dwelling.
- *Motor vehicle theft*: stealing or illegally using a motor vehicle or using a motor vehicle without authorization.
- *Robbery with violence*: stealing which involves the threat or use of actual violence or force to a person or property.
- *Theft*: stealing without threatening or using violence or force to any person or property.
- *Fraud, forgery, false pretences*: all types of fraud, forgery, uttering (circulating any fraudulent document or money), falsification of records, false pretences and all offences involving false claims, deception, trickery, cheating or breaches of trust.
- *Peeping*: only females were asked if they had been spied upon by a 'peeping Tom'.
- *Indecent exposure*: only females were asked if a male had 'indecently exposed' himself in front of them.

- *Rape and attempted rape*: all rape, attempted rape and assault with intent to rape. Only females were asked about rape victimization.
- *Nuisance calls*: threats, abuses, indecent calls and other nuisance calls by telephone.
- *Assault*: unlawful attack by one person on another for the purpose of inflicting bodily injury.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Standard Error

With a sample of such magnitude, problems of statistical inference loom less large than with most social science data. Nevertheless, with less common types of crime marginals can become quite small. As a matter of policy the Bureau of Statistics will not make available raw data on the number of actual victimizations of each type within the sample. Instead we are provided with estimates weighted from the sample for the number of victimizations nationally. There can be no doubt that the Bureau's weighted national estimate is a superior statistic to the raw figure. The weighting procedure is such that raw figures from different geographical areas will be multiplied by different weights depending on the proportion of the population of the nation living in that area, and the response rate.

While the weighting procedure provides a superior statistic it does create some complexity for the social scientist who might be interested in calculating a conventional test of statistical significance. Tests of significance have not been calculated for each comparison made in this paper. However, Table 1 provides the standard errors for survey estimates of the number of victimizations of each type.³

It can be seen from Table 1 that the survey estimate of the number of breaking and entering victimizations occurring in Australia during 1975 was 146,500. The approximate percentage standard error on this estimate is 8.5. This means that the standard error is 8.5% of 146,500, i.e., 12,500. Discounting non-sampling errors, there are therefore about two chances in three that the number of breaking and enterings in Australia during 1975 fell between 134,000 and 159,000; and about 19 chances in 20 that it fell between 121,500 and 171,500.

Occupation and Crime Victimization

Occupation is the most widely used index of social class in the sociological literature. In Table 2 the ANU code for classifying occupations⁴ has been applied to each respondent in the survey who was in the labour

force at the time of interview. The first row of that table shows that the highest rates of break and enter victimization are found for the two highest status occupational groups—professional and managerial. It is possible that this simply reflects the fact that professional and managerial respondents were more likely to be designated as heads of households by the interviewers and therefore more likely to become eligible for victimization for breaking and entering. Working wives and working young people living with their parents are both less likely to be professionals or managers, and less likely to be designated as heads of households.

TABLE 1

APPROXIMATE STANDARD ERROR PER CENT FOR SURVEY ESTIMATES OF NUMBERS OF VICTIMIZATIONS IN AUSTRALIA FOR 1975, AND NUMBERS OF NON-REPORTED VICTIMIZATIONS IN AUSTRALIA FOR 1975 BY TYPE OF CRIME

	<i>Estimated Number of Victimizations</i>	<i>Standard Error Per Cent</i>	<i>Estimated Number of Non-Reported Victimizations</i>	<i>Standard Error Per Cent</i>
Assault	191,500	13.6	131,200	16.3
Robbery with violence	14,200	18.6	5,100	27.9
Rape, attempted rape	7,800	26.5	4,500	33.3
Break and enter	146,500	8.5	42,400	19.3
Motor vehicle theft	62,700	9.8	10,700	20.6
Fraud, forgery, false pretences	214,100	8.6	163,000	9.9
Theft	609,900	3.4	382,600	4.2
Nuisance calls	1,612,594	11.3	232,500*	23.6

* The estimated number of non-reported victimizations relates only to the *most recent* instance of a nuisance call.

TABLE 2
VICTIMIZATION RATES PER 100,000 POPULATION 15 YEARS AND OVER BY OCCUPATION

	<i>Pro- fessionals</i>	<i>Managers, Farmers, Shop Pro- prietors</i>	<i>Clerical</i>	<i>Craftsmen</i>	<i>Sales, operators, transport workers</i>	<i>Miners, labourers, service workers</i>
Break and enter	3,693.5	5,481.3	2,117.0	2,935.5	2,733.7	2,167.8
Motor vehicle theft	1,292.3	1,190.0	1,090.3	1,992.9	989.3	1,090.6
Robbery with violence	301.3	511.4	459.9	261.8	120.6	161.5
Theft	13,285.3	18,033.7	13,145.0	13,294.3	8,764.5	10,399.0
Fraud, forgery, false pretences	3,422.6	10,588.2	4,498.1	4,989.7	3,037.1	2,435.4
Peeping	1,677.2	1,704.2	6,194.8	685.9	1,125.1	2,648.1
Indecent exposure	1,452.4	631.2	371.9	200.3	218.8	669.5
Rape, attempted rape	175.3	78.7	267.6	151.2	57.5	174.4
Nuisance calls	42,468.0	50,786.8	39,923.2	23,849.5	22,367.1	25,395.4
Assault	3,197.7	1,682.2	3,138.1	5,736.7	2,671.5	5,942.0

Motor vehicle theft shows little variation by occupation, with craftsmen (skilled workers) having the highest rate of victimization. Standard error on the robbery with violence estimates is high, so extreme caution must be exercised in comparing these rates, but managerial and clerical workers are more likely than others to report robbery victimizations. Theft victimization does show a clear pattern by occupational status. The two lowest status groups, 'sales, operators, transport workers' and 'miners, labourers and service workers' (almost entirely unskilled workers) are the groups with clearly the lowest victimization rates for theft. Managers, farmers and shop proprietors are the group most likely to report being the victim of theft. The same pattern applies with fraud, forgery, false pretences victimization: managers have the highest rates and the two unskilled categories the lowest rates.

The over-representation of women in the clerical category explains the fact that it is clerical workers who report the highest victimization rates for peeping. It is professionals who show the highest rates for being victims of indecent exposure. Standard error on the rape estimates is too high to permit meaningful comparisons. Again it is the two highest status groups, professionals and managers, who are most likely to be victimized by nuisance calls, possibly because they have the highest levels of access to telephones.

For assault the highest level of victimization is reported by 'miners, labourers and service workers' and the second highest by craftsmen. This latter finding suggests that one possible way to summarize the results of Table 2 would be that while higher occupational status groups tend more often to be the victims of crimes against property, it may be the lowest occupational groups who are most often the victims of some crimes against the person. Before rushing to such a conclusion, however, we should explore the effects of another index of class position—household income.

Average Weekly Household Income and Victimization

The income of all members of the household from a wide range of sources over the previous twelve months was averaged to a weekly income according to a Bureau of Statistics formula. Included among the forms of income which are eligible to be counted as part of the household income are gross salary or wages, superannuation payments, worker's compensation, maintenance/alimony, rent (less expenses), child endowment, and all forms of pensions, government benefits, scholarships or student allowances.

The results in Table 3 suggest that the finding from the previous section that respondents in professional and managerial occupations are

more likely to be victims of breaking and entering probably is a consequence of the fact that 'household heads' are more likely to be in professional and managerial occupations than working wives and children. Table 3 shows that it is the households with the highest average weekly incomes which are least likely to be victims of breaking and entering. In contrast, these more affluent households are the most likely to be victims of vehicle theft, presumably because they own more cars. Standard error on the robbery with violence and rape estimates is really too large to be able to make anything of the relatively small differences among household income categories for these crimes.

TABLE 3

VICTIMIZATION RATES PER 100,000 POPULATION 15 YEARS AND OVER
BY GROSS WEEKLY INCOME OF HOUSEHOLD

	<\$80	\$80-\$139	\$140-\$199	\$200-\$259	\$260-\$339	>\$340
Break and enter	2,235.3	2,448.8	2,244.3	1,290.9	1,550.0	1,280.2
Motor vehicle theft	297.5	446.7	684.3	773.2	956.2	993.8
Robbery with violence	142.1	282.5	97.2	164.4	326.7	317.3
Theft	5,319.6	7,837.4	7,611.6	8,205.1	10,497.8	8,970.8
Fraud, forgery, false pretences	1,250.7	3,738.5	2,507.4	2,073.1	4,014.5	3,281.8
Peeping	2,038.1	715.0	1,902.2	1,117.8	1,319.3	3,618.2
Indecent exposure	308.6	276.2	251.0	145.5	360.3	308.2
Rape, attempted rape	39.0	154.2	59.8	50.8	28.0	57.6
Nuisance calls	18,989.8	7,548.7	18,972.3	22,115.2	18,759.8	28,621.5
Assault	790.3	1,220.8	4,368.7	1,417.9	4,911.2	1,660.4

The correlation between household income and theft is less than perfect, but there is, nevertheless, a strong tendency for higher household income to be associated with greater theft victimization. The positive correlation with income is even stronger for fraud, forgery and false pretences.

For both peeping and indecent exposure the people with the highest victimization rates are those who live in both the very poorest and the most affluent households. It is the middle income household which reports the lowest levels of victimization for these minor sexual offences. Both nuisance calls and assault show inconsistent relationships with household income. The low assault rate of the lowest income group possibly reflects the disproportionate number of aged pensioners in this group. Certainly the household income data do not provide any glimmer of a replication of the negative association between social class and assault victimization reported in Table 2.

To summarise the results from both Tables 2 and 3, the National Crime Victims Survey data on occupation and income indicate that it is

the wealthy who are most likely to be victims of vehicle theft, fraud, forgery, false pretences and common theft. The household income data show that it is the poor who are most likely to be the victims of breaking and entering. All other offence types tend to show inconsistent relationships with occupation and income.

Unemployment and Crime Victimization

Table 4 shows that the unemployed are a quite unique category with respect to criminal victimization. The data indicated that the unemployed are peculiarly vulnerable to being victims of some of the more serious types of crime. Take theft for example. We have shown above how it is generally true that the wealthy are more likely to be victims of theft than the middle and low income earner. The unemployed, however, have a far higher rate of theft victimization than both the employed generally, and every one of the household income groups listed in Table 3. The unemployed also show higher rates of criminal victimization than the employed for breaking and entering, peeping, and assault. The assault victimization rate is staggeringly high among the unemployed. They are more than twice as likely to report victimization for this offence than those in full-time jobs, and six times as likely to have been assaulted compared with respondents not in the workforce or in part-time jobs.

TABLE 4
VICTIMIZATION RATES PER 100,000 POPULATION
15 YEARS AND OVER BY EMPLOYMENT

	<i>Not in workforce</i>	<i>Unemployed</i>	<i>Full time employment</i>	<i>Part time employment</i>
Break and enter	918.4	3,162.3	2,748.3	1,150.6
Motor vehicle theft	192.9	409.9	1,317.8	706.3
Robbery with violence	82.9	364.4	257.0	146.3
Theft	4,799.8	12,927.5	9,451.8	7,741.3
Fraud, forgery, false pretences	633.9	2,864.7	4,364.4	2,659.1
Peeping	1,535.8	11,365.0	1,389.6	1,047.1
Indecent exposure	371.5	321.8	286.0	372.9
Rape, attempted rape	116.6	—	72.0	147.2
Nuisance calls	2,443.2	15,266.6	17,834.7	26,835.3
Assault	1,211.7	8,374.8	3,283.0	1,467.6

The unemployed do have lower rates of victimization for motor vehicle theft and nuisance calls, probably because they do not own cars or telephones. They are also less likely to report being victims of fraud, forgery and false pretences—an expected finding since it is people in business who generally report this kind of crime. Standard error with respect to robbery, indecent exposure and rape is too high for any

statement to be made about the rates for these offences among the unemployed.

Comparison with United States Findings

Data from the United States National Victims Survey⁵ of 1975 reveal a more or less comparable picture to the one painted by the Australian data.

The larger United States survey has an acceptable standard error for rape and robbery with violence, so that a more complete picture is possible than with the Australian data. Among the unemployed in the US, victim reported crime rates were higher for rape, robbery with violence, assault and theft. Lower income groups report higher rates of victimization than higher income groups for rape, robbery with violence, and assault. For theft we see the same kind of reversal that appears in the Australian data: it is higher income groups who report the higher rates of victimization for theft. In addition, as in the Australian data, higher income groups report higher motor vehicle theft victimization.

CONCLUSION

It would seem that whether it is the working class or the middle class who have most to fear from crime depends to a considerable extent upon what kind of crime one is talking about and what is meant by working class. The data from the Australian Crime Victims Survey show that in exploring the class basis of criminal victimization it is important to distinguish the unemployed from the working class generally. The unemployed in Australia are an underclass who experience a level of criminal victimization far in excess of that experienced by either the wealthy or the employed manual worker.

The excessive extent to which the unemployed are victims of crime in Australia (and the United States) may reflect the fact that the unemployed spend such a large proportion of their time in public space. Ironically, the fact that the unemployed spend so much of their time in public space—in trains rather than cars, streets and parks rather than factories and offices, public bars rather than private clubs—probably renders them more available for both criminal victimization and accusations by the police that they have been the perpetrators of crimes.

The data reported in this study point up how simplistic is the 'radical' critique which tells us that crime is a manifestation of working class rebellion against the ruling class, a way that the workers hit back at the bourgeoisie. Jock Young is one of the first to have foreseen the need for a more sophisticated radical critique which is less at odds with the evidence:

For the working class does have a real stake in a genuine social order, however much it may be that conservative 'law and order' campaigns are a sham behind which particular interests advance themselves, and proclaim themselves to be acting in the interests of all. It is a simple fact that the majority of working-class crime is *intra-* and not *inter-*class in its choice of target, area of activity and distribution. Working-class people suffer from crime, confront daily the experience of material desperation, undergo the ravages of disorganization and competitive individualism. The ideology that plays on this—bourgeois ideology—contains an element of truth, and touches on the genuine interests of the class—albeit in a distorted fashion.⁶

Acknowledgments

This paper was made possible by the generous assistance and cooperation given to the Australian Institute of Criminology by the staff of the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

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