



Women as Victims of Crime

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Source: *The Australian Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (Spring, 1980), pp. 329-339

Published by: [Australian Institute of Policy and Science](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20635076>

Accessed: 13/01/2015 21:48

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Women as victims of crime*

Some findings from the first Australian national crime victims survey

In one of the largest social surveys ever undertaken in Australia, the Australian Bureau of Statistics conducted during 1975 18,694 interviews in randomly selected houses throughout the country to ascertain what proportion of the population had been victims of crimes of various types. Earlier surveys by Wilson and Brown¹ and Congalton and Najman² on much smaller samples in Queensland and New South Wales respectively are no match for the size, scope and response rate from the Bureau study.

The survey has been a goldmine of significant criminological findings, as evidenced by the eight papers the present authors, with others, have written on it.³ Looking back over the masses of data which have been generated, it is a reasonable conclusion that the variable which has been most consistently predictive of the relationships explored has been sex. The purpose of this paper is to highlight some of these findings on women as victims of crime. Some of them, we believe, are revealing for those who are interested in a feminist

* 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.

analysis of Australian society. The present authors will not attempt to demonstrate their unsophisticated grasp of feminist theory through an effort to intergrate the findings into a coherent theoretical framework. We simply present the empirical findings as a resource for those who might be competent to undertake such a task.

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 per cent is only possible, of course, in a survey which has the legal authority of the Bureau of Statistics.⁴

The crimes

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

- *Break and enter*: breaking into 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 authorisation.
- *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.
- *Rape and attempted rape*: all rape, attempted rape and assault with intent to rape. Only females were asked about rape victimisation.
- *Robbery*: stealing which involves the threat or use of actual violence or force to a person or property.
- *Assault*: unlawful attack by one person upon another for the purpose of inflicting bodily injury.
- *Nuisance calls*: threats, abuses, indecent calls and other nuisance calls by telephone.

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- *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.

For all offences except motor vehicle theft an attempt counts equally with an actual offence. Thefts in connection with breaking and entering are only included in 'break and enter'.

Standard error

With a sample of such magnitude problems of statistical inference loom less large than 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 victimisations of each type within the sample. Instead we are provided with estimates weighted from the sample for the number of victimisations 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 provided 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 victimisations of each type.

Table 1
Approximate standard error percent for survey estimates of numbers of victimisations in Australia for 1975

	Estimated number of victimisations	Standard error percent
Break and enter	146,500	8.5
Motor vehicle theft	62,700	9.8
Theft	609,900	3.4
Fraud, forgery, false pretences	214,100	8.6
Rape and attempted rape	7,800	26.5
Robbery with violence	14,200	18.6
Assault	191,500	13.6
Nuisance calls	1,612,594	11.3
Peeping	127,892	27.5
Indecent exposure	26,366	15.1

It can be seen from Table 1 that the survey estimate of the number of break and enter victimisations occurring in Australia during 1975 was 146,500. The approximate percent standard error on this estimate is 8.5 percent. This means that the standard error is 8.5 percent of 146,500, i.e. 12,500. Discounting non-sampling errors, there are therefore about two chances in three that the true number of break and enters in Australia during 1975 fell between 134,000 and 159,000; and about nineteen chances in twenty that it fell between 121,500 and 171,500.

The question of Australia's rape rate

Police reported rape rates per 100,000 population are four to five times as high in the United States as in Australia.⁵ It was therefore a surprising finding that the victim reported rape rate from the Australian survey was slightly higher than the rate from the 1975 US National Crime Victims Survey. The difference in rape rates was minimal, the rate being 86 per 100,000 in the American survey and 95 per 100,000 in the Australian survey.⁶ It would be misleading to use the figures to argue that the rape rate is in fact higher in Australia, because the standard error on the Australian estimate is 26.5 percent, more than the observed difference from the American figures.⁷

Nevertheless, the figures can support the conclusion that rape, unlike most other types of crime, shows no significant difference in victim reported rates between Australia and the United States.⁸ A considerable part of the explanation for the fact that there are dramatic differences between US and Australian rape rates for police statistics, but none for victimisation estimates, probably lies with the fact that Australian rape victims are less likely than American victims to report the offence to the police. Table 2 shows the percentage of offences which are reported to the police to be very similar on each of-

Table 2
Comparison of percentage of victimisations reported for the US versus Australian National Crime Surveys of 1975

	US Victim Survey %	Australian Victim Survey %
Break and enter (Households only)	49	60
Motor vehicle theft	91	87
Theft	27	34
Rape and attempted rape	56	28
Robbery with violence	53	54
Assault	45	43

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fence type on which the US and Australian data are comparable, the only exception being rape. Twice as many of the US rape victims reported their victimisation to the police.⁹

The discrepancy between the police recorded and victim reported rape rates should not only be interpreted in terms of the low reportability rate for rape. The survey estimate of the number of crimes actually reported was 2,200, while police records show only 803 rapes being reported in the country for the same year. While the former is an estimate of crime reported by all people not living in rural areas of the Northern Territory and not under 15 years of age, the police figures include people living in the rural areas, the Northern Territory and under 15. Extreme caution is warranted with the survey estimate, however. The standard error on the estimate of 2,200 is 41.7 percent. Nevertheless, the figures provide grounds for suspicion that many incidents which are regarded as rape by the victim and reported as such to the police are either not regarded as rape by the police or for some other reason are not officially recorded by them.

It is not our intention to suggest that the victim-reported estimate of the rape rate of 95 per 100,000 per annum is the 'true' rape rate. Nevertheless, we do suggest that it is likely to be closer to the reality than the rate published on the basis of police statistics for the same period (5.9 per 100,000).¹⁰ Undoubtedly, there would have been women in the sample who had been victims of rape and who were not only unwilling to report this to the police, but also unwilling to report it to an interviewer from the Bureau of Statistics. Moreover, there would have been cases which by law were instances of rape but which were not constituted as such by the respondent (perhaps the incident was constituted as 'seduction'). There may also have been cases where incidents were reported as rapes which do not fall within the legal definition (perhaps, for example, because it occurred within marriage).¹¹

Victim surveys almost invariably produce higher estimates of crime rates than police statistics. In the present survey the victim survey rates ranged from a minimum of twice the published police recorded rates in the case of 'break and enter' to a maximum of sixteen times the police recorded rate with rape.¹² Notwithstanding the error in victim surveys, it is reasonable to conclude that the 'true' rape rate is many times the rate derived from police statistics. Moreover, the data suggest that it is unreasonable to assume that the Australian rape rate is any lower than in that nation where women live in fear of walking alone at night, the United States. This, in spite of the fact that the rates for many other serious forms of crime, such as murder, are unquestionably higher in the United States.

Women as victims of other types of crime

It can be seen from Table 3 that excluding rape, peeping and indecent exposure (offences for which, according to the survey design, only women could be victims) men were generally more likely than women to report that they had been victims of serious crimes. The higher victimisation rates of males for 'break and enter' is in part a reflection of the fact that families were most likely to nominate a male as the owner of the house and therefore the person most likely to be classified as having been victimised. It was only on nuisance calls that the data showed a significantly higher rate of victimisation among women.

Table 3
Victimisation rates per 100,000 population 15 and over by sex

	Males	Females
Break and enter	2851.9	715.3
Motor vehicle theft	1265.8	262.1
Theft	8854.8	5909.4
Fraud, forgery, false pretences	4145.7	1065.4
Rape and attempted rape	—	186.4
Robbery with violence	168.0	173.6
Assault	3775.4	847.9
Nuisance calls	10516.9	28170.7
Peeping	—	3045.4
Indecent exposure	—	627.9

There were many interesting findings arising from a further breakdown of victimisation rates according to both sex and various third variables. For example, women over forty years of age were far less likely to be victims of indecent exposure or rape than women under forty. The most dramatic difference was according to marital status. For males it was true that men who were separated or divorced were more likely to be victims of crime than men who were now married, never married or widowed. However, with females these differences reach extraordinary proportions. Table 4 shows the strength of the association between being separated or divorced and being a victim of various types of crime for women. The assault rate, for example, was a remarkable 47 times as high among separated or divorced women as compared with married women. In part, this may be because married women were less likely to interpret an instance of assault by their husband as a crime.

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Table 4
Victimisation rates per 100,000 by marital status for females only

	Never Married	Now Married	Widowed	Separated Divorced
Break and enter	1220.8	22.6	1880.5	5222.3
Motor vehicle theft	230.2	267.3	86.2	914.1
Theft	8346.7	5069.8	3466.9	16599.6
Fraud, forgery, false pretences	1254.7	1021.6	260.9	3491.0
Rape and attempted rape	313.9	128.1	63.1	556.8
Robbery with violence	270.4	143.7	136.6	380.5
Assault	925.1	254.4	64.1	11972.4
Nuisance calls	12685.4	30146.8	23806.7	91253.0
Peeping	2801.1	2608.8	3549.5	11247.4
Indecent exposure	1764.3	404.9	—	825.9

The reporting of crimes to the police by women

Sex differences were not great in the propensity to report offences to the police.¹³ Across all offence types, 43.7 percent of crimes with a male victim were reported compared with 38.7 percent of the crimes with a female victim. Since the offences for which only female victims were counted were offences of low reportability (e.g. rape), on comparable offences males and females evidenced generally similar patterns of reporting to the police. Assault was the dramatic exception to this tendency. While 52.9 percent of the assault victimisations on males were reported to the police, for only 19.9 percent of assaults on females were the police notified. It is possible that many of the assaults against females occurred within families. This possibility becomes more plausible when one considers the reasons which women gave for not reporting their assault victimisations.

Across all other offence types, sex differences by reasons for not reporting offences to the police were generally unremarkable.¹⁴ Table 5 shows that these differences were marked for assault victimisations. Feminist scholars who have attached special importance to the offence of spouse assault might take particular interest in the pattern of these differences.

Women were far more likely than men to fail to report assault because they 'Thought it was private not criminal' (22.4 percent versus 4.3 percent of the reasons given). Women were also more likely than men to fail to report assault because they 'Did not want harm or punishment to come to the offender' (6.0 percent versus 3.6 percent). Women were more likely to say that they were 'Too confused or upset to notify the police' (9.2 percent versus 1.6 percent),

Table 5
Reasons for non-reporting assault by sex*

Reasons	Male %	Female %
Police discovered incident	5.2	0.0
Somebody else notified	1.3	4.9
Did not want to take time	0.9	0.0
Did not want to harm/punish offender	3.6	6.0
Afraid of reprisal	6.3	7.6
Thought it was private not criminal	4.3	22.4
Police could not do anything	6.3	3.4
Police would not bother	7.2	7.8
Too confused or upset to notify police	1.6	9.2
Not sure offenders would be caught	0.7	3.9
Offenders thought to be children	0.0	6.4
Would handle situation themselves	17.1	1.9
Too trivial	21.0	7.1
Other reason	24.7	19.2
Total	100.2	99.8

* 'No answers' have been excluded in the calculation of percentages

that they 'Would not bother since offenders thought to be children' (6.4 percent versus 0.0 percent), and that 'Somebody else was notified instead' (4.9 percent versus 1.3 percent). The latter reason possibly reflects the fact that some women were reporting assaults to women's refuges. In contrast, men were markedly more likely than women to fail to report assault because 'The victim would handle the situation himself' (17.1 percent versus 1.9 percent) or because the offence was 'Too trivial' (21.0 percent versus 7.1 percent).

In general, it can be said that the reasons that women give for failing to report assaults to the police reflect a greater concern for protecting the offender, while reasons given by men reflect a greater self-assurance and a belief that the problem could be resolved without official intervention. It may be that unusual sex differences appear for assault because this offence, like rape, is very much a manifestation of traditional patterns of male/female domination/subordination.

Sex of the offender

Crime victims were asked in the survey whether they could identify the sex of the offender. Table 6 shows that in the overwhelming majority of cases where the offender could be identified it was a male. Not one of the 18,694

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respondents to the survey had been the victim of a female robber acting alone without the assistance of a male. As if confirmation were needed, the data show in a way that is uncontaminated by any supposed 'chivalry' biases in the administration of justice that offenders are overwhelmingly male.¹⁵

Table 6
Sex of offender(s)*

	Male %	Female %	Both male and female %
Break and enter	87	4	9
Motor vehicle theft	94	—	6
Theft	79	14	7
Fraud, forgery, false pretences	78	13	9
Robbery with violence	93	—	7
Assault	79	10	11
Nuisance calls	87	11	2

* 'No answers' and 'don't knows' have been excluded in the calculation of percentages.

Fear of crime among women

One question in the National Crime Victims Survey asked: 'If you are walking out alone in your neighbourhood at night would you feel very safe, reasonably safe, somewhat safe, or very unsafe?' Braithwaite, Biles and Whitrod¹⁶ were able to show that Australians were generally relatively unconcerned about crime and felt safe in their neighbourhoods. However, by far the best predictor of feeling unsafe walking alone in the neighbourhood at night was sex (see Table 7). Of those survey respondents who said they felt very unsafe, 89.1 per cent were women. Surveys from other countries also produce findings indicating greater fear of crime among women.¹⁷

Table 7
How safe individuals feel walking alone* in their neighbourhood at night, by sex

	Male %	Female %	Total %
Very safe	43.5	11.0	26.7
Reasonably safe	48.2	47.7	47.9
Somewhat unsafe	6.2	25.4	16.2
Very unsafe	2.1	15.9	9.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

* 'No answers' and 'don't knows' have been excluded in the calculation of percentages.

We have seen, however, that with the exception of sex offences, women have generally lower rates of self-reported criminal victimisation than men. It may be that even though women are less likely to be victims of most types of crime, the few crimes of which they disproportionately are the victims are crimes which are inordinately fear-provoking. This is especially true of rape. One is reminded of Brownmiller's forceful statement:

Man's discovery that his genitalia could serve as a weapon to generate fear must rank as one of the most important discoveries of prehistoric times along with the use of fire and the first crude stone axe. From prehistoric times to the present, I believe rape has played a critical function. It is nothing more nor less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear.¹⁸

The objective reality of rape, bad as it is, is surely of less importance to women than the way that fear of rape hems them into a protected day-to-day existence. The findings of the National Crime Victims Survey are suggestive that, rape notwithstanding, the inordinate fear of crime among women is not so much a function of the objective risks which they confront when compared to men, but rather a concrete manifestation of the ideological importance in a sexist culture of keeping women dependent on men for protection.

Notes and references

- ¹ P.R. Wilson and J. Brown, *Crime and the Community*, Brisbane, University of Queensland Press, 1973
- ² A. A. Congalton and J. M. Najman, *Who Are the Victims?*, Sydney, New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, 1974.
- ³ J. Braithwaite and D. Biles, 'Overview of Findings from the First Australian National Crime Victims Survey', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 13, 1980, pp. 41-51. D. Biles, J. Braithwaite and V. Braithwaite, 'The Mental Health of Victims of Crime', *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 23, 1979, pp. 129-134. J. Braithwaite and D. Biles, 'On Being Unemployed and Being a Victim of Crime', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 14, 1979, pp. 192-200. D. Biles and J. Braithwaite, 'Crime Victims and the Police', *Australian Psychologist*, 14, 1979, pp. 345-355. J. Braithwaite and D. Biles, 'Crime Victimization in Australia: A Comparison with the U.S.', submitted for publication. J. Braithwaite and D. Biles, 'Crime Victimization Rates in Australian Cities', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, in press. J. Braithwaite, D. Biles and R. Whitrod, 'Fear of Crime in Australia', *Proceedings of the Third International Symposium on Victimology*, Muenster, 1979. J. Braithwaite and D. Biles, 'Comment on Gottfredson and Hindelang: Verifiability and Black's *The Behavior of Law*', *American Sociological Review*, 1980, in press.
- ⁴ For more complete details on the sampling methodology and the estimation of standard error in the Australian Crime Victims Survey see Australian Bureau of Statistics, *1975 General Social Survey: Crime Victims*, Ref. No. 4105.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra, 1979.
- ⁵ For 1975 the rape rate based on crimes reported to the police was 5.9 per 100,000 in Australia and 26.3 per 100,000 in the United States. (Sources: *Year Book of Australia, 1976-77*, Canberra, Australian Bureau of Statistics. M.R. Gottfredson, M.J. Hindelang and N. Parisi (eds), *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics—1977*, Washington D.C., Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, 1978, p. 397.)
- ⁶ Part of this difference might be explained by the fact that the U.S. survey is of persons 12 and over, while the Australian survey is of respondents 15 and over. It might be that 12-14 year olds have a lower rate of rape victimisation than the rest of the population. Male rapes, which are included in the American survey, have been excluded from the American figures for comparison with the Australian survey rate.
- ⁷ Standard error on the US Survey estimate is much lower than this because of its considerably higher sample size of 135,000 persons.

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- ⁸ See Braithwaite and Biles, 'Crime Victimization in Australia: A Comparison with the U.S.', *op. cit.*. The other major exception apart from rape is car theft.
- ⁹ The standard error on the estimates of the number of non-reported victimisations is 33.3 percent, even higher than the standard error on the total number of victimisations. Moreover, 'no answer' and 'don't know' responses have been excluded from Table 2, as in all other tables in this paper. Since these responses were more common in the Australian survey, the Australian percentages are artifactually slightly lower than they should be in comparison to the American figures.
- ¹⁰ See footnote 5. This police statistic which is usually quoted is per 100,000 total population, whereas the victimisation statistic is per 100,000 population 15 and over not living in rural areas or the Northern Territory. Apart from the exclusion of the Northern Territory (which has a high crime rate), these factors serve to make the victim survey rates artificially higher than the police reported rate.
- ¹¹ Undoubtedly, the reporting of rape in marriage as rape would be unusual. This example was chosen, however, because it illustrates how even an error-free victim survey methodology would not produce a 'true' rape rate which was satisfactory to feminists.
- ¹² See Braithwaite and Biles, 'Crime Victimization in Australia: A Comparison with the U.S.', *op. cit.*, for a discussion of the meaning of these differences. In particular, the reservations of footnote 10 above must be kept in mind.
- ¹³ For a detailed breakdown of this data see Biles and Braithwaite, 'Crime Victims and the Police', *op. cit.*
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ For a discussion of the 'chivalry' biases in the administration of justice see J. Scutt, 'The Myth of the "Chivalry Factor" in Female Crime', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 14, 1979, pp. 3-20.
- ¹⁶ *op. cit.*
- ¹⁷ H. Erskine, 'The Polls: Fear of Violence and Crime', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 38, 1974, pp. 131-145. M. Hindelang, M. Gottfredson and J. Garafolo, *Victims of Personal Crime*, Cambridge, Mass., Ballinger, 1977, p. 178. I. Waller and N. Okihiro, *Burglary: The Victim and the Public*, Toronto, University of Toronto, 1978, p. 82. R. F. Sparks, H. G. Genn and D. D. Dodd, *Surveying Victims*, Chichester, 1977, John Wiley, p. 207.
- ¹⁸ S. Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1976, pp. 14-15.