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HOMOGENEOUS VICTIM-OFFENDER POPULATIONS: A REVIEW AND SOME RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

SIMON I. SINGER*

In a complex society where traditional similarities no longer guide social action, a single homogeneous population is less likely to exist because there is generally too much variation in the group social attributes. More appropriately, a given population should be defined in relation to another one using a range of variables that measure the extent of similarity. Using this method of definition social scientists test for the significance of between-group variation while controlling for within-group characteristics. But the problem is complicated when referring to populations with legal labels in which the definition of one is dependent on the perception of the other.

The idea that victims and offenders are part of the same homogeneous population runs contrary to the public's popular impression that criminals are distinct from their innocent victims. In the rhetoric of contemporary crime control, the criminal is often portrayed as the enemy while the victim needs "defensible space" or "target hardening."¹

Although generally confined to incidents motivated by theft, support exists for the heterogeneity of victim and offender populations. The offender does not intend to commit physical harm, but to obtain something of value while minimizing the risk of detection or arrest. Any similarity of victims and offenders exists in terms of their demographic characteristics that increase one population's availability to the other. For example, juveniles in their daily activities are more likely to interact with their peers who then are in the crime-prone committing years. Thus, the higher probability of being a victim during adolescence is explained by the age of the offender population and the increased probability of victim-offender interaction.

For crimes of assault, the distinction between victim and offender populations is less clear. Both populations seem to be related in their

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¹ D. NEWMAN, *THE DEFENSIBLE SPACE: CRIME PREVENTION THROUGH ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN* (1973).

demographic characteristics and in terms of certain shared responses to perceived situations of physical or psychological threat. Their social interaction suggests certain normative constraints where a violent outcome is dependent in part on the victim's reaction.²

A key question then in explaining personal victimization as a consequence of the victim's exposure to an offender is the extent to which violence reflects a lifestyle that leads victims to alternate as offenders in the same social environment.³ If victims and offenders share certain understandings and misunderstandings supporting their use of physical force, then both populations are not distinct, but rotate in a web of sub-cultural relationships.

Although the support for a violent subculture⁴ rests in official recorded incidents that indicate victim-offender interaction, other measures are needed to determine the homogeneity of both populations. Several studies already have provided some data on their homogeneity. In a London sample, Genn and Dodd⁵ surveyed for both victim and offender experiences. Their self-report data indicate that a significant association exists for incidents ranging from simple to aggravated assault. In a similar survey, Savitz, Lalli, and Rosen⁶ contrasted surveyed victimization with juvenile arrest status. Again, the researchers found a significant relationship between assault victims and official delinquent arrest status, but found no similar arrest status relationship with theft victims.

Though they support the hypothesized relationship for assault, these studies are not specific to the serious violence that subcultural theory intends to address. Serious violence is relatively rare. When acts of aggression are weighted with verbal threats and the experiences of adolescence, they become more common, as surveys of delinquency and victimization indicate. With a subculture, analysis of victim-offender populations must be confined to those events not likely present in the dominant culture. The critical concern is to measure the extent to which victims are also guilty of serious assault independent of the minor offenses that may have been experienced.

² M. WOLFGANG, *PATTERNS IN CRIMINAL HOMICIDE* (1958).

³ M. HINDELANG, M. GOTTFREDSON & J. GAROFALO, *VICTIMS OF PERSONAL CRIME: AN EMPIRICAL FOUNDATION FOR A THEORY OF PERSONAL VICTIMIZATION* (1978).

⁴ M. WOLFGANG & F. FERRACUTI, *THE SUBCULTURE OF VIOLENCE: TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED THEORY IN CRIMINOLOGY* (1967).

⁵ R. SPARKS, H. GENN & D. DODD, *SURVEYING VICTIMS: A STUDY OF THE MEASUREMENT OF CRIMINAL VICTIMIZATION* (1977).

⁶ L. SAVITZ, M. LALLI & L. ROSEN, *CITY LIFE AND DELINQUENCY—VICTIMIZATION, FEAR OF CRIME, AND GANG MEMBERSHIP* (1977).

THE CRIMINAL BACKGROUND OF VICTIMS SURVEYED IN THE
FOLLOW-UP TO *DELINQUENCY IN A BIRTH COHORT*⁷

In the follow-up survey to *Delinquency in a Birth Cohort*,⁸ a study of self-reported victimization, this author examined the extent to which victims are also guilty of serious assault. Of the 975 subjects sampled randomly from the male cohort population, 567 twenty-six-year-olds were located and interviewed concerning their social and criminal background experiences.

Surveyed victimizations were measured by asking the respondent to recall his victim experiences during three time periods: before age twelve, between twelve and eighteen, and after age eighteen. Based on methodological studies of surveying victims, we can expect significant response error for simple assaults, given the relatively large reference period.⁹ For incidents in which the respondent was shot or stabbed, there should be less response error because they are injuries that victims likely will recall.

In contrast to victims of minor assault and property damage, a clear pattern emerged for those cohort members who were shot or stabbed. First, they were most often nonwhite, high-school dropouts, unemployed, and single when surveyed. Second, they were involved more frequently in official and self-reported criminal activity. Victims of serious assault had the highest probability of having a friend arrested, belonging to a gang, using a weapon, committing a serious assault, and having an official arrest.

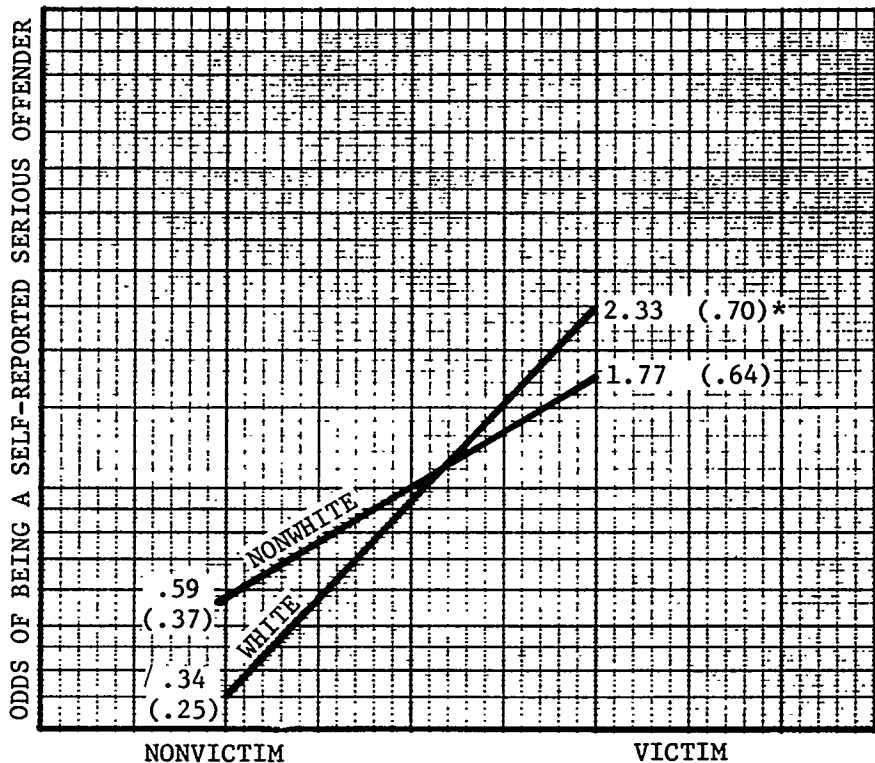
Highly significant is the relationship between having been shot or stabbed and having committed a serious assault, as measured by offenses causing the victim's hospitalization, death, or rape. In Figure 1¹⁰ the relationship is illustrated in the plotted odds of committing a serious assault by victim status and race. Although 46% of nonwhites report committing a serious assault compared with 32% of whites, part of the variation is explained by victimization. The relationship is significant both for whites and nonwhites: 68% of the cohort victims reported committing a serious assault compared with 27% of the nonvictims.

⁷ The results reported are based on S. Singer, *Victims in a Subculture of Crime: An Analysis of the Social and Criminal Backgrounds of Surveyed Victims in the Birth Cohort Follow-Up* (unpublished dissertation, Univ. of Pennsylvania Dep't of Sociology 1980).

⁸ M. WOLFGANG, R. FIGLIO & T. SELLIN, *DELINQUENCY IN A BIRTH COHORT* (1972).

⁹ M. HINDELANG, *CRIMINAL VICTIMIZATION IN EIGHT AMERICAN CITIES* (1976).

¹⁰ In each of the figures the odds of being an offender are calculated by dividing the sample cell size for non-offenders into that value for offenders with the given attribute of interest. The odds are normalized by plotting the computed values on semilogarithmic paper so that negative and positive values are comparable with one another.



* Numbers in parentheses are the probabilities. The odds associated with the dependent variables are converted to their probabilities with the following formula: $\text{Prob} = \text{odds}/(1 + \text{odds})$.

FIGURE 1

ODDS OF BEING A SELF-REPORTED SERIOUS OFFENDER BY RACE AND VICTIMIZATION

When other significant indicators of offender status are included in a logit analysis, the victim experience is the best predictor.¹¹ In accounting for the observed variation in offender status, victimization, gang membership, and weapon use provided the best model for explaining the observed relationships between offender status and race.

Although homogeneity exists between victim and offender, the hypothesized subcultural relationships can be related further to age specific periods. The social learning of crime may not be as direct as

¹¹ The logit procedure used is the one suggested by Goodman for dichotomous variables. See Goodman, *A Modified Multiple Regression Approach to the Analysis of Dichotomous Variables*, 37 AM. SOC. REV. 28 (1976).

theorists suggest¹² and may include negative as well as positive associations. To test this aspect of the similarity between victims and offenders, Figure 2 depicts the odds of committing an adult offense by juvenile victims. For whites and nonwhites, the plotted relationships support the hypothesis of learning by negative associations. The percentage committing a serious assault of adults is significantly higher for juvenile victims: 64% compared with 22% for nonvictims.

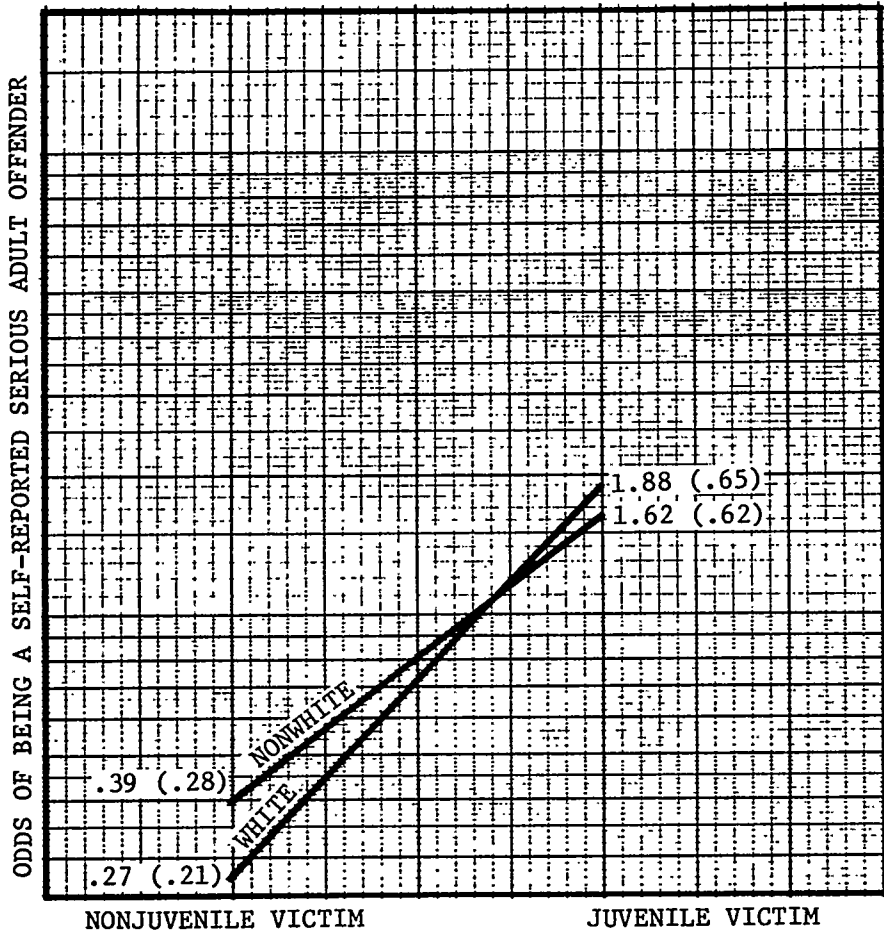


FIGURE 2

ODDS OF BEING A SELF-REPORTED SERIOUS ADULT OFFENDER BY AGE, RACE, AND VICTIMIZATION

¹² Burgess & Akers, *A Differential Association-Reinforcement Theory of Criminal Behavior*, 14 SOC. PROB. 128 (1966).

Controlling for gang membership, Figure 3 illustrates again the correlation between juvenile victim and adult offender status. For gang members the relationship is almost perfect in that 94% of juvenile victims who are gang members report committing a serious assault. For non-gang members who are victims, however, the probability of committing a serious assault is higher than for nonvictim gang members: 54% compared with 42% are offenders.

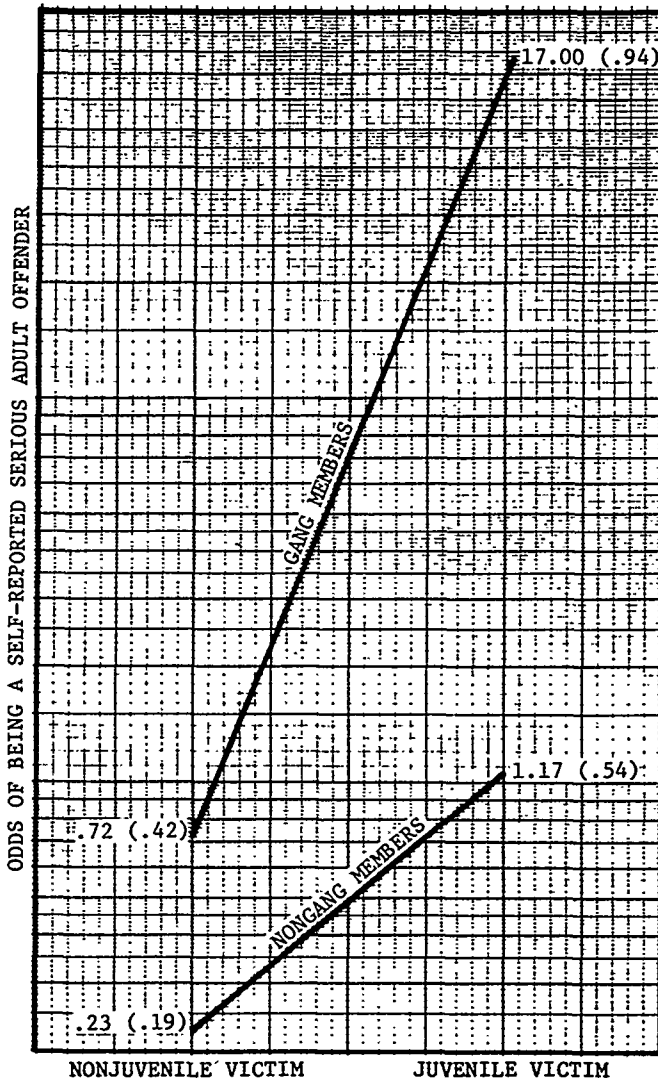


FIGURE 3

ODDS OF BEING A SELF-REPORTED SERIOUS ADULT OFFENDER BY AGE, GANG MEMBERSHIP, AND VICTIMIZATION

With self-reported offenses the observed relationship might partially be a function of response error, in that respondents who tend to answer in a particular direction will do so independently of its true occurrence. To control for this potential effect, the study examined official recorded arrests. The relationship between victim and offender status, however, is specific only to the adult years. This limited specificity may result because incidents are more accurately recalled in the nearest reference period and because of the greater seriousness of the offenses committed in the adult years.

Figure 4 demonstrates the relationship between victim and official offender status and illustrates the additive effects of race and victim status. Although nonwhites have three times the probability of an adult arrest, .48 compared to .16, the chance of a white victim having an arrest is higher than a nonwhite who was not a victim. In Figure 5, the relationship again is plotted for gang members and non-members with the observed odds of offender status in the expected direction.

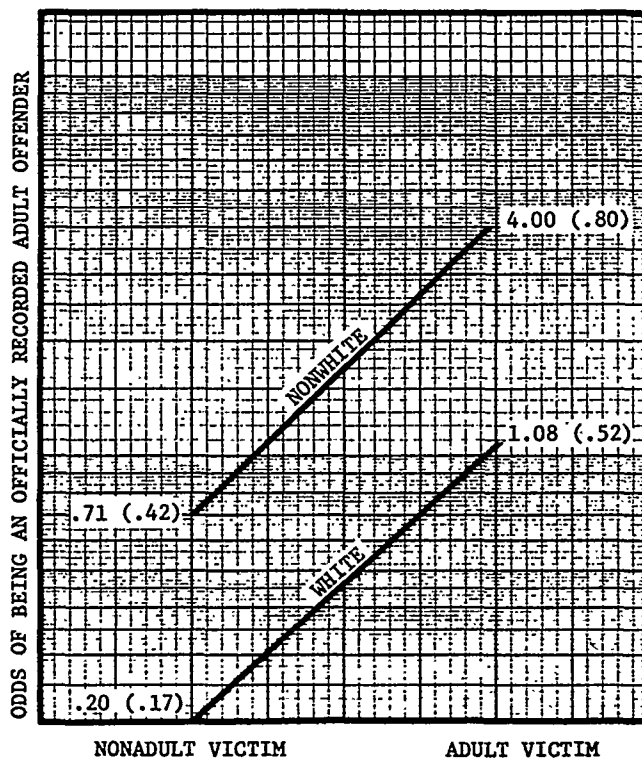


FIGURE 4

ODDS OF BEING AN OFFICIALLY RECORDED ADULT OFFENDER BY
AGE, RACE, AND VICTIMIZATION

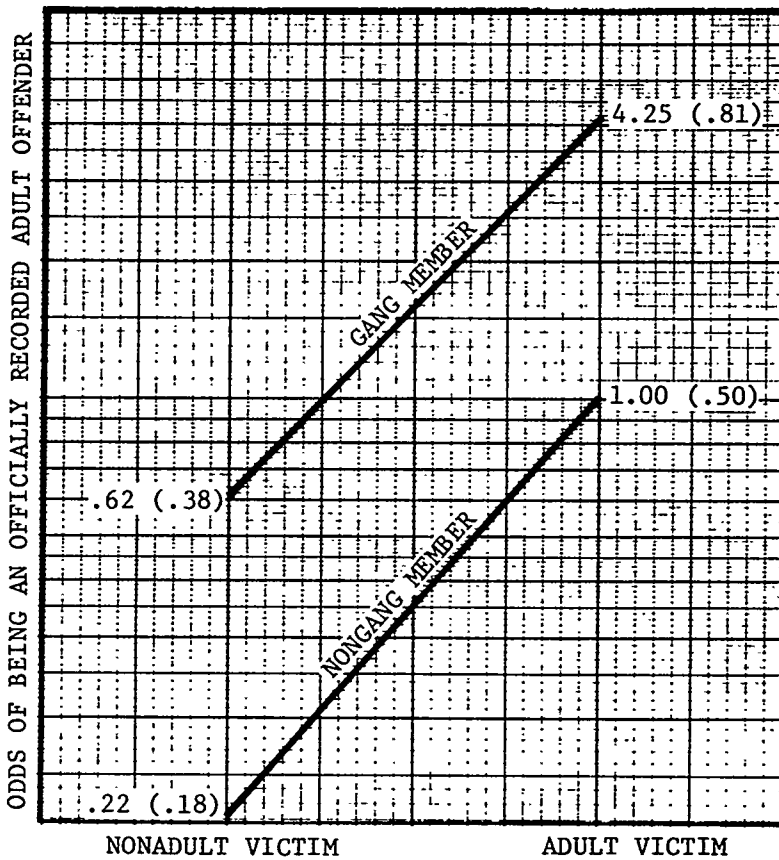


FIGURE 5

ODDS OF BEING AN OFFICIALLY RECORDED ADULT OFFENDER BY
AGE, GANG MEMBERSHIP, AND VICTIMIZATION

For cohort members with an official adult arrest, the victim experience is significant in explaining the seriousness of their criminal careers. The relationship, however, is specific only to nonwhite cohort members. In a general linear model, victimization, gang membership, and the seriousness of juvenile arrests explains 36% of the variance in the seriousness of a criminal career.

CONCLUSION

The results presented, along with those of other studies examining the victim-offender interaction, indicate support for the homogeneity of victim-offender populations involved in serious assaultive conduct. The

evidence does not confirm the existence of a subculture, but does support the need to examine other variables besides opportunity or exposure to explain personal victimization. In current formulations of subcultural theory, few researchers attempt to account for the direction of the victim experience as it may relate to offender status. Researchers need to understand further the effect of being a victim on an individual's sense of justice and propensity to obey the law.

More data are also needed to test more completely the significance of the victim experience. Researchers should examine homogeneity between populations with a model that allows for feedback between both victim and offender experiences. The self-support technique is a suitable method for tapping both sets of experiences, although generally used to measure one or the other.

Further study of victim and offender relationships should develop more fully some policy implications. First, there is a need to know the risk of personal attack by strangers to assess accurately the seriousness of offending behavior. The public's concern with crime may be dealt with more effectively by providing data that indicate the probability of becoming a victim if not involved in delinquent or criminal activities.

Second, the public may be willing to tolerate different levels of offending behavior, depending on the victim-offender relationship. Crime confined to persons acquainted with one another in the course of their social interaction may be perceived as qualitatively different from and less serious than the stranger-to-stranger violence that arouses increased fear and concern. Unless data on the risks of personal victimization are assessed in terms of the victim's relationship to the offender, the public's perception of the seriousness of crime may be subject to interests that are less objectively oriented.

In terms of the hypothesized continuum of homogeneity, researchers must consider the variables producing an overlap in victim and offender populations. Despite the fact that elderly persons have a lower probability of victimization by violence, they are more susceptible to personal attack in blighted urban areas and age-integrated public housing. Reducing homogeneity concerning residential proximity to an offending population necessitates reducing the elderly's chance of victimization.

Similarly, an increase in interracial violence may be attributed to a rise in residential integration. Variation by sex in victim and offender populations may be a function of females becoming less restricted in their traditional social roles. While not an exhaustive listing, these are some of the research questions that should be addressed over time and across different populations.

The cost of further analysis is minimal because the National Crime Panel project collected much of the data. With this National Crime Panel victimization survey data, researchers should examine changes in the demographic characteristics of victims in relation to the perceived race, sex, and age measures of the offender. This analysis should isolate the changes for cities and for the nation across the various surveyed time periods.