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Intellectual Disability and Criminal Victimisation

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People with an intellectual disability are almost three times more likely than those without a disability to be victims of physical assault, sexual assault and robbery. The study reported here found that intellectually disabled people who had become victims of crime scored significantly below the intellectually disabled nonvictims on measures of interpersonal competence. The study found that having a disability was not the main problem, but rather how people behaved and how that behaviour might promote a reaction from an offender. The one characteristic that stood out was the demonstration of anger.

The policy response can be found in training in relation to interpersonal competence and anger management. The Australian Institute of Criminology has a strong interest in identifing factors which precipitate anger and aggression, and making them part of broad crime prevention strategies.

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Director

The development of best practice in criminal justice administration and crime prevention requires a much wider evaluation of the "crime picture" than has been attempted, or even contemplated, in the past. Reactive policing provides only one tool in the arsenal used in the war on crime, with statistics on recidivism indicating that this weapon is likely to have only minimal impact on attempts to alter future crime statistics. Two other approaches offer the possibility of dealing more effectively with crime prevention. These approaches require policy makers working in criminal justice administration to examine the role and contribution of both changing social policy and victim behaviour in defining the prevalence and nature of crime.

The second prong to the approach is to advocate a critical focus on social change and government policy and their impact on crime. Any substantial changes to the situation of subgroups within the community can alter either vulnerability to criminal victimisation, or propensity to engage in criminal behaviour. For example, the changing age distribution of the population may have an impact on the likely profile of crime in the future, as might the increasing number of long-term unemployed. Similarly, government legislation which increases the difficulty of the psychiatrically ill receiving in-patient treatment, may influence the vulnerability of this specific subgroup. In other words, criminal justice policy makers concerned with crime prevention must be aware that subgroups within the community differ in their vulnerability to victimisation, and that government policy and other forces for social and cultural change can either heighten the exposure of an already vulnerable

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group, or may make a previously "safe" group less safe.

The third prong, which involves a focus on examining the impact of the behaviour of the victim on either the prevalence or nature of crime, may be conceived of as politically unpalatable. Nonetheless, criminal behaviour, like any other form of behaviour, does not occur in a vacuum and a detailed examination of the specific circumstances surrounding any crime incident would provide useful "epidemiological" data. When pooled, these data will identify community groups who are vulnerable to victimisation, and the variables impacting upon this vulnerability. This information can then provide the basis for targeted crime prevention strategies that are focussed on victims, as well as offenders. The current paper illustrates the potential usefulness of this approach.

A Population at Risk

Most people would not be surprised to learn that people with an intellectual disability are more vulnerable than most members of the public to criminal victimisation. The nature of lower than average intelligence means that such a person will probably be less adaptable to everyday circumstances and therefore at risk should someone be inclined to take advantage and exploit that person. Indeed, this possibility has commonly been one of the reasons advanced by proponents of institutional living for the intellectually disabled, for the continuation of such arrangements. However, although it is doubtless true that reduced intellectual ability is likely to result in higher vulnerability to victimisation, so that such people have special needs in this area, these broad facts are confounded by other considerations which, so far, are not well understood. For example, among people with an intellectual disability, intelligence does not predict vulnerability to criminal victimisation; lower IQ does not accompany a higher incidence of exploitation. Moreover, institutionalisation does not necessarily protect against victimisation for the full range of crimes; as we will see, residential housing may actually exacerbate the victimisation of some individuals by others who share their living arrangements. And perhaps even more controversially, our research has found that some victims can precipitate the offence against them by behaviour which provokes the offender in some way.

The current studies have followed the lead of Wilson and Brewer (1992) who were prompted by concern within police organisations about possible increasing police responsibilities in the area of intellectual disability, as a consequence of the wider community access which people with an intellectual disability are now achieving following recent shifts in governmental social policies. Wilson and Brewer's study, completed under the auspices of the National Police Research Unit, involved 174 persons with an intellectual disability—that is about 3 per cent of the intellectually disabled population in South Australia, assuming a prevalence rate of 0.44 per cent as ascertained by the South Australian Intellectually Retarded Persons Project in 1981[1]. Wilson and Brewer found that victimisation rates for crimes of physical assault, sexual assault, and robbery against people with an intellectual disability were almost three times those reported by nondisabled members of the community. The trend was similar though less marked for other kinds of crime, the incidence of household crime (breaking and entering, property theft) against people with an intellectual disability being more than one and half times higher than the level experienced by the general community.

Further, Wilson and Brewer (1992) found that the location and living arrangements for people with an intellectual disability related to rates of victimisation. Their study involved different organisations which provided services for people with an intellectual disability and these different locations were confounded to a marked extent by the levels of disability of the people there. Where an organisation provided services predominantly for individuals with more severe disabilities, housing arrangements tended to be organised along institutional lines and rates of victimisation involving household / property crime were lower than in locations where levels of disability were more moderate. In contrast, however, victimisation rates for crimes against a person were higher in these settings where disabilities were more severe. From this, Wilson and Brewer inferred that if an organisation was responsible for people with more severe disabilities, then it was likely to provide more intensive levels of property protection. However, the closer proximity to each other of persons within the residential and supported community housing arrangements provided increased opportunities for personal victimisation by other residents. On the other hand, where the disability was less severe, so that

[1] This probably underestimates the numbers of people having an intellectual disability. Based on the distribution of IQ, prevalence of individuals with IQs below 70 would be 2-3 per cent and various surveys in Europe, the UK and the US have returned rates consistent with this estimate. The South Australian figure is also below the 1 per cent estimate which some writers have argued for (Robinson & Robinson, 1976).

independent living was the preferred option, vulnerability to household / property crime was increased.

An important additional outcome from Wilson and Brewer's (1992) study was that the results suggested that the probability of an individual being victimised is influenced by more than situational circumstances which reflect location, time and opportunity. A victim can precipitate or facilitate an offence against him / her by behaviour which is inappropriate because it encourages or provokes the offender or serves in some other way to increase risk.

This possibility was therefore further examined in a study by Wilson, Seaman, and Nettelbeck (1996) which focussed on skills of interpersonal competence—for example the facility to interpret cues in another's behaviour in an appropriate way or to distinguish a reasonable request from an unreasonable one. Based on a large body of research by Greenspan (1979) and others, Wilson et al. argued that interpersonal competence is a separate entity from intellectual ability (as indicated by IQ) or adaptive behaviour (as currently measured by tests for individual responsibility, independence in daily living and how well an individual conforms to social norms). Their study tested the hypothesis that people who had been criminally victimised would demonstrate lower levels of interpersonal competence than others who had not been victimised. The study's design involved comparisons of victims and non-victims matched on age, IQ and adaptive behaviour, so that it also had the potential to demonstrate the relative independence of interpersonal competence from IQ and adaptive behaviour—the two variables by means of which intellectual disability is commonly defined. Results were consistent with both these predictions; participants who had been victims of crime within the previous 12 months scored significantly below non-victims on a measure of interpersonal competence and also on self-reports (but not third party assessments) about their potential to be victimised. As expected, lower scores on the scale of interpersonal competence in part reflected victims' responses which indicated that they had difficulties when discriminating friends from acquaintances or strangers, particularly when setting limits on what friends might reasonably ask one to do. However, victims were also significantly more likely to make inappropriate angry or aggressive responses. Such responses were therefore qualitatively different from other forms of poorly developed interpersonal skills and were clearly consistent with the idea that some behaviours can directly contribute to someone being victimised—that is behaviours which "precipitate" or provoke a reaction from the offender.

Investigations of precipitating factors

A precipitating factor is a behaviour by the victim which, although it may be inadvertent, increases the probability of a crime occurring. Two studies were made of precipitating factors which may contribute to the criminal exploitation of individuals with an intellectual disability. The aim was to follow up Wilson et al.'s (1996) findings, by testing the inference that, if victims of assault do precipitate or provoke that assault by inappropriately angry or aggressive behaviour, then victims should display more feelings of anger than non-victims. Responses by victims of an assault (hit, punched, pushed, kicked) in the past year, and by non-victims, to hypothetical but common, every-day situations formed the basis of comparisons.

Participants were first interviewed to determine their status as "victim" or "non-victim"; and, if the former, full details about the incident(s) were recorded. Each participant also completed tests for verbal and non-verbal IQ, a test of interpersonal competence and an anger inventory designed to elucidate different dimensions of anger—for example, frequency of occurrence, duration, the strength of the emotion and whether it was expressed outwardly or not. Finally, five hypothetical scenarios, in the manner of stories which depicted common situations with the participant as the central character, were described in turn and with due attention to clarifying for each participant what was required. When it was clear that each participant understood the scenario, s / he was asked to describe in as much detail as possible how s / he would react to that situation (for example queuing for a bus and being pushed out of the way; work tools which are being used are taken away, without asking permission). Responsible others—for example, supervisor (workshop), caregiver (residence)—also rated each participant on items designed to provide similar information to that sought from the self-reports by the participants about their experiences and feelings of anger.

Results

A majority of victims had been assaulted by someone they knew, the most frequent types of offences being hit, punched or kicked. Most importantly, interviews clearly revealed that most assaults involved a precipitating or provoking interaction between the offender and the victim; for example some misbehaviour by the offender which drew a rebuke or threat from the victim, which was in turn followed by the assault by the offender. Self-reports to the anger

inventory revealed important significant differences between victims and non-victims. Victims were more likely to show their anger to others and were more likely to feel angry in a wider range of situations. A hostile outlook successfully predicted 70 per cent of victims and 84 per cent of non-victims, with an overall classification accuracy of 77 per cent and the likelihood of a person becoming a victim increased as that person's hostile outlook increased.

Overall third party ratings did not differentiate between victims and non-victims, confirming Wilson et al.'s (1996) observation that supervisors and other responsible caregivers do not necessarily observe aspects of their client's behaviour which clients are themselves aware of and which place them at risk for victimisation. It is possible, of course, that this reflects nothing more than fewer opportunities for supervisors to observe their clients in recreational settings and environments outside of supervisory responsibility.

Responses to hypothetical scenarios also reliably distinguished victims from non-victims. Victims were significantly more likely than non-victims to report that they would say and/or do something in response to the initial behaviour of the offender whereas, conversely, non-victims were more likely to say that they would not do or say anything. There was wide variation in the types of responses made to the hypothetical scenarios but, in general terms, it was obvious that many victims indicated a predilection for physically or verbally abusive acts or confrontative interactions, whereas very few non-victims made such responses.

The picture which emerged from these analyses was therefore highly consistent. Compared to individuals with the same level of intellectual disability but who had not been victims of assault, those who had been assaulted showed similar levels of interpersonal competence except in one very important respect. Their responses to the anger inventory and their accounts of how they would behave in situations described by the hypothetical scenarios suggested that, if confronted by a situation which has potential for an assault to occur, these persons do not ignore the potential offender or quietly withdraw from the situation or act in a manner likely to defuse the situation. Instead, they tend to respond in a confrontative matter which serves to escalate the situation until they are assaulted. Of course, none of this excuses the actions of the aggressor. But it does seem likely that victims of assault are rendered more vulnerable by stable behavioural traits associated with the manner in which they express anger. This inference is drawn from the lack of evidence that victims experienced anger more intensely or more frequently than non-victims. Had victims reported more anger than non-victims, then it could be that heightened hostility is the *consequence* of victimisation, rather than a contributing factor. However, such was not the case. In so far as victims did not necessarily *experience* anger to a greater extent than non-victims, a plausible psychological account for the more pronounced *expression* of anger is that these persons are poor at inhibiting hostile tendencies. The evidence is strong that these behaviours precipitate assault and in this sense the victims therefore contribute to their victimisation.

The second study was undertaken to broaden the focus of specific behaviours which may increase an individual's propensity for victimisation. However, it should be reiterated that there was no intention here to "blame" the victim for being victimised. The aim was to identify behaviour patterns which might increase the vulnerability of a person to criminal victimisation, so that educational intervention could then be applied appropriately. The second study tested the main five factors in a model of victim proneness put forward by Sparks (1981; 1982), using a sample of persons with an intellectual disability who had been victims of physical or sexual assault or robbery. Although these offences are qualitatively different, they all require some kind of exchange between the offender and victim before they can occur. Sparks' five factors were operationalised in terms of multidimensional anger inventories and scales of antisocial tendencies (termed "precipitation" by Sparks. This was also tested in the first study); measures of eccentricities, odd mannerisms and unacceptable vocal habits (termed "facilitation" by Sparks. This is behaviour which is not dependent on interpersonal interaction); age and interpersonal competence, especially the ability to identify risk ("vulnerability"); the extent of unsupervised recreational time in the wider community ("opportunity"); and a care-worker's rating for the person's ability to communicate ("impunity"—attributes of the victim which increase the probability that the offender will not be caught).

Results were drawn from the analysis of spoken interviews which were used to reduce difficulties arising from generally lower than average literacy within the sample; and from interviews with care-workers who were sufficiently familiar with the participants to make judgments about their communication skills and any maladaptive tendencies. Results were consistent with those from the first study. IQ was not related to any of the variables which distinguished victims from non-victims. Victims registered a significantly higher average hostile outlook than non-victims and were

more likely to feel angry in a wider range of situations. They exhibited higher manifest aggression and a higher level of untrustworthiness as judged by care-workers who completed the relevant section of an adaptive behaviour scale. This outcome therefore confirmed the relevance of the idea that angry or aggressive responses in a potentially threatening situation can contribute to an interaction, the end result of which is an assault to the victim by the offender. Beyond this outcome, however, the results provided little to suggest that the other factors from Sparks' model were important. At least for people with an intellectual disability, precipitation—and specifically inappropriately uncontrolled anger—was the important factor.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Taken together, these studies have shown that, among people with an intellectual disability, IQ does not have relevance for predicting who will become victims of crime. At least within our samples, physical assault was the main offence committed against such people and—very significantly—victims showed higher levels of antisocial, maladaptive behaviours which may serve to precipitate the aggression towards them. To some extent, these behaviours may have included odd mannerisms which served to draw the attention of others but, much more importantly, victims showed levels of hostility and aggression when confronted with potentially threatening situations, which others do not show.

In broad terms, these hostile behaviours reflect on other aspects of interpersonal competence but, at this stage, the nature of the relationship is not clear. In part, this is because both studies have focussed on a narrow range of offences—in effect, physical assaults. In addition, in the second study, scores of interpersonal competence turned out to be confounded by location; participants had been recruited from two institutions and analyses found that scores from one were much higher than those from the other. Follow-up enquiries revealed that the former group had recently completed an in-house "protective behaviours" workshop, aimed at training effective responses for situations where there is a risk of victimisation. A controlled investigation of this issue has therefore recently been set up within the second institution, based on the original protocol. The aim is to test whether those completing this training demonstrate higher interpersonal competence than those who do not and, most importantly, whether any such gain is reflected in lower rates of victimisation.

Our analyses have not revealed anything of significance about the locations at which victimisation occurs. Essentially, situation variables appear to be idiosyncratic—perhaps a case of the individual being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Nevertheless, irrespective of setting, our results have clearly shown that some victims are likely to precipitate victimisation, by behaving in ways that are violent, aggressive or antisocial in other ways. Of course, in so far as they are readily identified, these forms of behaviour are amenable to intervention by appropriate training; so that there is a good prospect that the research reported here will turn out to have considerable practical significance. At a more general level, these results highlight the importance of looking to the behaviour of the victim as well as to offender behaviour, and the interaction between these two, when attempting to account for differential propensity for victimisation within various community groups. Criminal justice practitioners concerned with crime prevention should focus on further defining the full range of variables which contribute to vulnerability.

Our investigations of the victimisation of the intellectually disabled indicate that crime does not occur in a vacuum and that the behavioural characteristics of members of the victimised group, impact on the prevalence and nature of crime. As previous research by Wilson and Brewer (1992) has shown, government or social policies that change the nature and / or frequency of interactions between people with an intellectual disability and possible offenders in the community can result in similar effects. Moreover, as a general principle it is imperative that any government committed to crime prevention give close consideration to the possible effects of policy or legislative activities on increasing the vulnerability to victimisation of specific subgroups in the community. These considerations need not be an extraordinarily burdensome impediment to change, but they should serve to identify the systems that ought to be put in place to prevent heightened vulnerability and to ensure that a higher price for change is not paid by those with the least capacity to pay.

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