

Criminal victimisation of the homeless: an investigation of Big Issue vendors in Leeds

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Introduction

Obtaining an accurate picture of the extent of homelessness in Britain is challenging due to the transient and hidden nature of this population, the lack of an accepted definition of the term 'homeless', and because official statistics only include individuals formally acknowledged as homeless by their local authority (Widdowfield, 1999). Unofficial homelessness counts are also considered unreliable (Baron & Hartnagel, 1998; Burrows *et al.*, 1997). The lack of data on the extent of homelessness is matched by a paucity of data on crimes committed against the homeless.

"Homeless persons are among the most vulnerable people in our society" (Kushel *et al.*, 2003, p.2493), yet there is "an absence of the homeless victim from popular consciousness and the criminal justice system" (Wardhaugh, 2000, p.87). Crisis (2005) found that homeless persons are 13 times more likely than a member of the general public to have been a victim of violent crime and 47 times more likely to be a victim of theft. However, literature on the relationship between homelessness and crime tends to focus on homeless individuals as the perpetrators of crime, rather than the victims.

As with crime data for the general population, the personal and lifestyle characteristics of homeless individuals have a significant relationship with levels of criminal victimisation. Young homeless individuals are more likely to be targeted than homeless adults, due to their lack of experience on the streets and their perceived vulnerability (Whitbeck *et al.*, 2001). Males appear more at risk from physical assault and theft, particularly when in male only hostels, and females more at risk of sexual victimisation (McCoy *et al.*, 2001; Kushel *et al.*, 2003; Fitzpatrick & Kennedy, 2000). An unkempt appearance increases the risk of victimisation (Hoyt *et al.*, 1999), with rough sleeping and squatting found to increase the risk of physical victimisation, sexual harassment and abuse (Whitbeck *et al.*, 2001; Fitzpatrick & Kennedy, 2000). Substance abuse and affiliation with deviant peers have been found to affect levels of criminal victimisation

(Hoyt *et al.*, 1999; Wenzel *et al.*, 2001; Whitbeck *et al.*, 2001; Kushel *et al.*, 2003).

Homeless individuals are targeted by both their homeless peers and the general population. However, due to a sense of solidarity “most of the homeless do not victimise each other criminally” (Snow & Anderson 1993, p.106). It appears more common for male members of the public, particularly if under the influence of alcohol, to be perpetrators of crimes against the homeless (Fitzpatrick & Kennedy, 2000; Wardhaugh, 2000). To reduce risk of victimisation, homeless individuals use various strategies such as keeping a low profile, carrying a weapon, staying in a group, earning a tough reputation and owning a dog (Fitzpatrick & Kennedy, 2000; Wardhaugh, 2000). Some create mental maps of safer areas within the cityscape where they feel less at risk from victimisation, with the decision to spend the night on the streets or in a hostel affected by perceived risks of victimisation (Wardhaugh, 2000).

Crimes committed against the homeless are “overwhelmingly underreported” due to a lack of awareness of legal rights, unwillingness to assume victim status, the self-classification of incidents as non-crimes, feelings of unworthiness, difficulty in getting evidence and witnesses, cultural constraints against ‘grassing’ and lack of trust in the criminal justice system (Wardhaugh, 2000, p.92). There is resignation among homeless people that the police will not act on crime reports, as the homeless victim will be perceived as “asking for it” (Cook, 1997, p.47). Whilst there are numerous high-profile zero-tolerance policies against rough sleeping and begging, crimes committed against the homeless are not a priority. Despite the increased likelihood of victimisation, homeless drug users are even less likely to report incidents to the police for fear of prosecution (Goldstein, 1991). Rather than report crimes, homeless victims often deal with them personally, rather than through “formal mechanisms of social control” (Wardhaugh, 2000, p.95) but this potentially turns victim into offender.

Study aims

Outside London, Leeds in West Yorkshire has one of the UK’s largest homeless populations (Crisis, 2005). Using vendors of ‘The Big Issue in the North’ magazine in Leeds as a sub-set of the homeless, this study aims to identify the nature of the criminal victimisation experienced. This involves investigating the sociodemographic characteristics of victims and perpetrators, and how these relate to the crimes committed. It also looks at the reactions of Big Issue vendors to any

criminal victimisation, including whether crimes are reported or dealt with otherwise.

Research implementation

To facilitate access to study participants, the researcher (Scurfield) became a volunteer worker for the Big Issue office in Leeds thereby gaining familiarity and a degree of trust from potential participants. Data collection combined self-completion questionnaires with by face-to-face interviews. Ten semi-structured interviews, lasting between fifteen and thirty minutes, were carried out in the Big Issue office. The small sample size largely related to the unwillingness of many vendors to be involved. There were difficulties in persuading vendors to participate and, for those who agreed, there was uncertainty as to whether they would return their questionnaires and attend at the scheduled interview time. Interviewees' haphazard lifestyles and lack of contact details meant that the researcher was reliant on face-to-face contact at times that suited the participants. To compensate for their time, payment was provided in the form of Big Issue magazines, which vendors normally purchase themselves.

Study findings

In line with previous work (e.g. Kushel *et al.*, 2003), this study showed that homeless individuals experience high levels of criminal victimisation, ranging from verbal abuse to muggings. The majority of this victimisation can be explained by the extended periods of time spent in public, associations with deviant individuals, and dislike or fear of the unknown 'other' by sections of the general public.

Types of victimisation

Verbal abuse, perhaps the least serious type of victimisation in the eyes of the law but psychologically damaging when experienced frequently, was the most common form reported by Big Issue vendors. All but one interviewee reported experiencing verbal abuse regularly, several on a daily basis. The majority of this abuse was by members of the public when victims were selling the magazine, often focusing on the vendor's homeless status or assumed drug abuse. All interviewees reported experiencing physical victimisation by male perpetrators, ranging from stone throwing to serious physical assault. Sexual victimisation was reported by the one female interviewee, who had experienced harassment by a member of the public whilst she was selling the Big Issue.

Half of the interviewees reported being mugged and two had been victims of theft, though only one mugging took place whilst the victim was selling the Big Issue. It might be expected that vendors, standing

alone with money in their pockets, would be easy targets for muggers, however, perpetrators may be discouraged by vendors' visible positions in public locations. Consistent with previous studies (e.g. Whitbeck *et al.*, 2001) most muggings occurred during drug deals by perpetrators known to the victim.

Characteristics of victims

Although this study aimed to use a representative sample of Leeds' Big Issue vendor population, the fact that participants were recruited based on willingness meant that options were limited. Participants were aged between 27 and 38 years and all described themselves as being White British heterosexuals. The participation of only one female, whilst consistent with the vendor sex ratio, made it difficult to draw any conclusions about gender and victimisation experiences. However, it was the female interviewee who reported sexual victimisation and, although she had been targeted by youths throwing stones and spitting, she had never been physically assaulted. She believed this was largely due to her sex and moral codes regarding gender.

Previous studies (e.g. McCoy *et al.*, 2001) showed that substance abuse increases the likelihood of an individual experiencing criminal victimisation. As all interviewees had recently been, or were still abusing drugs or alcohol it was difficult to investigate this. However, the majority felt that the general public tended to assume that all Big Issue vendors were drug addicts anyway. Despite these views, this study found substance abuse directly related to experiences of criminal victimisation. Drug users are often forced to visit deviant areas populated by numerous drug dealers and several vendors reported being physically assaulted, mugged or threatened with a weapon on such visits. One interviewee thought his previous drug abuse affected his reactions to victimisation since he was more aggressive when abusing drugs. Levels of reporting to the police were also affected by whether or not the victim was a drug user.

Whilst some interviewees felt that selling the Big Issue had no effect on levels of victimisation, others believed that they experienced more due to their increased visibility and vulnerability as Big Issue vendors and general assumptions that all vendors are drug addicts. In line with other studies (e.g. Hoyt *et al.*, 1999) interviewees felt that the likelihood of victimisation increased if an individual had an unkempt appearance. However, the requirement that vendors wear an orange bib when selling the magazine was thought by many to override the effect of individual appearance. Only one interviewee felt that working

for the Big Issue helped reduce the levels of victimisation since the public's perception of them as homeless was improved.

Characteristics of perpetrators

Males were found to be more likely to be the perpetrators of crimes against the homeless, though six of the ten interviewees were also victimised by females. The type of victimisation differed depending on the sex of the perpetrator with physical victimisation by females not reported and, whilst females did perpetrate verbal abuse, this occurred less frequently than abuse by males. The age of perpetrators had a noticeable relationship with victimisation. All participants reported that victimisation by persons aged less than 25 years was common with the majority of this victimisation verbal. Older perpetrators were more likely to carry out physical assaults, especially after dark.

Groups rather than individuals carried out the majority of victimisation experienced by interviewees. All reported being victimised in various ways by members of the public, with several interviewees also experiencing victimisation by homeless peers. Victimisation by fellow vendors involved verbal arguments, whereas victimisation by other homeless individuals was carried out to gain property. Only two interviewees reported that perpetrators had possessed a weapon. Incidents tended to be drug-related with perpetrators frequently intoxicated. The occurrence of alcohol-fuelled victimisation dramatically increased after dark and any substance-fuelled victimisation carried out in daylight hours was by drug users.

Spatial and temporal dimensions

Clear spatial patterns to the victimisation experiences of Big Issue vendors emerged with differences in victimisation levels experienced by city centre vendors and those selling outside the centre. Out-of-town pitches were considered safer with incidents of victimisation less frequent and less serious. Most out-of-town victimisation occurred in deviant areas and involved illegal substances. There was a consensus on the variation in victimisation risk levels between the city centre and out-of-town areas but opinions about areas within the city centre were varied. Places noted as being more dangerous were usually mentioned in terms of night time and tended to be places popular with city centre revellers.

Spatial differences in perceived safety had a strong effect on where interviewees chose to sleep. Although only a few participants had been victimised in their place of sleep, the fact that they knew of others who had been affected their decisions. If they were sleeping rough,

interviewees chose places hidden from main thoroughfares or avoided sleeping in the city centre altogether. Depending on past experiences of victimisation, some vendors regarded all hostels as safe places, whereas others avoided particular ones. Interviewees even reported preferring to sleep rough due to the number of drug users in hostels.

All interviewees experienced victimisation during daylight hours and the majority also after dark. Several reported avoiding selling the Big Issue after dark as they felt the reduced people presence and lighting made them more likely to be victimised. Even those who had not experienced night time victimisation reported feeling more vulnerable. Interviewees blamed this vulnerability on a rise in alcohol-fuelled victimisation. There was reported to be a specific increase in the occurrence of physical victimisation after dark often due to the intoxication of perpetrators, particularly groups of adult males.

Reactions to victimisation

Although the majority of interviewees recognised they were often victims of a crime, less than half would report it to the police. The majority had little or no faith in police responses believing they discriminate against homeless individuals. Crimes linked to the victim's substance abuse were not reported for fear of arrest. Interviewees felt that reporting to the police went against the 'street code' to which homeless individuals adhere. Participants even seemed wary of reporting crimes to the Big Issue office. They either saw it as pointless or 'grassing'. However, a few would report victimisation to security guards or City Centre Liaison Officers who worked close to their pitch and were considered more sympathetic than the police.

Most interviewees preferred to deal with victimisation personally rather than involving outsiders. Retaliating to victimisation can lead to a selling ban as verbal or physical aggression goes against the Big Issue vendors' Code of Conduct. The most common strategy for dealing with victimisation was to ignore it, although this was obviously hard if the victimisation was physical. Several interviewees reported that ignoring victimisation often encouraged perpetrators to persist. Interviewees had verbally retaliated to victimisation but this caused an escalation into physical attacks. Those who physically retaliated to victimisation created situations in which they became a perpetrator and risked arrest, but had done so as a matter of pride.

Individuals have developed ways to reduce the risk of victimisation. These strategies were particularly used after dark and included sleeping with a friend, keeping to populated or well-lit areas and avoiding certain areas. Several interviewees reported owning a dog or a

weapon as a way of increasing their safety. One vendor reported that he only asked specific types of people if they would buy the Big Issue to minimise the risk of victimisation. However, a number of participants reported that these crime reduction strategies had less effect on verbal victimisation than on physical abuse and did not work if perpetrators were young or intoxicated.

Conclusion

This study found that criminal victimisation experienced by Big Issue vendors is varied in nature and occurs on a frequent basis. Despite the wide range of victimisation experiences, patterns emerged. Verbal and physical victimisations were common, with the majority perpetrated by members of the public as a result of the victim's homeless status. Whilst perpetrators were mostly groups of young males, females were reported to carry out verbal but not physical victimisation. Males aged over 25 were more likely to physically victimise vendors, and crimes committed by homeless peers predominantly involved theft of property. A number of interviewees thought their position as a Big Issue vendor served to increase the likelihood of victimisation, perhaps because of their visibility.

It is important to realise that the victimisation of this study population is not simply a matter of being homeless. Gender, substance abuse and spatial behaviours affect the types and levels of victimisation experienced. This study confirmed previous findings (e.g. Wardhaugh, 2000) that homeless individuals are generally opposed to reporting victimisation to authority figures and prefer to deal with it personally. If homeless victimisation is to be reduced, it is paramount that police forces view homeless individuals as potential victims rather than perpetrators, with crimes reported by these individuals taken seriously.

This study only involved Big Issue vendors, who have a certain level of involvement in mainstream society and receive more support than many homeless people. Due to the individualised nature of ethnographic research, it is not possible to reach definitive conclusions on homeless victimisation, but to relay the experiences of interviewees. However it is obvious that homeless individuals suffer greater levels of criminal victimisation than the housed population. The issues identified here require serious consideration and strategic responses by policy makers and service providers, with the involvement of members of the homeless population.

Problems of studying the homeless have been highlighted in Radical Statistics publications before. Widdowfield (1999) examined the

difficulties involved in measuring and defining homelessness and limitations of official homelessness statistics. For these and other statistical reasons, Abdul-Hamid (1999) warns that results in relation to surveys of the homeless are unlikely to be generalisable.

A data collection strategy, albeit labour intensive, could be to emulate a previous census of Sheffield's homeless (George *et al.* 1991). Local knowledge indicated sites and a team distributed questionnaires between 8 am and 8 pm on one day. In addition to lack of knowledge of the coverage achieved, problems encountered included refusal to participate, defaced, incomplete forms and illiteracy. Crisis (2005: 29) recommends that for the collection of the British Crime Survey the targeting of people across homeless situations "would be an important step in recognising homeless people's experiences as victims of crime". The experience of the work reported both here and elsewhere suggests this would be fraught with difficulty and that a representative sample may not result.

Acknowledgements

This study would not have been possible without the willingness of vendors of 'The Big Issue in the North' to be interviewed and the support of the staff at the Leeds branch, in particular centre manager, Lucy Pitkin.

The authors were sad to learn of the death of Big Issue vendor Ralph Millward whose body was found on 8th May 2009 outside Marks & Spencer in Westbourne, Dorset. Three boys aged between 14 and 16 have been charged with his murder.

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