

THE HOUSTON VICTIM RECONTACT EXPERIMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

by

**Wesley G. Skogan, Mary Ann Wycoff,
Antony M. Pate and Lawrence W. Sherman**

**with the assistance of
Sampson Annan
and
the Houston Police Department**

**Final Draft Report
to the
National Institute of Justice
The Honorable James K. Stewart, Director
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Police Foundation
Hubert Williams,
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This report summarizes an evaluation of a new program in which police officers recontacted crime victims by telephone. These calls were intended to express police concern for their plight, to provide information about referral services, provide information about filing insurance claims, elicit additional information about the crime, and offer crime prevention literature. This program was intended to reduce victims' fear of crime, increase their commitment to their community, and enhance their satisfaction with the quality of police service.

The program was carried out in Houston, Texas. It was evaluated by the Police Foundation, with the support of the National Institute of Justice.

The experimental evaluation found no positive differences between victims who received the calls and those who did not. The evidence suggests the program may even have had a negative effect upon Hispanic and recently-immigrated Asian victims with limited facility with English.

POLICE AND VICTIMS

As the President's Task Force on Victims of Crime recently argued, victims are often the "forgotten participants" in the criminal justice system. Victims often feel abandoned, powerless, and vulnerable to further attack. In the rush of police business, victims often receive little attention. Police are trained in taking information from victims (to help catch the criminal), rather than giving protection, psychological support, and practical advice to help victims cope with a traumatic event. But the growth of the victims' rights movement has made police increasingly sensitive to the problem, and prompted a search for solutions.

One idea that has been tried in various forms in different cities is post-crime victim assistance. The most common version of this idea is an intensive, court-based program of services for people who either seek out such assistance or are referred to it. The clients of the court-based victims' assistance programs are usually people who have substantial and specific problems, which the programs often have resources to deal with: they house battered women, provide emergency assistance, and deal directly with social welfare agencies to provide services for victims. Such programs are sometimes targeted on victims of serious offenses, such as rape or physical attack, and they can include many hours of direct contact with, and counseling of, the victim.

In contrast to this intensive approach for a small fraction of all crime victims, some police agencies might be interested in trying an extensive approach of doing something for almost all crime victims. Routinely calling upon victims some time after the offense might offer some solace to victims and provide an expression of police concern. What it usually could do--and what leads to some debate over the idea--is to provide good news about recovery of stolen property or arrest of a suspect. Unless the service officer has ready access to the department's information system it could provide much information at all about the progress of the case. But the telephoning officer might be able to provide more advice than could the officer who took the crime report about such practical matters as how to file an insurance claim, prevention strategies for reducing the chances of being a repeat victim, and other public and private agencies to contact for additional help.

Perhaps the crucial difference between the intensive and extensive approaches--or, true assistance and mere recontact--is not what is offered but to whom it is offered. The assistance programs are offered to people who have sought out or been referred for intensive help. The Houston recontact approach was offered to virtually all victims. And as the Houston Victim Recontact experiment revealed, two-thirds of the victims contacted did not report any enduring problems because of the crime.

One potential advantage of the recontact approach which was tested in Houston is it's low cost, and the limited demands it's implementation made on the organization. With little more than a telephone and the time of a police officer's detachment from other duty, it seemed likely that the police could reach out to victims and at least make them feel a little better. However, the program proved to have few of its anticipated benefits.

THE HOUSTON PROGRAM

In late 1982, the National Institute of Justice selected the Police Foundation to help design, and then evaluate, police programs designed to reduce fear of crime. The Foundation proposed two cities (Newark, New Jersey and Houston, Texas) in which to test the effects of fear reduction strategies in the very different contexts of dense, older cities with declining populations and sprawling, new cities with rapid population growth.

Each city planned its own experiments in fear reduction, in consultation with Police Foundation staff. One problem identified by the Houston planning group was the fear of crime produced by victimization, and they looked for ways to deal with it. The planning officer assigned to the problem observed victim

contact programs in the San Diego and Santa Ana, California, Police Departments, and then designed Houston's approach.

Content. The Houston group agreed that recontact calls should be made within a week to ten days after the crime, and that the recontact officer should:

- o Express concern for the victim's welfare.
- o Find out whether victims need any further assistance, and refer them to appropriate sources of aid.
- o Offer to send written crime prevention information or give other advice.
- o Ask victims if they can provide the police with any new information to help solve the crime.

To prepare for making these calls, the planning officer developed a "Victim Information Form," based upon standard offense reports, which could be completed prior to contacting each victim. This helped guide the interview. She also developed separate questionnaires to be used when calling victims of different types of crime, copies of which are available in the Police Foundation's technical report. For household crimes such as burglary, the original complainant was the target of the recontact call.

The first interview question asked victims "...how you've been doing since..." the incident. This allowed them to describe emotions or experiences which had resulted from the crime. The final question was "are there any other problems that I can assist you with? These and other questions were designed to elicit descriptions of specific problems facing victims. To be able to respond to those problems, the planning officer assembled a resource list which identified public and private sources of assistance for a variety of problems. At the time, Houston had no victim assistance program which could provide

anything but counseling, so alternative sources of financial or other assistance had to be identified. The officer also collected crime prevention information which she could mail to those who indicated an interest in receiving it.

Since it was apparent that some victims would be difficult to reach by telephone, she also prepared a letter explaining the Department's interest in contacting victims. This letter, which was to be mailed to those who could not be reached after several attempts, requested that the victim contact her directly.

Measurable Objectives. The Planning Task Force and the evaluators hypothesized that this approach would produce four general outcomes for the victims contacted:

1. Victims' fear of crime would be reduced.
2. Victims' satisfaction with their neighborhood as a place to live would increase.
3. Victims' satisfaction with the quality of police services would be enhanced.
4. Victims would take more steps to protect their home from repeat victimization.

Information Flow Problems. According to the original plan, victims were to be contacted within a week or ten days after each incident. At the district stationhouse, patrol officers were to photocopy incident reports which they had written in the field. These were to be forwarded to the Victim Recontact office. The forms were to be the source of victim's names, telephone numbers, and other information needed to begin the recontacting process.

In actual practice, the flow of these forms was erratic and created a considerable delay in the program. Despite instructions by the district

captain, officers frequently failed to copy their incident reports, which were then sent from the stationhouse to the Records Division without coming to the attention of the Recontact Office. In addition (and this may be more unique to Houston), in many instances, patrol officers did not "write" incident reports at all; rather, they entered their notes directly into the Department's computer from a terminal at the stationhouse. When they did this they were to print copies for the Victim Recontact office, but frequently neglected to do so.

After the program had been in operation about three weeks, a check of the incidents recorded in the central computer showed more crimes recorded for the target area than were documented in reports received by the office. Reminders from the captain did not lead to marked improvement in the rate at which officers made copies of their reports, so the program team turned to the computer as its source of information.

Timing. This change produced a more complete list of victims, but it extended the time between the commission of the crime and recontact with the victim, since there often was a backlog of handwritten reports awaiting entry by the Records Division. Over the course of the project, only 15 percent of the victims were contacted within seven days of the crime; 45 percent were contacted within two weeks, and 82 percent were contacted within one month of when the crime occurred.

Program Reorganization. The report-flow problem, plus the fact that some victims could not be contacted during the day shift (when the recontact officer worked), and a smaller-than-anticipated number of crimes in the area, all combined to produce the result that only 40 victims were contacted during the first four months of the program. In order for the project to be completed and

evaluated on schedule, steps were taken to increase the number of victims contacted each month. Several changes were made: the area was expanded to cover the entire police district and two more officers were assigned to the program.

Style. The addition of the two new officers created considerable variation in how the recontact calls were handled. The original planning group patrol officer, a black female, made all the day shift calls; the two new officers were white males. The original officer appeared to have been more compassionate and sympathetic, and to have emphasized the communication of her concern for victim welfare. Both the male officers tended to emphasize collecting additional facts about the crime, but one was more sympathetic than the other. Thirty percent of all contacts were made by the original, most sympathetic officer, 26 percent by the least sympathetic officer, and 44 percent by the officer whose style lay somewhere in between. The analysis suggests this variation in style made no difference in the impact of the strategy on the outcomes. However, the most sympathetic of the officers elicited almost twice as many mentions of problems by the victims with whom she talked.

Training. It should be stressed that none of the three officers making the calls had any special training in counseling or other aspects of dealing with crime victims. The two officers added to the team were instructed in their duties by the one already conducting recontact calls. This experiment constituted a test of what police agencies can do without extensive training, with ordinary patrol officers temporarily assigned to this kind of duty.

Effort Required. When victims could not be reached after repeated phone calls, officers sent a letter to them asking them to call the victim recontact office. The officers made contact with 327 victims over the first 32 weeks of the program, 235 of which met the evaluation criteria for further study (see below). Of those 235 victims, the officers eventually talked by phone to 93 percent. It took an average of two telephone calls to reach victims who were to be found at all; an average of 2.4 calls were made for all cases. Thirty-six percent of all cases were reached on the first call, and a total of 71 percent were reached by the second call. Only 29 percent required more effort than two calls.

Costs. The major cost of the program was the officers' time. Since much of the time was taken up by paperwork required for the evaluation but not for operations, the actual cost in officer time would normally be less than it was during the experiment. We estimate that about 60 minutes of staff time would be consumed for each completed victim contact.

Time of Day. The cost may be reduced, however, by attempting to make the contacts between 4:00 and 10:00 p.m., when officers seemed to have the greatest success in reaching victims by phone. Contact attempts during the day shift appear to be less productive.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to learn as much as possible about the effectiveness of the victim recontact strategy, the Houston planning group and Police Foundation staff agreed upon a rigorous randomized experiment. This research design

required that a randomly selected half of the eligible victims were to be called and half were not. By using a predetermined method of selection, each victim could be given an equal chance of being recontacted. Such a procedure should produce two groups of victims which are similar in most respects, except whether they were recontacted (the experimental treatment). Any subsequent differences between the two groups of victims could then be attributed to the treatment, rather than to any pre-existing differences in the two groups.

Randomization. The procedure used to randomly assign victims to be called or not was originally based upon a particular digit in the case identification number: even-numbered cases were to be contacted, while odd-numbered cases were not. After 3 months, this method suffered from a mathematical fluke: of the first 69 cases, an inexplicably large number fell into the non-treatment or "control" category. As a result, a change in the assignment procedure was made. The remaining 416 incidents which came into the office were assigned according to the date on which the incidents occurred: those on even-numbered dates were to be called, while the others were not. With this new procedure, only two cases were misassigned (and excluded from the analysis).

Sample. The evaluation sample (of both "treatment" and "control" victims) was limited to these victims:

- o Only victims 13 years old or older, who lived in Houston at the time of the incident were included.
- o Only individual or household victims (store clerks who were victims in armed robberies were included, but not organizational victims of such crimes as burglary or theft).
- o Victims of rape and the survivors of homicide victims were excluded.

o Victims who were part of another experiment in the same area, which was measuring the effects of police neighborhood newsletters upon fear of crime, were also excluded.

These criteria produced an evaluation sample of 485 persons, 235 in the "treated" (or telephoned) group and 250 in the untreated control group. The two groups were compared for their proportions by race, sex, age, type of crime, relationship to the offender, whether weapons were present, and level of injury. Only "weapons present" showed a statistically significant difference between the treatment and control groups (present in 12% of the control cases versus 6% of the treated cases). By this measure only, control cases were slightly more serious than experimental cases. But overall, the two groups were virtually identical.

Type of Crime. Few of the incidents in either group were personal crimes serious. Property thefts predominated. Only 18 percent of the 485 victims suffered assault or robbery incidents. The largest category, some 42 percent, were vehicle-related property crimes: 136 thefts of vehicles and 65 thefts of goods or parts from the vehicles. There were 139 residential burglaries (31 percent of the total).

Interview Method. The data to evaluate the effects of victim recontacts were obtained by personal interviews with both the treatment and control victims. Copies of all project paperwork were forwarded by the Recontact Office to the evaluation staff. The evaluation staff controlled the case assignments to the interview staff, so that not even the survey director was aware of which victims had been called and which had not. This procedure prevented any possible bias from interviewers' expectations.

The interviews, which lasted about 45 minutes, were conducted between early March and mid-July of 1984. About 25 interviewers knocked on victims' doors without an appointment, but preceded by a letter introducing them. Every effort was made to locate victims, even if they had moved. Independent verification contacts were made for one-third of the completed interviews.

Completion Rate. Completed interviews were obtained from 72 percent of all sample victims, including 70 percent of the control cases and 74 percent of the treatment cases. This provided 351 interviews for analysis, 175 in the treatment group and 176 in the control group.

Very few of the non-completed interviews were outright refusals (4% of the total sample). More non-completions were due to inability to find anyone at home after seven or more visits (9%), and language problems, respondents having moved, and other reasons (14%).

Representativeness. The group of victims which was interviewed is not statistically different from the original sample. The proportions of victims by treatment group, crime type, race, sex, age, injury, offender relationship and weapon presence are virtually identical in the original and interview samples. This suggests that the interview sample is representative of the group of victims from which it was drawn.

Outcome Measures. The effects of police recontacts on victims were measured through a series of questions about fear, concern about area personal and property crime, neighborhood commitment, satisfaction with police services, and actions taken since the crime to reduce the risk of further victimization. Most of the questions had been used and refined extensively in prior research on crime, fear, and police. Related questions were combined into index numbers and

scales, to produce more reliable measures. For example, "Fear of Personal Victimization in the Area," was derived from victims' responses to these four questions:

1. How safe would you feel being outside alone in this area at night?
2. Is there any place in this area where you would be afraid to go alone during the day or night?
3. How worried are you that someone will try to rob you or steal something from you while you are outside in this area?
4. How worried are you that someone will try to attack you or beat you up while you are outside in this area?

The technical report describes the exact questions used in these other scales measuring the effects of victim recontact.

FINDINGS

Out of seven scales of the outcome measures, six showed no difference between victims police had called and those they had not called: fear of personal victimization in the area, concern about local property crime, perceived personal crime problems, satisfaction with the area, evaluation of police service, and taking personal defensive actions and household precautions against crime. Since the two groups were almost identical in virtually every respect except the treatment, the findings suggest the phone calls had no influence on these outcomes.

The calls did appear to influence the perceptions of area personal crime problems. As Table 1 shows, the victim recontact strategy appears to have increased the level of recontacted victims on this measure.

TABLE 1
Mean Outcome Scores for Treatment
and Control Groups

Outcome Scale	Mean Scores		Statistically Significant
	Control	Treatment	
Fear of Personal Victimization in Area	1.64	1.67	No
Perceived Area Personal Crime Problems	1.57	1.69	Yes
Perceived Area Property Crime Problems	2.11	2.18	No
Satisfaction with Area	2.23	2.17	No
Evaluation of Police Service	3.18	3.22	No
Defensive Behaviors to Avoid Personal Crime	.40	.40	No
Household Crime Prevention Efforts	.70	.68	No
(N)	(176)	(175)	

Controls for Other Factors. While randomized experiments control for other influences besides the program, they do not take special account of factors that are known from prior research to influence the outcome measures. For example, fear of crime is known to be greater among the elderly and women. An additional analysis of these data controlled for crime type, seriousness, victim-offender relationships, past crime victimization, personal attributes, social isolation, and elapsed time between the crime and the Police Foundation interview. Those tests merely reinforced the conclusions drawn from looking at overall differences: the only significant effect of the recontact is to increase victim perceptions of local personal crime problems.

Effects on Subgroups. It is also possible for treatments to have different effects on different kinds of people, just as some people are allergic to penicillin. In this experiment, it was possible that the recontact treatment may have reduced the fear of some kinds of people and increased the fear of others. A further analysis tested the separate treatment/control differences for various subgroups of victims based on their facility with English, the seriousness of their victimization, their personal vulnerability, their social isolation, their prior victimizations, and the time elapsed between the crime and the Police Foundation interview.

This analysis found no subgroup effects, except among victims who were Hispanic or Asian, for whom the recontacts produced significantly higher levels of both fear and perceived levels of area crime. Such persons were also significantly more likely to report increasing their level of defensive behavior after being recontacted, consistent with their higher fear levels. It is not entirely clear why the program should have had these unexpected effects, but a

substantial portion of it is explained statistically by the poor facility with English (as rated by our interviewers) of many of those victims.

Treatment Variations. While variations in how the recontacts were handled were not randomly assigned, there were differences among recontacted victims in terms of: which officer called the victim, whether the victims indicated they needed some assistance, whether they were referred to another agency, or whether they offered the police new information about the crime. To the extent that a non-experimental analysis can measure the impact of these treatment variations, they did not make any difference.

Contacted Victims' Assessments. Despite the lack of impact on fear and other issues, the victims who were called by police appreciated the call. While some 29 percent of those people the police reported calling said they did not remember the call, the 124 who did remember generally thought the officers

- o were very helpful (79%)
- o were very polite (92%)
- o were very concerned (73%)
- o should continue to call crime victims to offer them support (97%).

On the other hand, most of them failed to recall being directed to any form of assistance. Of the small number who did recall the officers' suggesting such assistance, a large majority (79%) failed to follow through on that recommendation.

CONCLUSIONS

This experiment provides the best evidence yet about the effects of having police officers recontact crime victims by telephone. The results indicate that although no reduction in the fear of crime was achieved, the victims greatly appreciated being recontacted, felt they had been treated in a concerned, polite and helpful manner, and, almost unanimously recommended that such programs be continued. On that basis alone, many police departments may wish to initiate such programs.

The results also show, however, that such contacts, conducted by English-speaking officers in Houston, tended to increase levels of fear and perceived crime among Hispanic and recently-immigrated Asian victims with limited facility with English. So, while further research is clearly necessary to determine what types of recontact are most effective for various types of victims, we recommend police departments not recontact victims whose facility with English is poor unless the call is made by someone who can speak the victims' native tongue.

Cautions. There are several cautions to remember in interpreting this conclusion. One is that this experiment was conducted in only one highly transient, rapidly growing city. Recontacts may have different effects in other kinds of cities, or even in other kinds of neighborhoods.

Another caution is that this experiment only measured program input on victim fear of crime, and not other aspects of the victim's long term mental health and psychological adjustment. A third caution is that this experiment tested the effects of the work of only three individual officers. Although the officers differed in style, these differences did not influence the effect of

the recontacts on victims. But, it is possible that other kinds of officers or officers with special training might have more success in reducing victim fear.

The absence of program effects on the victim's fear of crime may have been due in part to the time lapse between the crime and most of the recontact calls. By that time victims were contacted, most of the trauma from the crime--almost all of which were property, not violent, crimes--may have dissipated, and most of the victims' problems may have already been dealt with. Provisions for contacting victims in languages other than English when necessary also might overcome the negative consequences of the program apparent for such groups. However, we have no experimental information on either of these points.

A more general caution is that other agencies may be able to do what police cannot do. In the absence of the threat implied by police authority (especially for recent immigrants from countries with lawless police), recontacts by others may succeed in reducing fear. Social workers, church volunteers or other groups may wish to conduct their own experiments. It could also be that other methods of recontacting victims could prove more effective than telephone calls. The results of this experiment only make clear that the modest effort to reassure victims which was attempted in Houston had no positive benefits.

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(Box comments by James K. Stewart
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