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Resistance and Injury in Non-Fatal Assaultive Violence

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This article employs National Crime Survey data on stranger assaults to examine the role of victim resistance in warding off attack and reducing the risk of injury. The tactics which victims adopt in the face of potential violence may themselves be violent or nonviolent. The survey data suggest that nonviolent resistance may be effective in warding off attack and preventing injury, but that violent resistance seems to exacerbate both of those outcomes.

Some 3,200 victims of assaultive violence are interviewed each year as part of the National Crime Survey (NCS), conducted by the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Assault is one of the key targets of the NCS. It is by far the most frequent crime which involves actual contact between victims and offenders. It often involves weapons and gang violence, and can result in injury or even death. The NCS itself indicates only about 42% of the incidents in this category are reported to the police, limiting the utility of data on assault drawn only from police files.

The assaults analyzed in this paper involved physical violence, attempted attacks, or threatened harm, but were not aimed at either the theft of property (robbery) or sexual predation (rape). They included barroom brawls, threats on the streets, attempts at mayhem in the bleachers at sports arenas, and gang fights. If reported to the police, they should have fallen into their "aggravated assault" or "simple assault" crime classifications.

The NCS reveals that assault is a far from uniform category of crime. Based upon victims' reports, less than one-half of them were actually attacked, and even fewer—about one quarter—suffered any injury at all. There were many threatened assaults and other forms of

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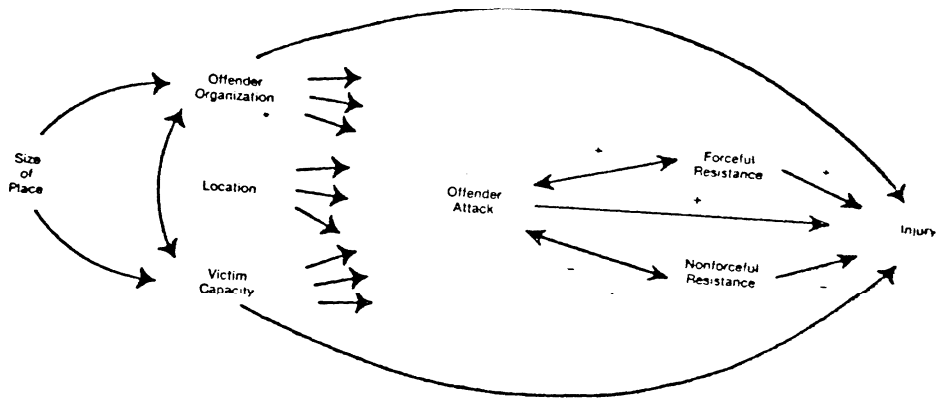
intimidation which promised injury or death, but did not deliver.

Some of this may be attributable to what *victims* did as well as to the strength or plans of their assailants. Some individuals have a greater capacity to resist attack, or appear to do so. Or, they may be more likely for situational or strategic reasons to take countermeasures to fend off attack or limit the extent of their injury. And those countermeasures also may be more or less successful, under various circumstances.

Figure I



Following a general model outlined in Figure 1, this article examines the ultimate success or failure of resistance to assault, taking into account the impact of other key elements of violent crime upon injury outcomes. Because a central feature of any criminal incident is whether or not the parties actually came to blows, it first delineates who is attacked and under what circumstances (the left-hand side of Figure I). Then, the ensuing interaction between victim and offender (the right-hand side of Figure I) is evaluated with regard to its bodily-threatening consequences.

The data suggest that non-violent forms of resistance in assault situations (which include yelling, trying to run away, reasoning with potential assailants, and attracting the attention of passers-by) may ward off an actual attack *and* may reduce the likelihood of injury for those who are attacked. These relationships are quite strong in the data, and the conclusions are hedged only because there is necessarily some ambiguity in the causal ordering of the findings. It is not possible to determine from the NCS if resistance came before, after, or during an attack or even an injury. A victim might be attacked because he or she seemed to threaten the offender, or may fight back only in response to an attack. Injury may be forestalled by nonviolent resistance, or impossible because of an injury. However, these and other data reviewed below present hopeful evidence that victim tactics may limit

violence and injury, and the findings are substantial enough to recommend greater attention to the time-sequencing of victim and offender actions in future victimization studies.

THE DATA

This analysis is based upon all personal crime incidents gathered in the NCS between 1973 and 1979 which fell into the assault category. We examine here only cases which involved *strangers*. This excludes a great deal of domestic and school-yard violence, and other acquaintance or related-party cases. Acquaintance assault 1) evidences different origins, contexts, and outcomes than stranger crime, and 2) is very poorly measured in the NCS (Skogan, 1981). The subset of assaults involving strangers—about 60% of the total—is a far more reliably measured group of criminal offenses.

In addition, we have excluded a group of assaults in which the victims were police officers and security guards. While some of these crimes may have involved them "off duty," it seems most were related to their line of work. A detailed analysis of crimes against law enforcement personnel indicates many of these were "series" incidents, reflecting continuous involvement in violent encounters. Both the causes and the consequences of these incidents differ substantially from assaults upon "civilians," who ordinarily can expect to be free from this threat.

Excluding nonstranger incidents and crimes involving the police or security guards as victims, NCS interviews conducted between 1973 and 1979 uncovered a total of 7,686 incidents of actual or threatened violence. When weighted to reflect sampling and other issues, the total available for analysis fell to 7,331 cases. The most significant disadvantage of these data on assault is, of course, that it does not include homicides. Certainly this is the most serious injury outcome of assault, and we probably underestimate the importance of more lethal weapons like guns and knives in the discussion which follows (Block, 1977). However, the approximately 2.9 million stranger assaults which occur in the U.S. each year far outnumber assault-related homicides, and the statistical findings of this paper would not change dramatically if these numbers were measured by the NCS and included in the analysis.

PROFILE OF VICTIMS AND OFFENDERS

Most victims of assaultive violence were young and male. Sixty-nine percent were in their twenties or younger, another 15% were in their thirties, and the remaining 15% were 40 or older. Overall, 76% of assault victims were males, and 40% of all victims were "young males," under the age of 25. Assault victims were overwhelmingly white: only 6.7% were black, and 1.3% of another race. For blacks, this is below their proportion in the population. The discrepancy is related in part to differences between stranger and nonstranger assaults of blacks and whites. While rates of assault victimization for whites and

blacks are virtually identical, among whites 60% of those incidents are by strangers, but only 45% of assaults against blacks are by strangers.

Compared to the general population, assault victims also are from lower-income families: 43% reported family incomes under $10,000 per year, and only 20% were above $20,000 per year. Again, these figures are affected by the omission of nonstranger assaults. The proportion of assaults which are described as involving strangers *increases* with income, "overrepresenting" higher-income victims in this subset of incidents.

Offenders in these cases were generally older than those involved in other types of personal crime. Overall, 65% of these victims described their assailants as being 21 years of age or older, and only 12% put them under 18 (16%, on the other hand, could not recall or tell). In contrast, 25% of robbery offenders were perceived to be under 18 and 44% over 21. (When multiple offenders were involved, the "age of offender" measure was based upon the youngest of them. Thus, members of "21 or older" gangs all were perceived to be at least that age.) Most assault offenders were alone (as were most victims), and only about 13% of these incidents involved "gangs" (four or more offenders). As the reported age of offenders rose, the frequency of gang incidents dropped. Categories of offender age and number were correlated (Gamma = −.59). There was a slight tendency for older offenders to carry guns and knives, and for younger ones to be armed more lightly, or not at all. As this suggests, the lethality of weapons generally was lowest in gang assaults.

Most assaults were intraracial. During this period, 71% of white victims were threatened or attacked by whites, and 64% of black victims were menaced by black offenders. The effect of focusing upon stranger crime is to *increase* the apparent frequency of interracial crime, for more of the cases involving friends and relatives featured victims and offenders of the same race.

There were other consistent relationships between attributes of victims and offenders. For example, the number of victims involved in an incident and the number of offenders were related. Only 11% of cases with lone victims were perpetrated by gangs; when three or more victims were involved that percentage rose to 27. There were also typically more offenders involved when victims were male. Lone offenders were most likely to attack women. Weapon use—and especially the presence of a gun—also was more common when there were multiple victims present or they were male. Weapon use was generally unrelated to age of victim, but the elderly were not often accosted by a gun or knife. All of this indicates more "difficult to manage" targets—groups, vigorous adults, and males—are more likely to be attacked only when significant offender capacity (measured by their number or firepower) is present. The "hardness" of the potential target seems linked to effort which must be expended to threaten it, in personal as well as in household crimes.

Weapons of any sort were present only in a minority of cases. The NCS asks about the "presence" of weapons rather than their "use," respecting the important role of guns and knives as a source of threat

a a means of intimidating victims. Twelve percent of these cases involved guns, 10% knives, and 16% "other" weapons, including clubs, rocks, and other items of convenience. Thus, 61% of all stranger assaults were "strong-arm" cases not involving weapons at all.

PROFILE OF OFFENSES

A large proportion of assault cases are at least potentially "visible" to bystanders. A majority of them (53%) took place in public, outdoor locations. The next most frequent location for assaults was in commercial establishments, where 22% occurred. Few took place "in school," only 2%. (The latter was greater among nonstranger cases.) In addition to taking place in relatively public locations, 40% of these crimes took place during the day. Sixty percent of victims also described others as being around at the time of the crime.

The time and location of incidents was consistently related to attributes of victims. For example, women were more likely to be victimized during the day (when 31% were women) than at night (when 19% were women). Two-thirds of all males were victimized after dark. Female victims were overconcentrated in crimes which took place "at home." Those incidents also had the highest rate of weapon presence (50%) of almost any subcategory of assaults. (The smallest proportion was for assaults which occurred in school or in offices.) Lone offenders most frequently were active in inside places, especially commercial establishments, while gangs more often worked the streets.

Unlike robbery, in which 40% of victims during this period lived in cities over 500,000 in population, assaultive violence is not distinctively a "big city" problem. Fully 64% of these victims lived in places under 100,000 in size, and more than one-half in places under 50,000. The most striking features of big-city as opposed to small-town violence were the distinctive attributes of victims and offenders in various places. Size-of-place (of victims' residences) was unrelated to whether or not they were actually attacked, what they did in response, or the consequences of the crimes. However, assault in larger cities was more likely to involve gangs, younger offenders, and the use of weapons—especially knives. Victims in big cities were more likely to be elderly, and the proportion of assault victims who were females rose with city size. All of these features of assault were in turn related to the more immediate situational factors and outcomes of interest here, suggesting an *indirect* rather than direct effect of urbanization upon patterns of assaultive violence.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF VIOLENCE

As indicated above, less than a majority of these "assault" victims actually were attacked. Of those who were attacked, most reported they were hit, slapped, knocked down, or otherwise beaten. Only 11% indicated they were struck with an object, shot at, or attacked with a

knife, and the data on injuries indicates not all of those weapon attacks found their mark. Overall, 23% of assault victims were injured in some way. Twenty percent reported bruises, broken bones, or other "battering" injuries, and only 3% described knife or gun wounds. Eight percent of assault victims needed some medical care as a consequence of their injury; 4.5% were treated by doctors or in hospital emergency rooms, and only 1.3% were so seriously hurt they stayed at least overnight in a hospital.

VICTIM RESISTANCE

This article focuses upon the forceful and nonforceful actions which assault victims reported taking to protect themselves during these incidents. The causal ordering of those measures and the actions of assailants is ambiguous. However, there are clear patterns of victim and offender action, and both are related to the eventual outcomes of incidents. Figure I sketched the analytic categories into which we will be classing indicators of various features of assault cases, and the relationship between them (indicated by some general "causal" arrows).

The self-reports of assault victims interviewed between 1973 and 1979 indicate about 73% did something in their own defense. The NCS questionnaire allowed them to describe adopting any of five different tactics. About 15% of all victims (20% of those doing anything at all) reported taking two or more actions.

One group of victims, about 25% of the total, reported adopting one or two *forceful* tactics. Twenty-three percent reported they hit, scratched, or otherwise physically resisted attack, and 2% indicated they used or brandished a weapon of their own. Another (slightly overlapping) group of victims recalled engaging in *nonforceful* forms of resistance. Fifty-five percent of all assault victims fell in this category. Overall, 27% reported they "ran away" or "left the scene," 17% "reasoned" or "argued" with the offender or even threatened him, 10% screamed, yelled, or otherwise tried to attract the attention of others or scare the attacker away, and 10% did "other" things. (The total adds to more than the number of victims in this category because a fair number of people reported taking more than one action.)

Of course, victims could take both forceful and nonforceful measures, and 7% said they did. The distinction between forceful and nonforceful resistance on the part of victims is an important one, for it is strongly related to their eventual fate. As Hindelang, et al. (1978) report for selected cities, forceful resistance is strongly related to injury. Offender action, in conjunction with the form of victim reaction, plays a significant role in determining frequency of actual attack and the outcome of assault cases.

THE DETERMINANTS OF ACTUAL ATTACK

The paramount factor shaping both victim actions and the eventual outcome of assault cases is, of course, whether or not a physical

assault—as opposed to a threatened or attempted attack—takes place.

The principal determinants of that act seem to lie in who offenders are, how they are armed and organized, and the potential visibility of the incident to bystanders.

Actual attacks by strangers were generally more common when the assailants were young, in groups, and armed with such weapons of convenience as clubs, bottles, and rocks. As the number of offenders present increased, so did the probability of attack. As weapons become more deadly, their actual use in an attack declined. Only 19% of the cases in which a gun was present involved an actual attack; knife cases featured somewhat more physical assault. These factors also tend to go together: gangs are less likely to use deadly weapons, and when three or four offenders are involved together in an assault they are usually described as young.

In addition, several factors which reflect the visibility of incidents to potential witnesses also are related to attack. Surprisingly, *more* visible offenses are those which most frequently involve actual attack. Assaults which occurred "outside" and those in which people other than victims and offenders were also nearby, both led more frequently to an attack. However, nighttime assaults also more often involved an attack, and those are presumably less visible to other nonparticipants.

The only remaining characteristics of stranger assaults which seem consistently to be related to the probability of an actual attack occurring are the age of the victim and the number of victims of the offense. Younger people and multiple victims were more frequently assaulted. Two other important victim attributes, sex and race, were not related to the likelihood of physical violence. And, although a substantial proportion of those assaults involved victims and offenders of different races, the interracial as opposed to intraracial character of the offense played no role in the likelihood of actual attack.

All of these attributes of assaults are related (or not) as indicated to the likelihood of attack even when their effect is examined jointly in a multivariate analysis. It is bands of young, lightly armed males roving in fairly public places, and confronting other young males—often not alone—who are similar to themselves, who are most likely to actually come to blows.

PHYSICAL ATTACK AND VICTIM RESISTANCE

The relationship between physical attack and the forms of resistance offered by assault victims is clear: the risk of attack was below average when nonforceful resistance was offered; actual attacks were more frequent than average when forceful resistance was encountered; offering *both* forceful and nonforceful countermeasures was linked to the highest risk of attack; doing nothing at all put the victim at an average level of risk, within 2 percentage points of those who did anything at all. Again, we do not know the ordering of victim or offender actions in time, and some forms of resistance may follow what offenders do while others may anticipate or perhaps stimulate it.

Offering nonforceful resistance was linked to a lower likelihood of actually being attacked. Those who did not were attacked in 54% of assaults, while those who resisted nonforcefully were attacked only 35% of the time. The correlation (Gamma) between these measures was −.33. As many victims of these crimes did offer some nonviolent resistance (55 percent), actual attacks were less frequent than threats or attempted assaults.

On the other hand, attempting either form of forceful resistance detailed in the survey was strongly related to a higher likelihood of attack. Thirty-four percent of those who did not respond violently to their predicament were assaulted, but 71% of those who did so were assaulted. The correlation (Gamma) between violent resistance and assault was +.66.

OTHER SOURCES OF RESISTANCE

In addition, other attributes of these situations and participants were related to the form which victim resistance took. Not surprisingly, some factors which were related to the probability of being attacked also were linked to forceful resistance. Forceful resisters were more likely to be young males, accosted at night while others were nearby. Older victims, and particularly the elderly, offered fewer forcible countermeasures. (The same is true just for central cities; see Hochstedler, 1981). Males were by far (Gamma = +.50) the most likely to offer one or two kinds of physical self-protection. The presence of a gun seemed to discourage forcible resistance, but knives or other less lethal weapons were linked to more combativeness. About 30% of those confronted with a knife or less lethal weapon reported "hitting or kicking" at their attacker, but for cases in which a gun was present physical resistance of any form was reported by only 9%. The most frequent form of resistance by those confronted with a gun was to try to run away. Forceful self-protection was more common when lone offenders were involved, when the incident took place in inside rather than outside locations, and among residents of smaller towns.

Nonforceful self-protection, on the other hand, was more frequent among white, female adults who were alone when they were accosted. (Their age was unrelated to levels of nonforceful resistance.) When non-offenders were present at the scene, these nonviolent actions became more common. Nonforceful self-protection was more frequent in outside locations, during the day, and when other victims also were involved—in short, when the potential for intervention by nonparticipants might be higher. As in rape, assaults at home (which would be the least visible to nonparticipants) involved the least resistance of any form. Interestingly, efforts at nonforceful selfprotection were more frequent than average when deadly weapons, and especially guns, were involved. In the face of this threat victims reason with, yell at, or attempt to evade their attacker, but they do not attempt to fight back.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF ASSAULTIVE VIOLENCE

The feared outcome of these cases is, of course, injury or death. While our reliance on the NCS precludes any systematic analysis of the *fatal* consequences of assaultive violence, the survey was designed to gather details about physical injuries and the kind and costs of medical care involved when victims did survive.

The relationship between offender action, victim reaction, and the outcomes of these assaults is clear. When people are attacked, forceful resistance is related to an increased risk of injury; adopting nonforceful protective measures is related to a reduced risk of injury; doing nothing at all does not seem to affect risk of injury to any substantial degree, leaving it at about the same level as for those who do something; taking both forceful and nonforceful measures seems to yield the worst possible outcome. Again, the causal relationship between these factors is uncertain. Victims may be injured because they put up an unsuccessful fight against an unexpectedly determined foe. However, they also may not resist effectively because they are suddenly attacked and injured, rather than receiving an injury "commensurate" with the vigor of their defense.

Overall, about 23% of those involved in these assault cases described some form of injury during a subsequent interview. Respondents who were not attacked could not describe any injury, and that was a majority of all victims. For this reason, a direct "causal arrow" between attack and victim injury was depicted in Figure I. Not surprisingly, those two measures are correlated (Gamma = +.67). The relationship between victim resistance and injury can only be examined for those who were attacked (which may overrepresent *ineffective* resistance which does not succeed in warding off attack). Among those who were attacked, victims who resisted forcibly were more likely to report an injury. Sixty percent of these forceful resisters were injured, in contrast to 48% of those who did not try to protect themselves in some forceful way. The correlation between these two measures (Gamma) is +.23.

Nonviolent self-protection, on the other hand, was as strongly related to *lack* of injury. Forty-six percent of those resisting this way reported an injury, in contrast to 58% of all others. The correlation (Gamma) between these two measures is −.21. Among those who recalled taking both forceful *and* nonforceful measures, 63% were injured.

While there are other determinants of injury outcomes in assault, these three factors—offender action and victim forceful and/or nonforceful resistance—are the immediate features of the situation which explain most about the results. Together, those three situational measures explain 40% of the variance in our simple "injured or not" dichotomy, and all three direct paths are statistically significant.

In addition to those situational factors, other characteristics of victims and offenders independently affect the outcome of assault. Controlling for attack and resistance measures, older victims, those at-

tacked by lightly armed gangs and after dark, were all more likely to report an injury. Many other bivariate correlates of injury change sign or disappear from view when situational factors are controlled for, however. For example, males and younger victims are more likely to recall an injury, but when the immediate features of the situation are taken into account, sex becomes insignificant and the relationship between age and injury reverses itself. However, even in a multivariate analysis being attacked by a gang outside and after dark remained a significantly more risky circumstance. The simple presence of a weapon of convenience also portended badly. Controlling for other factors, the presence of a gun was consistently linked to a lessened risk of injury (short of death), and knife cases fell at about the average. It was the least lethal weapons—those rocks, clubs and bottles which often were actually used—which had the greatest non-fatal impact. In addition, there were a substantial number of injuries in cases in which knives were present. Knives do not seem to offer enough of a threat to encourage victim submission. There was a great deal of forcible resistance by the (largely male) victims of knife assault. However, knives clearly carry with them an enhanced capacity for inflicting *serious* injury, and a greater percentage of these cases led to injury and required medical care than corresponding gun or "other weapon" incidents.

The addition of these factors to the explanatory model does not add much to its overall predictive power, however. Together they only raise the explained variance from 40 to 41%. Their greatest effect is doubtless indirect through their role in shaping the propensity of offenders to carry out an actual attack and encouraging or discouraging various forms of victim resistance.

CONCLUSIONS

Some studies of victim resistance in personal crimes have been so bold as to offer advice to the reader, presumably a potential victim. Hindelang, et al. (1978:85) advise us not to attack offenders. Block (1977:87) warned, ". . . the most likely combination of favorable payoffs, if you must resist (in robbery) is against multiple offenders." However, a careful consideration of the limits of the NCS questionnaire and the lack of information on the sequencing of victim and offender actions described there, should preclude such advice-giving on the basis of survey data alone (Lentzner and DeBerry, 1980). The data do describe a *close association* between the adoption of nonviolent countermeasures and avoidance of both attack and injury, and one careful study of police file data on assault which did attempt to reconstruct who-did-what-to-whom-when (Block, 1977) came to a similar and causally stated conclusion.

Studies of crimes other than assault also have come to the same conclusion. In big cities, women who resist in potential rape incidents are more likely to be battered in a non-sexual way (but less likely to be raped) (McDermott, 1979). Usually it seems best to give up your

goods and not to resist in robberies (Hindelang, et al., 1978; Block, 1977). The biggest problem remains the absence of homicides from this (and other survey) data. Block (1977) found a much greater role for guns in his study of police files on homicide and assault: their *use* or not was strongly related to the likelihood of death and (negatively) to victim resistance. In both robberies and assaults, resistance was positively related to death. On the other hand, Block could not examine the correlates of actual attack or injury in his assault data because the contingencies of victim reporting and police recording virtually eliminated all attempted and non-injury assault cases from police files. Victimization survey data present a far superior picture of unsuccessful or non-injury-producing crime. In light of these and other data, what the victim does appears highly significant in actually shaping the ultimate outcome of assault cases: it probably is better to do something than nothing (unless a gun is present), and to adopt only non-threatening countermeasures.

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