



ABORIGINAL VICTIMISATION AND OFFENDING: THE PICTURE FROM POLICE RECORDS

Jacqueline Fitzgerald and Don Weatherburn

This paper documents the extent of over-representation of Aboriginal people among victims of crime and offenders. Particular attention is paid to offences against Aboriginal women and children. The data presented show that Aboriginal people are between 2.7 times and 5.2 times more likely than residents of NSW as a whole to become victims of violent crime. Aboriginal women are between 2.2 times and 6.6 times more likely to become victims of violent offences than NSW women as a whole. Most violent offending against Aboriginal women and children is committed by Aboriginal men.

INTRODUCTION

Aboriginal people in New South Wales are significantly over-represented among victims who report criminal incidents to the NSW Police, and among offenders identified by the NSW Police. This paper outlines the extent of this over-representation and discusses some of its implications.

Police data are not an ideal source of information about victimisation and offending because many offences are not reported to the police, while only a small proportion of offenders are apprehended. This is especially true in relation to crime in Aboriginal communities because Aboriginal people are, if anything, even less likely to report crime to police than non-Aboriginal people.

For this same reason, however, the true rate of Aboriginal victimisation and offending is almost certainly higher than that which is revealed in police data. Police data, therefore, are likely to provide a fairly conservative picture of the extent of the problem of Aboriginal victimisation and offending.

ABORIGINAL VICTIMISATION

Table 1 shows the total number of victims recorded by the NSW Police in 2000 and the number of Aboriginal victims. It also details the victimisation rate of Aboriginal persons and all persons in NSW in 2000. The victimisation rate is calculated by expressing the number of recorded victims as a proportion of the residential population of the group.

Table 1: Number and victimisation rate of Aboriginal victims and all NSW victims, for selected offences# in 2000

Offence type	ATSI victims		Total NSW victims	
	Number	Victimisation rate per 100,000	Number	Victimisation rate per 100,000
Murder	8	5.5	107	1.7
Sexual assault	231	159.3	3,704	57.3
Sexual assault against children	123	84.8	2,045	31.6
Robbery	68	46.9	15,347	237.4
Assault	4,699	3,240.8	68,854	1,065.3
Assault (DV related)	2,573	1,774.6	21,815	337.5
Grievous bodily harm	211	145.5	2,012	31.1

Sexual assault against children is a subset of Sexual assault. Assault (DV related) and Grievous bodily harm are both subsets of Assault.

Table 2: Number and victimisation rate of female Aboriginal victims and all female NSW victims, for selected offences# in 2000

Offence type	Female ATSI victims		Total female NSW victims	
	Number	Victimisation rate per 100,00	Number	Victimisation rate per 100,00
Murder	4	5.4	44	1.4
Sexual assault	185	251.7	3,294	101.4
Sexual assault against children	88	119.7	1,735	53.4
Robbery	19	25.8	4,144	127.5
Assault	3,076	4,184.9	32,824	1,010.3
Assault (DV related)	2,114	2,876	19,137	589.0
Grievous bodily harm	65	88.4	431	13.3

Sexual assault against children is a subset of Sexual assault. Assault (DV related) and Grievous bodily harm are both subsets of Assault.

The salient features of Table 1 are:

- With the exception of robbery, Aboriginal persons are over-represented among victims for each of the violent offences considered when compared with the NSW average.
- Aboriginal persons are three times more likely than the NSW average to be a victim of murder, sexual assault, sexual assault specifically against children, and assault.
- Aboriginal persons are five times more likely than the NSW average to be a victim of a domestic violence related assault or an assault occasioning grievous bodily harm.

ABORIGINAL FEMALE VICTIMISATION

Table 2 shows the total number of female victims recorded by the NSW Police in 2000 and the number of female Aboriginal victims. It also details the victimisation rate of Aboriginal women and all women in NSW in 2000.

It can be seen from Table 2 that:

- With the exception of robbery, Aboriginal females are over-represented among victims for each of the violent offences considered when compared with the NSW female average.
- Aboriginal females are four times more likely than the average NSW female to be a victim of murder.
- Aboriginal females are more than twice as likely as the average NSW female to be a victim of a sexual assault or sexual assault specifically against children.
- Aboriginal females are four times more likely than the average NSW female to be a victim of an assault, domestic violence related or otherwise.
- The grievous bodily harm victimisation rate among Aboriginal females is seven times that of the average NSW female.

ABORIGINAL OFFENDERS IN ABORIGINAL VICTIMISATION

Table 3 examines the relationship between Aboriginal offenders and Aboriginal victims. That is, it shows the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander status of people who offended against Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander victims during the year 2000.

The salient points to note about Table 3 are that where the victim was Aboriginal:

- The offender was also Aboriginal in four of the seven murders.
- The offender was also Aboriginal in 73 per cent of sexual assaults.
- The offender was also Aboriginal in 72 per cent of specifically child sexual assaults.
- The offender was also Aboriginal in 80 per cent of assaults.
- The offender was also Aboriginal in 85 per cent of domestic violence related assaults.
- The offender was also Aboriginal in 86 per cent of assaults occasioning grievous bodily harm.

ABORIGINAL OFFENDING

Table 4 shows the total number of alleged offenders in each offence category recorded by the NSW Police in 2000 and the number of alleged Aboriginal offenders. It also details the offending rate of Aboriginal persons and all persons in NSW in 2000. The rate of offending is calculated by expressing the number of offenders as a proportion of the residential population of the group. To give a broader picture of Aboriginal involvement in crime, Table 4 also includes information on motor vehicle theft, break and enter and multiple offender sexual assault.

Table 3: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status of the associated offender for selected offences[#] in 2000, NSW[†]

Offence type	ATSI status of offender in incidents against ATSI victims					
	ATSI offender		Non-ATSI offender		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Murder	4	57.1	3	42.9	7	100.0
Sexual assault	102	73.4	37	26.6	139	100.0
Sexual assault against children	51	71.8	20	28.2	71	100.0
Robbery	16	72.7	6	27.3	22	100.0
Assault	3,155	80.3	772	19.7	3,927	100.0
Assault (DV related)	2,000	84.8	358	15.2	2,358	100.0
Grievous bodily harm	153	86.4	24	13.6	177	100.0

[#] Sexual assault against children is a subset of Sexual assault. Assault (DV related) and Grievous bodily harm are both subsets of Assault.

[†] Note that the figures in this table are lower than in the previous tables for several reasons. Firstly, the table only includes incidents with both an offender record and a victim record. Secondly, while many incidents have multiple victims and offenders, just one of each is represented in this table. Thirdly, it only includes cases where the ATSI status of the offender is known.

The main points to note from Table 4 are:

- Aboriginal persons have rates of offending significantly higher than the NSW rate for each of the offences considered in this table.
- Aboriginal persons are five times more likely than the NSW average to commit a murder or robbery.
- Aboriginal persons are three times more likely to be an offender in a sexual assault or child sexual assault matter.
- Aboriginal persons are five times more likely to be implicated in multiple offender sexual assault than the NSW average.
- Aboriginal persons are six times more likely than the NSW average to be implicated in a motor vehicle theft or an assault, domestic violence related or otherwise.

- Aboriginal persons are seven times more likely than the NSW average to be an offender in a break and enter.
- Aboriginal persons are eight times more likely to be an offender in an incident of grievous bodily harm.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The information presented in this brief indicates that, in the year 2000, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in NSW reported becoming victims of crime at rates far higher than would be expected given their numbers in the NSW population. This is particularly true of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. Aboriginal victimisation in violent crime is predominantly the result of offending by other Aboriginal people. In well over half the offences

Table 4: Number and offending rate of Aboriginal alleged offenders and all NSW alleged offenders, for selected offences[#] in 2000

Offence type	Aboriginal offenders		Total NSW offenders	
	Number	Rate per 100,000	Number	Rate per 100,000
Murder	14	9.7	125	1.9
Sexual assault	194	133.8	2,915	45.1
Sexual assault against children	95	65.5	1,627	25.2
Sexual assault involving multiple offenders	40	27.6	337	5.2
Robbery	583	402.1	5,185	80.2
Assault	8,001	5,518.2	58,587	906.4
Assault (DV related)	2,890	1,993.2	21,589	334.0
Grievous bodily harm	331	228.3	1,757	27.2
Break and enter	2,749	1,895.9	16,470	254.8
Motor vehicle theft	1,000	689.7	7,226	111.8

[#] Sexual assault against children and Multiple offender sexual assault are both subsets of Sexual assault. Assault (DV related) and Grievous bodily harm are both subsets of Assault.

against Aboriginal victims reported to the police and considered here, the offender was also an Aboriginal person.

Aboriginal people are over-represented generally among persons arrested by police. This is true not only where violent offences against other Aboriginal people are concerned but also in relation to property crimes such as motor vehicle theft and break and enter. It is very unlikely that is over-representation in police statistics can be explained solely by differential reporting and detection by police. It is far more likely that, for various reasons, the Aboriginal people are at much greater risk both of offending and of falling victim to crime.

In the long-term it is important to address the structural causes of Aboriginal crime and victimisation (e.g. poverty, unemployment, family breakdown). Levels

of violence and crime in Aboriginal communities, however, are severe enough to warrant immediate action. Unfortunately, the short-term options for dealing with violent crime are fairly limited. A reduction in alcohol consumption will help where the violence is alcohol related. The conventional response to problems such as sexual assault and the sexual abuse of children, however, is to encourage greater reporting of the offence so that offenders can be identified, prosecuted and sanctioned. The difficulty with this option is that, at least in the short term, it will further exacerbate Aboriginal over-representation in the criminal justice system. The policy challenge, then, is to find ways of bringing immediate relief from crime to Aboriginal people (particularly women and children) without further increasing the already high levels of contact between Indigenous Australians and the criminal justice system.