Crime Victimization and Political Participation

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Crime victimization is an important cause of political participation. Analysis of survey data from five continents shows that individuals who report recent crime victimization participate in politics more than comparable nonvictims. Rather than becoming withdrawn or disempowered, crime victims tend to become more engaged in civic and political life. The effect of crime victimization is roughly equivalent to an additional five to ten years of education, meaning that crime victimization ranks among the most influential predictors of political participation. Prior research has shown that exposure to violence during some civil wars can result in increased political participation, but this article demonstrates that the effect of victimization extends to peacetime, to nonviolent as well as violent crimes, and across most of the world. At the same time, however, crime victimization is sometimes associated with dissatisfaction with democracy and support for authoritarianism, vigilantism, and harsh policing tactics, especially in Latin America.

On March 28, 2011, Juan Francisco Sicilia was murdered, a bystander fatally drawn into Mexico’s bloody drug war. Juan Francisco was a 24-year-old student and the son of renowned poet Javier Sicilia. Upon learning of his son’s death, the elder Sicilia published a heartfelt open letter in the news magazine Proceso (Sicilia 2011). Linking Juan Francisco’s case to the tens of thousands of other senseless killings in Mexico each year, the letter was at once a searing indictment of Mexico’s criminals and politicians and an eloquent call to action. Sicilia urged his fellow citizens to take to the streets, using their voices, their bodies, and their pain to protest the wave of violence wracking their society. Hundreds of thousands responded enthusiastically, and soon the key refrain from Sicilia’s letter—“¡Estamos hasta la madre!” or “We’ve had it up to here!”—was echoing across the country. Seemingly overnight, the poet had become one of Mexico’s most influential activists (Archibold 2011; Moorhead 2011; Padgett 2011).

Sicilia’s story is clearly unique, but it raises a provocative question: When people are the victims of crimes, can this motivate them to become more active in politics? Education, socioeconomic status, age, gender, family history, and personality are all known to influence whether, and to what degree, individuals participate in politics. Yet even the most comprehensive studies of political participation have never considered crime victimization as a potential cause of participation, perhaps because prior research suggests that crime victims should be less politically active than their peers. Other negative shocks such as divorce (Kern 2010) and job loss (Rosenstone 1982) are associated with decreases in voter turnout. Crime might be expected to have an even stronger depressive effect because of its high costs, both monetary and psychological. Indeed, crime victims are generally portrayed as distrustful (Brehm and Rahn 1997; Carreras n.d.), unhappy (Powdthavee 2005), and withdrawn (Cárdenas 2002; Elias 1986; Marks and Goldsmith 2006; Melossi and Selmini 2000; Skogan 1990).

However, new research suggests that victimization may have some positive consequences. Bellows and...