Dangerous Intimacy: Toward a Theory of Violent Victimization in Active Offender Research

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Active offender research contributes to criminology, but a major concern for active offender researchers is that they will be victimized in the course of their work. With that concern in mind, experienced criminologists have recommended strategies for minimizing danger during research, but they have done so in a largely atheoretical manner. This paper calls for the development of a theory of violent victimization in active offender research, and poses the question: What determines the amount of violent victimization in such research? Answering this question is important because it has the potential to provide practical strategies for reducing victimization and, in turn, increasing the amount of research conducted and the number of insights that flow from it. This paper theorizes that active offender researchers are less likely to be threatened or physically harmed as they become more familiar with recruiters, criminals, and their relational ties. The paper concludes with a set of theoretically situated, practical tips for how criminologists might reduce the amount of violent victimization in active offender research.

Active offender research has provided criminology with unique and important insights into crime (see, among many others, Copes, Forsyth, and Brunson 2007; Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Jacobs 1999, 2000; Jacobs and Wright 2006; Jacques 2010; Jacques and Wright 2008a, 2008b; Miller 2001; Piquero and Rengert 1999; St. Jean 2007; Topalli 2005; Venkatesh 2006; Williams 1989, 1992). Despite the substantial benefits of research with active offenders, this methodological strategy is potentially dangerous (Wright and Decker 1994, p. 29). Active offender researchers have been threatened, stalked, robbed, and murdered in the course of their research (Jacobs 2006; Lee 1995). As observed by an experienced group of criminologists, “[a] serious problem confronting many social scientists is assuring the physical safety of ethnographers and other staff conducting research among potentially violent persons who are active in dangerous settings” (Williams, Dunlap, Johnson, and Hamid 1992, p. 343).
"But danger must be accommodated if we are to make the strides we need to make to really understand offender behavior" (Jacobs 2006, p. 167). Recognizing the dangers inherent in studying active offenders, researchers have recommended various strategies for avoiding violent victimization (see, e.g., Jacobs 1998, 2006; Sluka 1990; Williams et al. 1992). Although the value of this work is undeniable, its limitation is its atheoretical orientation (see Jacques and Wright 2008c; Venkatesh 1999, p. 285).

Without theory, scientific progress is slowed. Yet criminologists often have failed to view their methodological experiences through a theoretical lens, thereby rendering their recommendations difficult to falsify (see Popper 2002). What is needed, then, is a theory of violent victimization in active offender research. Although elements of that preliminary theory may turn out to be incorrect, the long-term goal should be to develop an empirically tested, tried-and-true theory of method that allows criminologists to reduce their probability of being violently victimized in the course of active offender research. Such a theory would not only have the potential to reduce violent crimes against researchers, it may also increase criminological research by providing scientists with the tools needed to safely collect data that are fundamental to documenting, explaining, and reducing crimes of all sorts.

The purpose of this paper is to stimulate discussion among criminologists seeking to understand variability between individual researchers, groups of researchers, and research situations in the rate and magnitude of violent victimization. To do so, the paper provides a definition of "violent victimization in active offender research," suggests an explanation of it that is built on existing theories (Black 1998; Cooney 2006; Jacques and Wright 2008b), then illustrates the theory by describing the experiences of active offender researchers (Arias 2006; Jacobs 2006; Mieczkowski 1988), and concludes by discussing future directions for criminology and offering a set of theoretically situated, practical recommendations for reducing the likelihood of violent victimization in active offender research. In the end, the hope is that developing a theory of victimization in research will lead to practical strategies for crime control that increase the amount of research that occurs and the number of insights that flow from it.

Violent Victimization in Active Offender Research: Concepts and Assumptions

The first step in the development of a theory of violent victimization in active offender research is to specify what that behavior "is." How is it defined? How is it measured empirically? What definitionally distinguishes violent victimizations relevant to "active offender research" from violent events that are not relevant to that process? The second step in developing such a theory is to lay bare the reasons for why studying such a behavior is an important endeavor.
A Definition of Active Offender Research

Active offender research is defined here as the process of obtaining information about criminals through conversation with or observation of unincarcerated persons involved in crime. There are at least three distinct components of active offender research: recruitment; remuneration; and data collection (Jacques and Wright 2008c, 2010; also see Dunlap and Johnson 1999; Wright, Decker, Redfern, and Smith 1992).

Recruitment is defined as the process of interacting with criminals and convincing them to provide data (Jacques and Wright 2008c). This is a quantitative variable measurable by the amount of social interaction spent convincing criminals to participate in research. For example, the more times a researcher asks a particular offender or group of offenders to participate in research, the greater is recruitment.

Remuneration is defined as the payment for participation in research (Jacques and Wright 2008c). This is a quantitative variable measurable by the amount of objects or services provided to subjects and recruiters for participation in research. For example, the more a participant is paid for cooperation in research, the greater is remuneration.

Data collection or data quality is defined as the process whereby knowledge about crime is ascertained by criminologists through conversation with or observation of criminals (Jacques and Wright 2008c). Data collection is a quantitative variable measurable by the quantity of valid information obtained. For instance, the more truthful information an offender provides, the greater is data collection/quality.

Defined as such, active offender research is a social, empirical, and quantifiable variable measured by (1) the number of recruitments or the amount of effort (e.g., time) spent on recruitment, (2) the number of remuneration payments or the amount of remuneration provided, and (3) the number of data collection sessions (e.g., interviews) or the amount of valid data collected. More recruitment, remuneration, or data collection is equivalent to more research.

A Definition of Violent Victimization

Violence is defined as "the use of physical force against people or property, including threats and attempts" (Black 2004, p. 146). Violence is a quantitative variable measurable by any consistent indicator of damage and destruction, such as the number of murder threats, shots fired, punches thrown, or the number of bruises or gunshot wounds. There are two prominently studied forms of violence: predatory and retaliatory (Cooney and Phillips 2002; Felson 1993; Jacques and Wright 2008a).

"Predatory violence is [defined as] the use of force in the acquisition of wealth or other resources," whereas retaliatory violence is defined as "the
handling of a grievance with aggression” (Black 2004, p. 146, italics in original). A person has been violently victimized when someone else threatens or uses physical force against them as a means of resource acquisition (predation) or social control (retaliation).

A Definition of Violent Victimization in Active Offender Research

The above definitions of active offender research and violence suggest that violent victimization in active offender research is defined as threats or physical force against a researcher that occurs during or due to the recruitment of, remuneration of, observation of, or conversation with unincarcerated lawbreakers. Violent victimization in active offender research is a quantitative variable measurable by (1) the amount of physical harm experienced, and (2) the number of threats received.

The Interplay of Active Offender Research and Violent Victimization

There are two implicit assumptions in the criminological literature that deserve discussion because they lie at the very heart of the debate surrounding violent victimization in active offender research: (1) the more criminologists do research with active offenders, the greater is violent victimization in active offender research; and (2) the greater is violent victimization in active offender research, the less active offender research occurs (see Jacobs 2006; Williams et al. 1992).

In other words, common sense tells us that when criminologists come into contact with persons known to be involved in crime, especially violent kinds such as robbery or murder (see Jacobs and Wright 2006; Wright and Decker 1994), then of course there is a greater opportunity for victimization among criminologists. If, for instance, there is only one interview with an active offender conducted by one researcher, then there is only one opportunity for victimization. But if, say, there are 100 interviews with 100 active offenders conducted by a researcher, then there are 100 opportunities for victimization.

Common sense also suggests that the more often a criminologist is victimized in the course of research and the more serious are such events (as measured by injury or other factors), then there is less active offender research conducted. It stands to reason, for instance, that criminologists would be less likely to conduct active offender research if the likelihood of victimization during that activity is one in ten rather than one in a hundred or one in a thousand.

Although the above ideas are common sense, there are theoretical reasons why active offender research might attract victimization, and also why victimization repulses research (see, e.g., Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990; Hindelang, Gottfredson, and Garofalo 1978). Opportunity theory suggests, for example, that the more often a potential target (e.g., a researcher) comes into contact
with a motivated offender (e.g., a potential participant) in the absence of a capable guardian (such a jail or prison guard) the more chance there is for victimization/crime (see, e.g., Cohen and Felson 1979). Deterrence/rationality theory explains behavior as the outcome of choices intended to maximize benefits and minimize costs; this perspective therefore predicts that active offender research decreases as victimization related to this work increases because it represents an increase in costs (see, e.g., Clarke and Cornish 1985). The danger associated with obtaining data from active offenders is not surprising to criminologists because the logic of various theoretical perspectives suggests that interacting with criminals and seeking information about outlawed behavior increases the odds of personal victimization.

In short, there are many good reasons why violent victimization is integrally intertwined with active offender research. These reasons provide the basis for two predictions, that are likely explainable with many different theoretical perspectives: (1) violent victimization in active offender research increases as the amount of active offender research increases; and (2) active offender research decreases as the amount of violent victimization in active offender research increases.

Although those ideas are on some level nothing more than common sense, they are empirical predictions that can be falsified or supported through the collection and analysis of data that bear on the interplay between active offender research and violent victimization.

If those predictions are verified, then it becomes clear that maximizing criminology’s potential depends on the development of a theory that explains why there is variability between active offender researchers (individuals and groups) and research situations in the rate and seriousness of violent victimization. The development of a valid theory of this kind is important because its logic can be used to develop practical strategies for increasing active offender research—and the criminological knowledge that comes from it—by reducing the likelihood and magnitude of violent victimization in the course of such work.

All of the above raises the question: 

**Holding constant the amount of active offender research, what factors affect the amount of violent victimization in active offender research?**

**Toward a Theory of Violent Victimization in Active Offender Research**

The third key step in developing a theory of violent victimization in active offender research is to view that behavior through a particular theoretical lens, and then make falsifiable predictions regarding how variability in specific factors influences the behavior in question. Specifically, between situations, people, or groups, what factors affect the amount of violent victimization in active offender research?

Although many theoretical perspectives may be able to answer this question, the present paper looks at this phenomenon through the lens of pure sociology.
(see Black 1976, 1995, 1998; Cooney 2006). The goal of pure sociology is to use sociological variables to explain sociological behavior (Black 1976, 1995).

There are at least five variables of interest to pure sociologists: wealth, relationships, organization, culture, and social control (Black 1976, 1998). Pure sociologists attempt to specify how variability in any of those factors explains the others and itself. For instance, a pure sociologist might ask, "How does any given act of social control (e.g., incarceration) affect relationships (e.g., marriage), organization (e.g., gang membership), culture (e.g., educational attainment), wealth (e.g., income), or subsequent acts of social control (e.g., further incarceration)?"

At present, there are three purely sociological theories with direct relevance to developing an understanding of violent victimization in active offender research: Jacques and Wright’s (2008c) preliminary theory of active offender research; Black’s (1983, 1998) theory of self-help; and Cooney’s (2006) theory of predation.

Jacques and Wright’s Theory of Active Offender Research

In an attempt to transcend the limits of atheoretical methodology and move criminology toward a more scientific understanding of the knowledge production process in active offender research, Jacques and Wright (2008c) have begun to develop a preliminary "theory of method" nested in the paradigm of pure sociology (also Jacques and Wright 2010).

They have proposed a preliminary theory of active offender research that, in part, uses relational distance, or intimacy, to explain variation in recruitment, remuneration, and data collection (quality). Relational distance is defined as the degree to which people participate in each other’s lives (Black 1976, p. 40). "It is possible to measure relational distance in many ways, including the scope, frequency, and length of interaction between people, the age of their relationship, and the nature and number of links between them in a social network" (1976, p. 41).

In short, the relational distance between two people decreases as the quantity of social interaction between them and their relational ties (e.g., friends, family, neighbors, and associates) increases.

All else equal, for example, two persons who have traded drugs are closer in relational distance than two people who have never traded, ... and two persons who have talked together about drugs are closer in relational distance than two persons who have never communicated. (Jacques and Wright 2008c, p. 26)

There are at least three key roles in active offender research: researcher; recruiter; and, active criminal. Researcher is defined as an actor who records data about crime obtained through conversation with or observation of active criminals. Recruiter is defined as an individual who attempts to convince active criminals to participate in research, but who does not record data. Active
criminal is defined as an unincarcerated person who is involved in crime. Researchers, recruiters, and criminals vary in the amount of time they have spent in each other’s company. By definition, the more researchers, recruiters, and criminals have interacted with each other or each other’s relational ties, the closer they are in relational distance.

Jacques and Wright (2008c) asked the question: “How does relational distance between researchers, recruiters, and criminals affect subject recruitment, resource expenditure, and the quantity and quality of data produced?” (p. 26). In offering a tentative answer to that question, they deduced three falsifiable propositions: As the relational distance between a researcher, recruiter, and criminal decreases (1) the probability that the criminal will be recruited increases, (2) the amount of remuneration provided to the criminal decreases, and (3) the quantity and validity of data provided by the criminal increases. This theory suggests, for example, that a researcher’s or recruiter’s criminally involved friend or family member is more likely than a stranger to be recruited for active offender research, to receive less remuneration, and to provide a plentiful amount of truthful information.

Black’s Theory of Self-Help

Black (1983, 1998) has developed a theory of self-help that has direct relevance for understanding violent victimization in active offender research. Self-help is defined as “the handling of a grievance by unilateral aggression ... It ranges from quick and simple gestures of disapproval ... to massive assaults resulting in numerous deaths” (Black 1998, p. 74). Thus, retaliatory violence is one kind of self-help, but not the only kind. Violent retaliation is defined as the use of threats or physical force in punishing a wrongdoer (Black 1983, 2004).

Black’s (1998, pp. 74-79) theory of self-help argues that retaliatory violence is affected by several different sociological variables, one of which is relational distance. According to Black’s theory, “as the relational distance between persons grows smaller, the likelihood of retaliatory violence between them declines” (pp. 76-77). Black’s theory suggests, for instance, that friends are less likely than strangers to solve disputes with violence.

Cooney’s Theory of Predation

Violence, however, is not always moralistic (Cooney and Phillips 2002; Jacques and Wright 2008a). Cooney (2006) has begun to construct a theory of predation that also is useful in explaining violent victimization in active offender research. Predation is broadly defined as “the non-moralistic seizure of the person or property

1. Note that while a criminal simultaneously can be a recruiter or researcher, a recruiter cannot simultaneously be a researcher because, by definition, a researcher records data but a recruiter does not. If the “recruiter” records data, then that recruiter is a researcher (even if the researcher "recruits" criminals for research).
of another” (Cooney 2006, p. 58), and includes many acts of fraud, burglary, auto-
theft, robbery, kidnapping, and murder (see Cooney 2006; Cooney and Phillips 
2002; Jacques and Wright 2008a). Thus, predation is sometimes violent, but not 
always. Violent predation is defined as the use of threats or force to take an actor’s 

Cooney’s (2006) theory of predation holds that violent predation is affected 
by the relational distance between prey and predators. According to Cooney’s 
theory, as two persons become closer in relational distance, the likelihood that 
they will prey on one another declines. Cooney’s theory predicts, for example, 
that two persons who are strangers are more likely to violently prey on each 
other than are friends.

A Theory of Violent Victimization in Active Offender Research

When combined, the logic of Jacques and Wright’s (2008c) theory of active 
offender research, Black’s (1998, pp. 76–77) theory of self-help, and Cooney’s 
(2006) theory of predation suggest that violent victimization in active offender 
research may behave as a function of the relational distance between research-
ers, recruiters, and criminals. Stated as a formal proposition:

Violent victimization in active offender research decreases as the relational 
distance between researchers, recruiters, and criminals decreases.

In other words, and all else equal, the more often researchers interact with 
recruiters, criminals, and their associates (e.g., friends and family), the less 
likely they are to be violently victimized for reasons related to recruiting, 
remunerating, and collecting criminological data from active offenders (also see 

The above proposition predicts, for instance, that a researcher who is friends 
with many criminals is less likely to be violently victimized while conducting 
active offender research than one who has spent time with just one criminal, 
but that person is less likely to be victimized than a researcher without any 
social links to the underworld. In addition, the proposition predicts that the 
more intimate a researcher is with a recruiter, the less likely that researcher is 
to be assaulted, robbed, raped, or killed during the course of research. The 
proposition further suggests that the more intimate a researcher is with the 
relational ties of a recruiter or criminal (i.e., their friends or family), the less 
likely that researcher is to be victimized for reasons related to active offender 
research.

Descriptions of Violent Victimization in Active Offender Research

Do the experiences of active offender researchers provide empirical support for 
the above proposition? Below, the paper provides descriptions of violent
victimization in active offender research culled from the extant literature (Arias 2006; Jacobs 1998; Mieczkowski 1988). These experiences illustrate how the amount of intimacy between researchers, recruiters, and criminals affects the likelihood that researchers are violently victimized for reasons related to the recruitment of, remuneration of, observation of, or conversation with active criminals.

Arias’ Study of Drug Traffickers in Rio de Janeiro

Arias’ (2006) study of drug trafficking in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, demonstrates how closer relational distance can deter violent victimization in active offender research. Brazil has a longstanding reputation for criminal violence, and Arias contributes to criminology by examining how politics and networks intertwine to influence lawbreaking. His study is based on findings from qualitative data obtained in conversations with and observations of law-abiding and criminal persons living in Rio’s shantytowns, or favelas.

The relational distance between Arias and criminals

In the beginning of his study, Arias (2006) “sought to build individual ties that would help [him] gain access to favelas” (p. xi). Eventually, he came into contact with an employee of a non-governmental organization, who provided him “with a long list of names and phone numbers of civic organizers in favelas around the city” (2006, p. xii). Arias spent time in three favelas, and in each community sought to “establish strong connections with leaders of the local Associação de Moradores (Residents’ Association, AM), the civic organization that generally mediates relations between outsiders and the community. In two of the three favelas” that Arias studied, the AM leaders “had very close ties to the local drug gang” (p. xii). Thus, we might say that, over time, Arias closed relational distance with the AM leaders, who were close in relational distance to members of the local drug gang.

Relational distance and violent victimization in active offender research

Does Arias’ experience bear out the theory that violent victimization in active offender research decreases as the relational distance between researchers, recruiters, and criminals decreases? According to Arias, he experienced fewer confrontations while conducting research as he increasingly interacted with community members. It is theoretically interesting that as Arias became closer in relational distance to favela residents, the number of confrontations between them grew smaller. In Arias’ own words:
When I started work, drug dealers often challenged me as I walked by their bocas. I always responded that I was visiting one of my connections in the AM, and they invariably let me in without further problems. After awhile if an inexperienced lookout stopped me, others would just say something like, "Oh, he's a friend of Josias, its cool," and let me go by. In one community, the adolescent gang member who kept watch became friendly and joked with me as I went to work. (2006, p. xii)

On one occasion, Arias was threatened by a drug dealer, but his close connections with the godfather of a drug trafficker’s child deterred his violent victimization. As Arias recounts:

The following event drives home the usefulness of ... connections [to the AM]. One night I was working very late in the favela of Tubarão, one of my research sites, interviewing a drug addict and his girlfriend, when a dealer decided that I looked like an X-9 (undercover informant) that gang members suspected operated in the favela. If he and other traffickers decided this was true they would have brutally murdered me. The addict I had interviewed tried to explain things but did not get anywhere. Despite all of this, I was never really nervous since I had the protection of the AM president who was also the godfather of an important drug trafficker’s child. On other occasions this had always worked to resolve potential problems. After I explained myself and my work, the trafficker apologized, suggested I take care and that I, perhaps, should not stay out on the street so late. (2006, p. xii)

In sum, what we see from Arias’ experience in studying criminal behavior in Brazilian shantytowns is that violent victimization is affected by the relational distance between researchers and criminals, which is in part dependent on their common relational ties. Had Arias been less well connected with AM members or less familiar with drug gang members (i.e., further in relational distance from them), the threats against him may have escalated to assault, robbery, kidnapping, or even murder. And had Arias’ experience with victimization been more common or serious, then he may have conducted less subsequent research.

Mieczkowski’s Study of Heroin Dealers in Detroit

Mieczkowski’s (1988) study in Detroit, Michigan, provides further support for the theory that the amount of intimacy between researchers, recruiters, and criminals affects the amount of violent victimization in active offender research. "Starting in the 1970s, the major newspapers and other media in the city of Detroit began reporting on groups of teenage street-level heroin dealers ... These heroin-selling units were collectively referred to as 'Young Boys, Inc.' (YBI)” (1988, p. 40). Mieczkowski (1986, 1988) made methodological and theoretical contributions to criminology by interviewing heroin dealers operating as part of the YBI.

The Detroit study was based on the interview technique, coupled with observation and description of the subjects within their own natural setting. It involved
meeting contacts on the street ... and meeting subjects in various settings such as dope houses. (Mieczkowski 1988, p. 40)

Relational distance between Mieczkowski and criminals

Mieczkowski’s (1988) “major procedural problem was how to gain access to YBI drug dealers A plausible and nonthreatening entrée was needed” (p. 40). Access to the underworld came through one of Mieczkowski’s connections, a student named “Dave”:

Attempts to establish an initial contact with Young Boys operatives came about through the voluntary work of a contact named Dave...[,] a student in a criminal justice course who became familiar with my research ambitions. He said that he could put me in touch with numerous drug operatives of the Young Boys type. Dave was able to help me for several reasons. First, he was a resident in the Jeffries Housing Project, a major center of heroin activity. He was not only a resident but had lived there since birth. Second, although Dave was not a drug dealer or user, his two brothers were both drug dealers. Third, he knew nearly all of the major dealers in the Jeffries. (1988, p. 41)

As relates to measuring the intimacy between persons involved in the Detroit project, Mieczkowski initially had no direct ties to heroin dealers and so was far away from them in relational distance. However, his student, Dave, bridged that distance. Dave’s close relational distance to criminals gave Mieczkowski access to the information held by them (also see Jacques and Wright 2008c, pp. 28–29). Because all of the dealers who participated in the study were unknown to Mieczkowski prior to the interview, his relational distance from each of them depended wholly on Dave’s relational distance from each individual; the less well Dave knew a participant, the further in relational distance that participant was from Mieczkowski.

Relational distance and violent victimization in active offender research

Does Mieczkowski’s study of heroin sellers indicate whether or not violent victimization in active offender research diminishes as the relational distance between researchers, recruiters, and criminals lessens? Two “frightening” incidents experienced by Mieczkowski suggest that victimization is affected by relational distance. As recounted by Mieczkowski:

Consideration was given to the potential dangers and risks involved in approaching and sustaining contact with heroin vendors ... To those knowledgeable about the street heroin trade and those familiar with the city of Detroit, fear of violence is not an unfounded concern ... Dave felt that there was some inevitable risk to us, but he was confident that his supervision and prior solicitation of informants would obviate extreme risk ... Thus, the problem of violence was not
eliminated, but it was reduced to a reasonable degree ... In fact, there were only two experiences which were frightening.

Cruising sometimes led to interviewing on the steps of a housing unit ... Sometimes we would sit and talk as a group. While engaged in one such scene, with Dave absent, I was harassed by an unknown individual who was very belligerent and demanded money from me. He jostled me several times and continued to demand money. Eventually, he departed after receiving some money from me ...

[In a separate frightening incident,] Dave had hastily set up an interview with a recently released convict who had a heavy background in drug dealing. Dave told me the person had just been released from prison where he did time for "taking a dude out"—killing him. One of Dave’s sisters was dating the individual, and through that route Dave had made contact with him. Since he was not a neighborhood person, Dave had no firsthand knowledge of his credibility ... Dave had briefed him on the project ... as we were introduced ... At the start of the interview, the person became quite upset and insisted that he had nothing to do with drugs ... As time wore on, the person became increasingly agitated. Attempts at terminating the interview were met with his insistence that I sit down, shut up, and listen to him. (1988, pp. 41-43, italics added)

In short, Mieczkowski’s lack of direct ties to drug dealers meant that his relational distance from research participants was mostly dependent on Dave’s relational distance from them. The greater Dave’s relational distance from the participant, the greater was Mieczkowski’s relational distance from the participant. The theory of violent victimization in active offender research proposed in this paper suggests that as researchers, recruiters, and criminals become less intimate, the quantity of victimization increases. During the course of his research, the most "frightening" incidents experienced by Mieczkowski involved individuals who were, in comparison to other participants, further away in relational distance. Had Dave known the "individual who was very belligerent," then Mieczkowski may have not been harassed. Conversely, had Dave been further in relational distance from the murderer (e.g., by not being the brother of his girlfriend), Mieczkowski may have been murdered or otherwise violently victimized. And had Mieczkowski been more often or more seriously victimized, then he may have conducted less subsequent research.

Jacobs’ Study of Crack Dealers in St. Louis

Jacobs (1998, 2006) was robbed and then stalked for reasons related to his criminological research in St. Louis, Missouri (see Jacobs 1999). In a groundbreaking study, Jacobs explores the world of street-corner crack-cocaine dealing. What motivates crack selling? What is the social organization of crack selling? What is the role of predation in crack markets? How do the police affect crack dealing? What is the future of crack selling? Jacobs addresses these questions and others with qualitative data obtained during interviews with 40 active crack dealers.
Relational distance between Jacobs and criminals

Jacobs gained access to the information possessed by active crack dealers by building social ties with them, their friends and family, and fellow community members. Jacobs describes his initial attempts at accessing the underworld:

I began frequenting a neighborhood known for open street-level crack sales... For weeks, I would either walk or slowly drive through the area to try to be recognized, attempt to capitalize on what Goffman has called second seeings... Unfortunately, this process did not go as easily as Goffman suggests... A few more weeks passed and more trips, but I had yet to make any direct contacts. (1999, p. 13)

In need of data and apparently out of better options, Jacobs turned to a more dangerous approach (also see Jacobs 2006):

Finally, I decided to get out of my car and approach the individuals I had seen dealing ... I told the dealers who I was and that I wished to take a few minutes out of their day to interview them about street life. Predictably they scoffed, accused me of being the "poh-lice," and instructed me to "get the hell out of here." Two days later, I tried again. I showed the dealers my university identification and told them that the interviews would be confidential ... and that they would be paid for their time and effort. (Jacobs 1999, p. 14)

This second interaction with the street dealers was a positive turning point in the study, as it opened up the collection of valid and plentiful data. The individuals who Jacobs initially approached served as recruiters for the study, and from that point onward the sample began to snowball:

The first five respondents were recruited directly from the dealers I initially approached. Four of these five became contacts and provided six additional referrals. Three of these six then referred nine additional respondents. This chain referral method was carried out to secure a forty-person sample. (Jacobs 1999, pp. 19-20)

As relates to measuring the relational distance between Jacobs and street criminals, his description of the recruitment process suggests that Jacobs is closer in relational distance to the crack dealers he "initially approached" than he is to the dealers contacted thereafter since he has known the former group of dealers longer.

Relational distance and violent victimization in active offender research

Does Jacobs’ experience provide any supporting or counter evidence for the theory that violent victimization in active offender research decreases as the relational distance between researchers, recruiters, and criminals decreases? To this point, little has been said about why it is necessary to distinguish
between predatory victimization and retaliatory victimizations. Jacobs’ (1998) case shows why such a distinction has important theoretical implications.

Recall that the difference between predation and retaliation is that the latter is social control, or conflict management, whereas the former is exploitation (Cooney and Phillips 2002; Jacques and Wright 2008a). If a criminologist is violently victimized for reasons related to active offender research, the victimization is deemed predatory if it did not result from a pre-existing grievance. Conversely, if the researcher’s perceived wrongdoing prompted their victimization, then the incident is deemed retaliatory.

Jacobs (1998) was violently victimized by a crack dealer, known as Luther. This victimization began as a robbery but escalated to more than a month of stalking. Jacobs’ description of his research-related, violent victimization is perhaps the most lucid such account available in the extant literature:

"Yo, Bruce, come on down the set [neighborhood]. Meet where we usually do," Luther said, and hung up the phone. A trusted contact for an ongoing study on street-level crack dealers and a crack dealer himself, I had no reason to question him. "Just another interview," I thought... I went to the bank, withdrew fifty dollars for subject payments, and drove fifteen minutes to the dope set I was coming to know so well.

Luther flagged me down as I turned the corner. The seventeen-year-old high school drop-out opened the door and jumped in. "Swerve over there." He pointed to a parking space behind the dilapidated three-story building he called home. "Stop the car—turn it off."... He produced a pistol from under a baggy white T-shirt. "Gimme all your fuckin’ money or I’ll blow your motherfuckin’ head off!"

"What the fuck is your problem?" I said, astonished that someone I trusted had suddenly turned on me. The gun was large, a six-shooter, probably a long-barrel .45 ... Why was he doing this? How did I get myself into the situation? It was the kind of thing you hear about on the evening news but don’t expect to confront, even though I knew studying active offenders risked such a possibility.

I frantically pondered a course of action as Luther’s tone became more and more hostile. He was sweating. “Just calm down, Luther, just calm down—everything’s cool,” I trembled. “Don’t shoot—I’ll give you what you want. "Gimme all your fuckin’ money!" he repeated. “I ain’t fuckin’ around—I’ll waste you right here!” I reached in my left-hand pocket for the fifty dollars and handed it over. As I did so, I cupped my right hand precariously an inch from the muzzle of his gun, which was pointing directly into my abdomen. I can survive a gunshot, I thought to myself, as long as I slow the bullet down.

He snatched the five, crisp ten-dollar bills and made a quick search of the vehicle’s storage areas to see if I was holding out. "Ok," he said, satisfied there were no more funds. "Now turn your head around!" For all I knew, he was going to shoot me and run; his right hand was poised on the door handle, his left on the trigger. “Just take your money, man, I’m not gonna do anything.” “Turn the fuck around!” he snapped.
As I pondered escape routes, he jammed the gun into his pants as quickly as he had drawn it, flung open the door, and disappeared behind the tenements. I hit the ignition and drove slowly and methodically from the scene, grateful to have escaped injury, but awestruck by his brazen violation of trust.

If this were the end of the story, things would have normalized, I would have learned a lesson about field research, and I would have gone about my business. But Luther was not through. Over the next six weeks, he called my apartment five to ten times a day, five days a week, harassing, taunting, irritating, baiting me.

I’d arrive home to see the answering machine lit up with messages. "I can smell the mousse in your hair—huh, huh, huh," his sinister laugh echoing through the apartment. One message ... caught my undivided attention: "897 Longacre—huh, huh, huh," he laughed as I heard him flipping through the phone book pages and identifying my address. "We’ll [he and his homeboys] be over tomorrow." I didn’t sleep well that night or for the next six weeks. (Jacob 1998, pp. 160–162, brackets in original)

After being robbed and stalked for six weeks, Jacobs was emotionally exhausted yet felt as though there was no end in sight to his torture. He “had to do something” (p. 162). The chance came when "the telephone rang, and Luther’s number displayed on the caller ID” (p. 162). Jacobs (1998) “picked up the phone and started talking” to his victimizer (p. 162):

"What do you want?"

"Why do you keep hangin’ up on me? All I want is to talk."

"What do you expect me to do, like you? [sardonically, on the verge of losing it.] You fuckin’ robbed me and I trusted you and now you call me and leave these fuckin’ messages and you want me to talk to you? [incredulous]"

"I only did that ’cause you fucked me over. I only ganked [robbed] you 'cause you fucked me."

"What are you talking about?"

He proceeded to explain that without him, none of the forty interviews I obtained would have been possible. True, Luther was the first field contact to believe that I was a researcher, not a cop. He was my first respondent, and he was responsible for starting a snowball of referrals on his word that I was “cool.” But after he could no longer provide referrals, I moved on, using his contacts to find new ones and eliminating him from the chain. My newfound independence was inexplicable to him and a slap in the face. He wanted vengeance; the robbery and taunting were exactly that. (Jacob 1998, pp. 162-163, italics and brackets in original, bold added)

Jacobs’ victimization clearly demonstrates why it is theoretically necessary to distinguish between acts of predation and retaliation (also see Cooney and
Phillips 2002; Jacques and Wright 2008a). Without distinguishing between predatory and retaliatory violence, his story would suggest that closer relational distance does not reduce the odds of violent victimization. Although the distinction between predation and retaliation reduces theoretical simplicity and generality, the distinction is necessary because the nature of events preceding a situation affect (1) whether a victimization occurs, and, if it does, (2) the magnitude of that victimization.

It makes common sense, for instance, that a researcher who “wrongs” a criminal is more likely to be violently victimized than the one who does not. In Jacobs’ own words:

Luther felt wronged, he was mad, and he took it out by robbing me. I believe the robbery would never have happened had I been more attentive to the special referral role he had come to play in my research and had I communicated my gratitude and reasons for moving on more clearly. Nobody deserves less … but in my quest for more data, I lost sight of this. (2006, p. 160)

It is necessary to “hold constant,” the nature of events preceding victimization because otherwise the true effect of relational distance—whatever it may be—will remain unknown or be misinterpreted.

Allow us to speculate about what might have happened if, all else equal, Jacobs (or another researcher) had either closer or further relational distance from Luther (or another person) at the time of the conflict. Put differently: If Jacobs had wronged Luther in the same way but was more (or less) intimate with that person, would he have been violently victimized? And if he was victimized, would the event have been more or less serious? The theory proposed in this paper suggests, for example, that if Jacobs and Luther had been friends or family rather than persons who met recently on a street, then Jacobs would have been less likely to be robbed or stalked as retribution for his wrongdoing. On the other hand, had Luther and Jacobs been less well acquainted (e.g., had Luther not been Jacobs’ first respondent and recruiter, but rather his tenth or fortieth), then he may have been physically harmed during the robbery or stalking, perhaps even murdered as payback for his perceived betrayal. And had Jacobs’ victimization been a regular or serious event, then he may have conducted less subsequent research.

Implications for Reducing Victimization and Increasing Research

Active offender research is an important part of qualitative criminology (see, e.g., St. Jean 2007; Topalli 2005; Venkatesh 2006; Williams 1989, 1992; Wright and Decker 1994, 1997). The benefits of active offender research, however, occasionally come at the cost of violent victimization (see, e.g., Jacobs 1998, 2006). Recognizing this, various researchers have recommended strategies for avoiding and minimizing danger during research (see, e.g., Sluka 1990; Williams et al. 1992). Although these recommendations are valuable, they have remained
a theoretical, which is problematic because they are difficult to falsify (see Popper 2002).

Therefore, this paper has called for the development of a *theory of violent victimization in active offender research*. The goal is long term: to develop an empirically tested, tried-and-true theory of method that provides criminologists with practical strategies to reduce their probability of being violently victimized for reasons related to the recruitment of, remuneration of, observation of, or conversation with unincarcerated criminals. The value of such a theory is that reducing the amount of victimization related to research should increase research and the insights that flow from it. Thus, the question was posed: *Holding constant the amount of active offender research, what determines the amount of violent victimization in active offender research?*

This question was addressed by defining “violent victimization in active offender research” and combining the logic of three purely sociological theories (Black 1998; Cooney 2006; Jacques and Wright 2008c) to construct an empirically falsifiable proposition. For the time being, we suggest that active offender researchers are less likely to be threatened or physically harmed as they become more intimate with recruiters, criminals, and their relational ties (e.g., friends and family), holding all else constant (e.g., whether the event was predatory or retaliatory).

**Effect of Relational Distance on Victimization and Research**

Theorizing violent victimization in active offender research is important because such theories have implications for understanding and increasing the amount of knowledge produced by criminologists. If, as we suggested in the beginning, active offender research decreases as the amount of violent victimization in active offender research increases, then the amount of relational distance between researchers, recruiters, and criminals should have an effect on the amount of research conducted. Stated as a formal proposition:

*Violent victimization in active offender research decreases as the relational distance between researchers, recruiters, and criminals decreases, and, in turn, the amount of active offender research increases.*

Stated differently, the ideas proposed in this paper suggest that researchers who have more intimate relationships with offenders and recruiters are more likely to recruit, remunerate, or collect data from criminals because they are less likely to be violently victimized in their course of their research (cf. Jacques and Wright 2008c).

The above proposition predicts, for instance, that a researcher who is friends with many criminals is more likely to do active offender research because that person is less likely to be violently victimized than a researcher who has spent time with just one criminal, but that person is less likely to be victimized than a...
researcher without any social links to the underworld. In addition, the proposition predicts that the more intimate a researcher is with a recruiter, the more likely research is to be conducted because the less likely that researcher is to be assaulted, robbed, raped, or killed during the course of research. The proposition further suggests that the more intimate a researcher is with the relational ties of a recruiter or criminal (i.e., their friends or family), the more likely research is to occur because the less likely that researcher is to be victimized for reasons related to active offender research.

Future Directions for Theorizing Victimization and Research

This paper has numerous theoretical limitations, including a narrowed focus on relational distance, pure sociology, violent victimization, and active offender research. Thus, much work is left to be done by theorists. They should specify the implications of various paradigms for explaining different kinds of victimization and research.

It is clear, for instance, that beyond relational distance, other aspects of social life may have relevance for explaining violent victimization in active offender research. Black’s theory of self-help argues that disputants are more involved in retaliation when they are low in social status (Black 1983), equal in status, socially distant, immobile, functionally independent, and organized (Black 1998). What Black’s theory implies, then, is that the researchers who are most likely to be victimized are those who are low in social status, organized, immobile, equal in status with recruiters and criminals, and socially distant and functionally independent from such persons. In addition, Cooney’s (2006) theory posits that predation increases as a direct function of social distance. This paper has examined how one part of social distance, namely relational distance, affects victimization. But Cooney’s theory suggests that the amount of cultural distance between researchers, recruiters, and criminals also affects violent victimization in active offender research. Theorists should further explore the relevance of purely sociological theory for understanding danger in research.

In addition, it is imperative to recognize that violent victimization in active offender research can be addressed from many different theoretical perspectives. Rational choice theory (Clarke and Cornish 1985), for instance, might address it by examining how the relative costs and benefits of victimizing an active offender researcher determine its prevalence and magnitude. Opportunity theorists (see, e.g., Cohen and Felson 1979; Hindelang et al. 1978) may explain it as a function of variability across time and space in how targets (criminologists and their wealth) and offenders (recruiters and criminals) come together in the absence of capable guardians (e.g., police). Social learning theory (Akers and Jensen 2006) would perhaps address it by specifying how violent victimization is affected by recruiters’ and criminals’ differential association, imitation, reinforcement, and definitions. Gottfredson and Hirschi’s (1990) theory predicts that the lower a criminal’s self-control, the more likely
that person is to threaten or physically harm a researcher. Those theories and others (e.g., Guo, Roettger, and Cai 2008; Sampson and Laub 1993) may shed light on how violent victimization in active offender research “behaves.” Thus, criminologists should specify the implications of various theoretical perspectives for understanding and reducing threats and physical harm that occur in the course of active offender research.

This paper has focused on violent victimization. An alternative theoretical approach would be to theorize not only violent but other kinds of victimization too, such as burglary, fraud, and vandalism (see Jacques and Wright 2008a). What factors, for example, affect the chance that the home or office of a researcher will be burglarized by a research participant? As relates to fraud, Jacques and Wright’s (2008c) theory of method argues that criminals tell more lies as they become less intimate with recruiters and researchers, and this in turn suggests that fraud—or deceptive trading—increases in tandem with the relational distance between persons involved in the research. Theorists should specify what factors affect the likelihood of various crimes against researchers in the course of their work.

It is obvious that research-related danger is not confined to active offender research (e.g., see, Athens 1997, pp. 133-136). Among others, anthropologists, demographers, and health workers conducting research in war torn countries face the possibility that they will be violently victimized for reasons related to their work; think of the amount of danger associated with surveying households during the Iraq War (Roberts, Lafta, Garfield, Khudhairi, and Burnham 2004). The common concern among many scientists that they or their associates will be violently victimized for reasons related to research suggests that a scientific approach to understanding "violent victimization in science" is important for practical as well as academic reasons. Criminologists and other scientists should develop and test theories of violent victimization in science so that scientists can reduce their likelihood of being victimized and also so that danger does not inhibit scientific progress.

Future Directions for Researching Victimization and Research

Another limitation of this paper is that it does not attempt to falsify or support the theory through the statistical analysis of data. We hope that researchers will devote their attention to determining the validity of theories aimed at explaining violent victimization in active offender research. Such research would not only contribute to criminology by determining what factors do and do not affect violent victimization, it also would give researchers the information they need to significantly and substantially reduce the probability and magnitude of danger associated with collecting information from criminals.

Reality is complex and this makes testing almost any theory a difficult endeavor. When evaluating the validity of a theory, it is always important to control for other factors that may influence the behavior in question. It is
imperative that when testing the theory proposed in this paper, the events preceding and surrounding the (absence of) victimization are controlled in analyses. For instance, recruitment, remuneration, and various forms and aspects of data collection (e.g., interviews versus unobtrusive observations) all have their own unique contingencies that likely affect the opportunity for victimization. Therefore, tests of our theory should control for whether the victimization followed from a recruitment effort, remuneration payment, or data collection session. In addition, researchers would also want to control for the factors specified by other theories and also for basic demographic variables such as age, sex, and the race/ethnicity of researchers, recruiters, and criminals.

**Theoretically Situated, Practical Advice for Reducing Victimization and Increasing Research**

For now, however, the validity of any theory of violent victimization in active offender research is less important than the acknowledgment that this methodological problem *can be—indeed should be—theorized*, and that, in time, this may reduce the amount of threats and physical harm experienced by criminologists in the course of their research, and, in turn, increase the amount of such research and insights that emerge from it. Atheoretical descriptions and explanations of method should be abandoned. Criminologists should always attempt to view their own behavior through a *theoretical lens*. The value of a theoretical approach to method is that theoretically situated recommendations can be constructed and then supported or falsified through empirical testing.

The theoretical proposition proposed in this paper suggests four pieces of practical, albeit tentative, advice for criminologists seeking to minimize the amount of violent victimization in active offender research and increase their involvement in such research:

1. The more time a researcher spends with a *recruiter*, the less likely they are to be threatened or physically harmed for reasons related to research, and so the more research is conducted. Researchers thus should interact more often with recruiters.
2. The more time a researcher spends with a *criminal*, the less likely they are to be threatened or physically harmed for reasons related to research, and so the more research is conducted. Researchers thus should interact more often with criminals.
3. The more time a researcher spends with *the relational ties of a recruiter*, the less likely they are to be threatened or physically harmed for reasons related to research, and so the more research is conducted. Researchers thus should interact more often with the relational ties of recruiters.
4. The more time a researcher spends with *the relational ties of a criminal*, the less likely they are to be threatened or physically harmed for reasons...
related to research, and so the more research is conducted. Researchers thus should interact more often with the relational ties of criminals.

In sum, the task for criminologists is to develop and test theoretically situated suggestions for reducing violent victimization in active offender research, and to use quantitative and qualitative research to support or falsify those suggestions. Even if they are proven to be wrong, criminology and methodology will have progressed by establishing what does not reduce the probability of active offender researchers being victimized in the course of their research. That is often how science advances. Better yet, where the suggestions are supported through research, active offender researchers will have acquired an empirically proven tool for reducing their odds of being violently victimized and thereby increase their recruitment of, remuneration of, observation of, or conversation with unincarcerated criminals.

References


