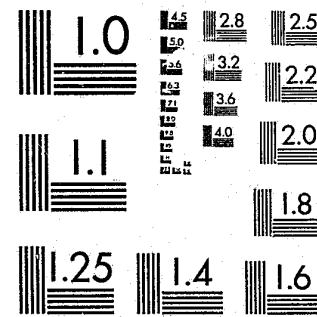


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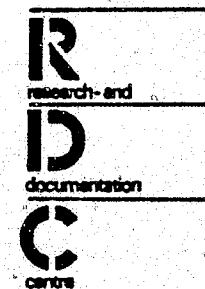
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BYSTANDERS INTERVENTION IN A CRIME

a comparison between the results of a field experiment and questionnaire studies.

Jan J.M. van Dijk
August Roëll
Carl H.D. Steinmetz

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the criminal opportunity perspective crime levels are strongly dependent upon the effectiveness of both official and private persons or objects (e.g. burglar alarms, locks) in preventing crime from occurring either by their presence alone or by some sort of direct or indirect action (Cohen and Felson, 1979). Empirical research has shown the ineffectiveness of both law enforcement programs and technical crime prevention in preventing crimes (Kelling a.o., 1981; Van Dijk a.o., 1982).

A prerequisite for a successful program of crime control seems to be a general willingness on the part of the public to intervene personally or alarm the police when witnessing a crime. In the absence of a reasonably high level of bystanders intervention attempts to control the presently existing high levels of crime in Western societies seem to have little chance of success.

A better understanding of the motivations of civilians to intervene personally or to cooperate with the police when observing a crime therefore seems to be needed for the development of the criminal opportunity perspective. At the same time this knowledge is required for designing and evaluating future crime control projects based upon this perspective (Lewis and Salem, 1981).

Bystanders intervention has been a subject of interest for experimental psychologists for some time (Iatané and Darley, 1970). Most of their earlier studies have been laboratory experiments. Sociological studies on police/community relations have often addressed the subject by means of attitudinal questions (Jonger-Tas, 1978). In addition several field experiments on bystanders intervention in crime have been conducted recently by criminologists in the United States (e.g. Bickmann and Helwig, 1979; Takooshran and Bodinger, 1979).

In this paper we will present the main results of a field experiment on the responses by pedestrians to a (staged) bicycle theft. These results

will be compared to the findings of a questionnaire study on the same subject. In the questionnaire study two kinds of data have been collected. First, respondents were shown a photograph of a bicycle theft (taken during the field experiment) and were asked how they would react when witnessing such a crime. Second, respondents were asked whether they had actually witnessed any crime(s) (including bicycle thefts) during the last two years and if so, how they had reacted.

The results of the field experiments have been presented elsewhere in greater detail (Roëlla.o., 1982). The results of the questionnaire study have not yet been published.

2. METHODS OF RESEARCH

2.1 The field experiment

During 1981 app. 100 bicycle thefts have been staged on various locations in The Hague (city areas and suburban areas) as well as in some village near The Hague. Most of the locations were situated either in the centre of shopping areas or nearby marketplaces or pavement cafés. The staged incidents were standardized as follows.

One of the researchers entered the location with a racing bicycle and chained it ostentatiously on a fence or other available object, using a clearly visible chainlock. About one minute after he left the location an other researcher -a 30-year old man, bearded, in jeans- entered the location and approached the racing bicycle. He took a large bolt cutter from his shopping bag, started to break the chain in a highly visible manner and walked away with the bicycle. During this sequence -usually taking about 2 or 3 minutes- one or two other researchers observed from a nearby point the behaviour and global characteristics of all pedestrians passing the incident within a circle of 3 or 4 meters. The researcher playing the role of the thief memorized all comments made to him, but did not respond in any way to the onlookers.

In order to collect data on the motivations of non-interveners during some experiments groups of onlookers were interviewed in a natural way. Research assistants joined groups of onlookers and started conversations by making short comments upon the incident ("look at him, what is he doing"). Also after some thefts the researcher playing the role of the owner of the bicycle reentered the location and addressed the remaining onlookers (e.g. those present at a nearby pavement café)

about the disappearance of his bicycle. In addition to this follow-up interviews were made with all persons who had intervened in order to explain the experimental nature of the incident to them and discuss their thoughts and emotions regarding the staged theft.

During about half of all staged thefts one or two police officers who collaborated with the researchers were present at the location within a circle of 50 meters. Bystanders who reported the staged theft to the police were invited by the police to accompany them in order to interrogate the 'thief'. In all cases these bystanders were told by the police officers and researchers that they had participated in an experiment on police/community cooperation.

2.2 The questionnaire study

From the population register of Amsterdam a random stratified sample was drawn of app. 1 000 persons above 15 years. On the basis of this sample 729 persons have been interviewed. The resulting sample was representative for the total population with regard to sex, age and district.

From former studies it had become apparent that many respondents experience serious problems with verbal questions or their most likely response to a crime because they cannot imagine adequately the situations verbally described to them. In the present questionnaire the respondents were shown by the interviewer a photograph of a person engaged in a bicycle theft by means of a bolt cutter. The photograph showed a situation which was similar to the staged thefts of the field experiment.

At the end of the questionnaire which addressed various other subjects in the area of crime and crime prevention the respondents were asked whether they had ever actually witnessed a series of various types of crime as a bystander, during the last two years. Respondents who responded positively were subsequently interviewed about their reactions.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Intervention rates

In an earlier questionnaire study on police/community relations in the Netherlands the respondents were asked how they would react when they saw someone stealing a bicycle (ISK, 1981). Sixty percent of the national sample answered they would call the police.

Table 1 presents the intervention rates based on our data. An intervention could consist of addressing the thief or alerting the police. During the staged bicycle thefts 2 or 4 police officers were present within about 50 meters of the place of crime.

Table 1. A comparison of intervention rates in bicycle thefts, measured in three different ways.

	no inter- vention	alerting the police	addressing the thief
reactions of respondents (N=690) on a photograph of a bicycle theft	22%	40%	38%
reactions of respondents (N=40) who witnessed a bicycle theft	55%	20%	25%
reactions of bystanders (N=195) towards staged bicycle thefts	93%	5%	2%

The data presented in table 1 show significant differences between the intervention rates measured in three different ways. We will first discuss the differences between the reactions of respondents towards a photograph of a bicycle theft and towards a bicycle theft they had actually witnessed. Next we will comment upon the differences between the observed reactions during the field experiments and the reported reactions by the respondents of the questionnaire study. Finally we will examine some correlates of bystander intervention in crime.

3.2 Behavioural intentions and actual behaviour

Substantial discrepancies between behavioural intentions and actual behaviour have been found in innumerable areas of human behaviour (Dentscher, 1973; Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Van Dijk and Nijenhuis, 1979).

The present discrepancy between behavioural intentions (i.e. reactions on a photograph) and actual behaviour as reported by respondents can partly be accounted for by the small percentage of respondents who had witnessed bicycle theft in real life during the last years. Most respondents probably have no idea how they would react when such a

situation would occur. When interviewed about their most likely response such respondents will be greatly influenced by the contextual aspects of the interview itself. In real life the decision whether to intervene or to walk on is made in a split second among a crowd of other anonymous pedestrians. The decision to intervene will probably entail certain risks. In the interview situation the respondent is personally addressed about his response. He or she will often feel to loose face with the interviewer when answering in a negative way. A positive answer can be given without taking any risk. For these reasons bystanders' interventions in crime seem to be a clear example of a behavioural set that cannot be measured adequately by means of attitudinal questions. The behavioural intentions expressed by most respondents seem to be superficial and at any rate poor predictors of their actual behaviour. Of special interest are the behavioural intentions of those respondents who have actually witnessed bicycle thefts or other crimes during the last two years. The comparison between their behavioural intentions and their reported reactions showed a statistically significant correlation between intended and reported behaviour ($\chi^2 = 16$; $df = 4$; $p < 0.0005$). Nevertheless even among this subgroup of experienced respondents the discrepancies between intentions and actual behaviour were fairly high, as is shown in table 2.

Table 2. A comparison between the behavioural intentions when shown a photograph of a bicycle theft and actual responses to observed crimes during the last two years

		Actual reactions to various crimes			
		no inter- vention	warn the police	address the offender	
behavioural intentions with regard to bicycle theft	no intervention	77%	10%	13%	N=378
	warn the police	67%	23%	10%	N=153
	address the offender	59%	18%	23%	N=155

About half (45%) of the experienced respondents have stated they would intervene in some way when shown a photograph of a bicycle theft though only 30% said to have done so when actually witnessing a real crime. This finding again underscores the limitations and risks of measuring general attitudes towards bystanders intervention in crime.

3.3 Self reported behaviour and observed behaviour

Table 1 shows that a much higher percentage of the respondents who had witnessed a bicycle theft reported to have intervened than the percentage of onlookers who have been observed to do so in the field experiment. The self reported responses to actual incidents however, cannot be compared directly to the responses to the staged bicycle thefts of the field experiments since the latter do not fully represent the variety of incidents which are witnessed by the public. The self report data on intervention in crimes were found to be dependent upon several contextual aspects of the crime. The tendency to intervene was significantly higher when the victim was known to the potential intervener ($\chi^2 = 13.06$; $df = 2$; $p < .01$), when the offender was known ($\chi^2 = 6.77$; $df = 2$; $p < .05$) and when the crimes were observed from a private or semi-private setting such as home, a pub, etc ($\chi^2 = 23.74$; $df = 2$; $p < .001$). Also when the potential possessed some form of authority (conductor, waiter, etc.) he was more likely to intervene ($\chi^2 = 7.11$; $df = 2$; $p < .05$). In our field experiments the potential interveners did not know the victim or the thief, they were in the street when they witnessed the crime and they had no function at the place of crime. Therefore the observed responses have to be compared with the self reported responses of those respondents who witnessed a crime in the streets, did not know the offender or victim and had no official function. Of this matched subgroup of 142 potential interveners 75% (107) reported to have walked on, 11% (16) reported to have warned the police and 13% (19) reported to have intervened personally. These percentages are roughly the same for the small number of respondents who have witnessed a bicycle theft by a stranger in the streets.

The resulting intervention rate of 24% is still higher than the one observed during the field experiment (7%). The remaining difference, however, could be due to inadequacies of both the observations and self reports. The intervention rate of the field experiment has been calculated by percenting interventions on observed onlookers. It is quite possible, however, that some of the onlookers did not consider the staged theft to be a theft. In fact, about half of the non-intervening onlookers who

have been interviewed afterwards said they thought the owner was cutting his lock because he had lost his key.

If this explanation for non-intervention is taken at face value the observed intervention rate by onlookers who thought they were witnessing a bicycle theft is about 14%. Some of the self reported interventions on the other hand could be an artefact of the interview situation for the same reasons as the behavioral intentions discussed in paragraph 3.2.

4. CORRELATES OF BYSTANDERS INTERVENTION IN CRIME

Former questionnaire studies have shown that the behavioural intention to warn the police is associated with a high age and the female sex. Middle aged males express a relatively strong intention to intervene personally (J.Junger-Tas, 1978).

The behavioural intentions as measured in the present study by means of a photograph show exactly the same relationships with the factors sex and age. In addition to this we found a strong association between having followed a first-aid course and/or practising fighting sports and the behavioural intention to intervene personally ($p < 0.0002$). By means of five questions on behavioural intentions in public emergency situations (accidents, elderly needing help, vandalism), a scale was developed for street assertiveness. A high score on this scale was strongly associated with the expressed intention to intervene personally in bicycle theft ($p < 0.0001$). Furthermore an association was found between recent personal victimizations and high willingness to intervene. Those respondents who intended to intervene personally had also stated more often to experience feelings of anger when viewing the photograph of a bicycle theft than other groups.

From both the field experiments and the data on actual experiences, however, a different picture emerged. We will first discuss the findings of the field experiment. The percentage of male onlookers who intervened personally was significantly higher than that of females. This difference, however, was due only to the extraordinarily high percentage of interventions by those males who were escorted by their wives or lady friends (10%). Single males or all-male groups did not intervene more often than did single females or all-female groups.

The hypothesis that elder and/or female onlookers would exhibit a high tendency to warn the police was not vindicated by our experimental findings. Like Huston a.o. (1981) we did find a remarkably high

percentage of former victims among interveners. Young males more often reported to have witnessed crimes than any other group. The typical bystander of crime appears to have the same profile as the typical offender and victim (Van Dijk & Steinmetz, 1982). However, among those who had recently witnessed a crime almost no significant differences were found between the ones who had intervened personally or called the police and the ones who had not. The only personal characteristics associated with self reported interventions appeared to be former victimizations ($X^2 = 3.88$; $df = 2$; $p < 0.05$), high score for street assertiveness ($X^2 = 40.23$; $df = 12$; $p < 0.0001$) and experiencing feelings of anger when viewing a photograph of a bicycle theft ($X^2 = 6.79$; $df = 2$; $p < .05$). The self reported interventions showed no relationships with age, sex, or involvement in first aid activities or fighting sports. In this the data on self reported interventions differ markedly from the above presented attitudinal data.

In paragraph 3.3 we have discussed the strong relationships between self reported interventions and several situational factors (e.g. knowing the victim or offender, having a formal role of authority). It appears from our self report data that bystanders' interventions in crime are much more dependent upon these and possibly other situational factors than upon personal characteristics such as sex, age, etc. and attitudes of the potential intervener. It is possible, however, that within the more homogeneous group of stranger to stranger interventions in public places more and stronger relationships with personal characteristics or victim experiences will be found.

The self report data have brought to attention the important fact that potential interveners are not evenly distributed among the population but strongly overrepresented among male adolescents. These findings underscore the conclusion that there is little value in measuring the behavioural intentions of the total population with regard to interventions in crime.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Methodological issues

The percentage of onlookers who personally intervened or alerted the police was much smaller in our field experiment and in the self reports on bystander experiences with crime than the percentage of respondents who said that they would intervene when they were shown a photograph

of a bicycle theft. It also turned out that various personal characteristics were much more clearly related to would-be interveners than to actual interveners. Maybe the public does have clear opinions about the desirability of interventions in crime. However, such opinions, if they exist, are rather poor predictors of actual interventions because real life situations are highly variable and seldom as unequivocal as for instance a photograph of a bicycle theft. The decision to intervene was found to be dependent upon several situational aspects of the crime. Moreover, deriving intervention rates from the behavioural intentions of a representative sample of the total of the population may be deceptive since some groups of the population -especially young males- more often witness crimes than do other groups of the population. Hence, asking a representative sample of the population what they would do when witnessing a crime, will hardly be helpful in understanding bystanders' interventions in crime.

Field experiments are usually costs-effective but can cause ethical problems. Their main disadvantage from a methodological point of view seems to be the unrepresentativeness of the staged crimes. The selection of the staged crimes is restricted by both ethical and practical reasons, e.g. more serious crimes and crimes between acquaintances cannot be staged. Also in field studies the experimental populations will usually not be quite representative for the theoretically relevant populations. On the other hand field experiments offer a unique possibility to study the whole sequence of intervention starting with the bystanders observing the crime or not. The visibility of crimes and the impact of technical prevention measures upon this visibility should preferably be studied by observations in naturalistic settings. Questionnaire studies on actual experiences with crimes as a witness and on the personal reactions to these incidents seem to be of great value. Data collected in this way were found to be similar to observational data in most respects. The great advantage of this method is the possibility to collect data on witness experiences with all existing forms of crime and the reactions to these of a representative sample of a given population. An extension of national or local victimization studies with some questions on actual experiences as witnesses seems to be recommendable.

5.2 Theoretical issues

The very low percentage of bystanders or onlookers of thefts who actually intervene or call the police confirm the criminological notions of the anonymous social environments of cities being conducive to crime. The opportunities for committing highly visible crimes without being bothered by bystanders seem to be fairly good in both Amsterdam and The Hague. Nevertheless staged bicycle thefts in small villages in the vicinity of The Hague did not elicit any more interventions (Roëll e.a., 1982). On the other hand it must be pointed out that one out of every four staged bicycle thefts during which police officers were present nearby, has been reported to the police by at least one of the onlookers. While we were staging our thefts the police did not receive a single phonecall from people saying they had witnessed a bicycle theft. In the street the police officers could quite easily stimulate the public to alert them by looking at, nodding at or greeting the public (Roëll e.a., loc.cit.). These findings lend some support to the current hypothesis that foot patrols might be more effective in gaining the support from the local population for controlling crime than for instance car patrols. The questionnaire data on witness experiences have also brought to attention the very high percentages of civilians who actually observe the commission of crimes. For instance in Amsterdam 58% of the respondents said they had personally witnessed one or more crimes during the past two years.

Especially crimes like vandalism and pick-pocketing were found to be highly visible. More respondents said to have witnessed such crimes than to have been victimized by them.

These findings suggest that the potentials for bystanders intervention and cooperation with the police are higher than formerly assumed. If more civilians, especially male adolescents could be given concrete incentives for calling the police - swift and effective responses being the best incentive - the opportunities for committing various types of crimes might be reduced considerably.

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