Background

This briefing note is intended to inform local police and crime reduction partnerships of national patterns of stranger and acquaintance violence, as a baseline against which to compare local experience, and to inform possible priority setting for local analysis and resulting crime reduction initiatives. Much of the statistical information in this note was contained in the main report on the 2000 British Crime Survey (BCS – see Kershaw et al. 2000), but here more explicit links are made between BCS results and implications for local crime reduction practice. Analogous notes on burglary (Budd, 2001) and vehicle-related thefts (Kinshott, 2001) have also been published.

Throughout this note stranger and acquaintance violence are defined as:

- **Stranger violence** – assaults and attempts in which the victim did not know any of the offenders.
- **Acquaintance violence** – assaults and attempts in which the victim knew one or more of the offenders at least by sight (but not involving partners, ex-partners, household members and other relatives). In 1999, around a quarter of acquaintance incidents involved friends, a further quarter involved clients or members of the public contacted through work. Around one in ten incidents involved each of the following; neighbours, work colleagues or local children.

These are two of the four types of violence that the BCS identifies: the other two are domestic violence and mugging. 1 The BCS classifies a violent offence into one of the four categories by asking about the nature of what happened, and what relationship the victim had with the offender (if any). The offences included within stranger and acquaintance violence are common assaults and woundings. 2 These are classified in a way that is intended to mirror the rules laid down for police recording.

The BCS asks respondents whether they or their household have been a victim of crime since the beginning of the previous year. The BCS therefore includes, besides crimes known to the police, those not reported to the police or recorded by them. It therefore provides a more complete picture of violent crime than the police figures alone. As discussed later in this briefing note the BCS has consistently shown that the majority of stranger and acquaintance violence is not reported to the police. This makes it particularly relevant as the starting point for local analysis, to supplement counts of offences reported to the police. Box 1 provides information about the BCS.

The risk of violence

The average risk of being a victim of violent crime is comparatively low, with only 3% of adults being a victim of stranger and/or acquaintance violence once or more during 1999. Nationally, 1.5% of those aged 16 or more (the coverage of the BCS) fell victim to stranger violence in 1999. The figure was slightly higher (1.7%) for acquaintance violence.

One factor in risk of violence of this kind is prior victimisation. Around one in four victims of acquaintance violence (28%) were victimised more than once during 1999, with 14% victimised twice and 15% victimised three or more times. Repeat victimisation was less common for victims of stranger violence – 13% were

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1 These crimes are not covered in detail by this briefing note. Victims of domestic violence may be reluctant to reveal their experiences to interviewers. The 1996 BCS included a self-completion module to provide a more valid measure of domestic violence (see Mirrlees-Black, 1999).
2 Specifically, these are comparable with the following criminal statistics offences: wounding or other act endangering life (5), other wounding (8a and 8d (racially aggravated)), assault on a constable (104), common assault (105a) and racially-aggravated common assault (105b). Mugging covers the BCS offences of robbery, attempted robbery (criminal statistics codes 34a and 34b) and snatch theft from person. The latter is not directly comparable to police recorded crime (snatch theft is a BCS sub-category of ‘theft from the person’ (criminal statistics code 39)).
victimised twice and 8% were victimised at least three times. This means, as with other crime types, that earlier victimisation is an excellent predictor of later victimisation. In principle, preventing repeat victimisation by violence is as powerful and efficient a means of focusing crime preventive effort in respect of violence as for other crime types, but there are distinctive practical difficulties to do with chosen lifestyles which incorporate the risk of violence.

**Trends in violence**

The number of incidents of acquaintance violence more than doubled between 1981 and 1995, but between 1995 and 1999 fell by almost a third (Figure 1). Despite this recent fall, the estimated number of incidents of acquaintance violence in 1999 is 52% higher than in 1981. It cannot be ruled out that some of this increase might be due to the willingness on the part of the respondents to mention such incidents to BCS interviewers. Another possible factor is that, over time, attitudes as to what is acceptable behaviour might have changed.

The picture for stranger violence is different. Although the level of stranger violence measured by the BCS has fluctuated over the years, the number of incidents in 1999 was only slightly higher (4%) than in 1981. The police recorded crime figures do not make a distinction between acquaintance, stranger and domestic violence. This means that it is not possible to compare the number of incidents in these categories with comparable numbers recorded by the police. But as a rough guide, the comparable BCS count of all four types of violence (ie. also including domestic violence and mugging) – totalling 3.19 million incidents in 1999 – was seven times higher than the police recorded crime count of 430,000. This shortfall is mostly due to low levels of reporting of violent incidents (in 1999 an estimated 35% were reported to the police, of which an estimated 38% were then recorded). Local crime reduction partnerships wishing to address this problem will be aware of this, and of the need which it highlights to use supplementary sources of data about violence.

**Who is most at risk?**

Figure 2 lists types of people with risks of victimisation substantially above the national average. Young men are around five times more likely to be a victim than the national average. Overall, 15 in every 100 men aged between 16 and 24 were victims of acquaintance and/or stranger violence in 1999 – only 1.6% of all young men were victims of both stranger and acquaintance violence. Violent crimes do not necessarily take place in the victim’s neighbourhood. For example, two-thirds of incidents of stranger violence happened further than a 15-minute walk of the victim’s house. The equivalent figure for acquaintance violence was 53%. Therefore using the BCS to look at where victims live is less useful for violent crime than say for burglary. This said, knowing when and where high-risk individuals congregate, and when and where incidents of violent crime are most likely to occur will, self-evidently, inform targeting of policing and crime reduction initiatives.

**When and where**

According to the 2000 BCS, acquaintance and stranger violence is most likely to take place during the evening or at night. It is especially the case for incidents between strangers, with approximately seven out of ten incidents occurring during the evening or night. Violent crimes happen disproportionately during weekends. This pattern is strongest for incidents of stranger violence with half of all incidents occurring between 6am on Fridays and 6am on Mondays.

The most common place for stranger incidents was at a pub or club, with a third of all incidents occurring there.

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3 The increase between 1981 and 1999 is statistically significant (at the two tailed 10% level) for acquaintance violence, but not for stranger violence.

4 This comparison does not include theft from the person (or indeed snatch theft from the person) as the BCS and police figures are not comparable. Adjustments have been made to the police figures to exclude victims under 16, which the BCS does not cover. Further details of comparisons between the BCS and police counts of crime can be found in Appendix C of Kershaw et al. (2000).

5 Young women (aged 16 to 24) were also more likely than average to be victims of both stranger violence (2.3%) and acquaintance violence (3.6%).

6 Evening defined as 6pm to midnight, night defined as midnight to 6am.
Conversely acquaintance violence is most likely to occur in the workplace, followed by a pub or club (Table 1). A detailed study of violence at work (Budd, 1999), based on the BCS results, showed that the most important risk factor for violence while working is occupation. For example, the annual risk of assault was highest for police officers (25%), followed by social workers and probation officers (9%), publicans and bar staff (8%) and nurses (5%). This compares with an annual risk of assault of 1% for all those who had worked at some point in a year.

By combining 1998 and 2000 sweeps of the BCS to increase reliability, it is possible to examine these patterns further. Around one quarter of all incidents of stranger violence occur in either pubs or clubs on Friday, Saturday or Sunday evenings/nights.

Table 1: Location of violent incidents (2000 BCS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Acquaintance %</th>
<th>Stranger %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Around the home</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Around work</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pub or club</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other location</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unweighted N</strong></td>
<td><strong>410</strong></td>
<td><strong>337</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note:
1. Source 2000 BCS. Don’t know excluded from the base. <1 indicates less than 0.5%.

Alcohol and drugs

Alcohol and/or drugs are involved in a significant number of incidents of both stranger and acquaintance violence. In over half (53%) of all incidents of stranger violence the victim described the perpetrator as being under the influence of alcohol (the corresponding figure for acquaintance violence was 36%). These proportions were, not surprisingly, highest for incidents that occurred in pubs/clubs with around four-fifths of victims judging ‘their’ offender(s) to be under the influence of alcohol.

Victims believed the perpetrator was under the influence of drugs in 16% of stranger incidents and 22% of acquaintance incidents.

Other research commissioned by the Home Office (known as NEW-ADAM) showed that out of 41 individuals arrested for assault in the four research sites (London, Liverpool, Nottingham and Sunderland) 61% tested positively for an illicit drug and 32% for alcohol (Bennett, 2000).

Who were the offenders?

Respondents to the 2000 BCS were asked whether they could say anything about the people who were responsible for ‘their’ crime. In the vast majority of incidents of stranger violence (86%) all the offender(s) were male. The figure for acquaintance violence was lower at 72%, but nevertheless, as reflected by criminal statistics, males are responsible for the majority of violent crime. Often offenders did not act alone. Around 5%.

7 ‘Pub or club’ includes inside pub/club premises and surrounding streets and car parks.
9 The definition of violence at work used in Budd (1999) was “All assaults or threats which occurred while the victim was working and were perpetrated by members of the public”.

Figure 2: Adults most at risk of stranger and acquaintance violence in 1999
half of all incidents of stranger violence and three out of every ten incidents of acquaintance violence involved more than one person. Those incidents that occurred on the street were more likely to involve more than one offender.

A significant minority of crime was committed by individuals of school age (7% and 14% of all incidents of stranger and acquaintance violence respectively). The recent Youth Lifestyles Survey (which interviews younger respondents than the BCS) bears on this pattern with more males aged 14 to 17 admitting to fighting or other violence in the last 12 months, than those in their mid to late twenties (Flood-Page et al., 2000). In the BCS, incidents of stranger violence were most likely to be committed by adults aged 16 to 24, whereas the most likely age for offenders of acquaintance violence was 25 or over.

There were no significant differences between offenders aged 16 to 24 and those aged 25 or above as regards their being under the influence of drink. However, younger offenders (defined as 16 to 24 year olds) were judged much more likely to be under the influence of drugs. This is perhaps a reflection of the increased usage of illegal drugs among this age group (Ramsay and Partridge, 1999).

**Weapons**

According to the 2000 BCS it was relatively unusual for a weapon to be used (19% of stranger incidents and 22% of acquaintance crimes involved a weapon). Victims described the most common weapon as some type of hitting implement, followed by a glass/bottle or knife. Glasses and bottles were, perhaps not surprisingly, most commonly used in pubs or clubs – around one in seven incidents of stranger violence and one in ten incidents of acquaintance violence in pubs or clubs involved either a bottle or glass. The BCS indicates that the use of glass and bottles as weapons has fallen between 1997 and 1999, maybe reflecting steps that have been taken to reduce their utility and availability as weapons (e.g., greater use of toughened glasses).

Those offenders judged to be under the influence of drugs were significantly more likely to use a weapon. Whether the offender was under the influence of alcohol did not appear to affect weapon use.

**Reporting the incident to the police**

Thirty-eight per cent of victims of stranger violence and 37% of victims of acquaintance violence said that the incident had been reported to, or become known to the police in 1999. The majority of these violent crimes, then, are not reported to the police at all.

The BCS asks victims why they did not report the incident to the police. The most common reason for victims of acquaintance violence was the fact that they felt the matter was private and/or they wanted to deal with it themselves. The incident being too trivial and/or not involving financial loss was the most common reason for victims of stranger violence not to report to the police. Police related reasons were given in 19% of acquaintance violence incidents and 35% of stranger violence (Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Reasons for not reporting BCS violent crime (2000 BCS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Acquaintance</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incident related reasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too trivial/no loss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of reprisal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police-related reasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couldn't do anything</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would not be interested</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dislike/fear the police</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous bad experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>police/courts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other reasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private/dealt with ourselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reported to other authorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconvenient to report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:**

1. Source 2000 BCS. Don’t knows excluded from the base. More than one reason could be given.

Those incidents that involved weapons were significantly more likely to be reported – the police came to know about just over half of this type of stranger or acquaintance violence. Incidents where the victim was injured were also significantly more likely to reported to the police (in the case of stranger violence only), as were incidents where the offender was judged to be under the influence of alcohol (acquaintance violence only) or drugs (both stranger and acquaintance incidents).

However, a substantial proportion of crimes regarded by the victim as serious were not reported to the police. In 1999, around 170,000 incidents of acquaintance violence and a further 110,000 incidents of stranger violence which were regarded by the victim as serious were not reported to the police (more than 40%).

**Satisfaction with the police**

Victims who did report to the police were asked a series of questions about how well they felt the police responded to ‘their’ crime. Overall 55% of victims of acquaintance violence and 44% of victims of stranger violence said they were very or fairly satisfied with the way the police dealt with the matter. The majority of victims said that they were either dealt with immediately or felt their wait was reasonable, and the police showed enough interest in their case. However, in the majority of both stranger and acquaintance violence incidents the victim did not feel they had been well informed by the police. These overall patterns of satisfaction are not dissimilar to those for all non-violent offences (for further details see Sims and Myhill, 2001).

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10 Overall, the more serious crime of wounding was more likely to be reported to the police (61% of all stranger and acquaintance woundings) than common assaults (31%).

11 Victims were asked to rate what happened to them using a 'seriousness scale' where zero represented a very minor offence, and 20 represented murder. Those incidents with scores of 7 to 20 were defined as serious.
Practice pointers for local action

The most appropriate method of tackling violent crime will vary by local circumstances. While the BCS cannot provide local level information, it does give a useful general guide to national patterns. The BCS information on the location of violent incidents indicates the need to target hotspots associated with crime and disorder. It also indicates the need to pay special attention to those in vulnerable occupations. ‘Fighting violent crime together: an action plan’ (Home Office, 2001) suggest a range of initiatives in these areas, as well as other possible strategies for tackling the causes of violence (e.g., intervention work in schools and action against truancy).

Since neighbourhood problems may differ, though, available local data should be drawn on to develop the most appropriate solutions. Local action will almost certainly include general consideration of the management and policing of the leisure industry, particularly as it concerns alcohol. It should involve closer understanding of flashpoints for violence and the seasonality in leisure locales. Attention should be given to:

- Reducing access to glass and bottles limits potential offenders access to readily available weapons (e.g., by confiscating glasses and bottles in the vicinity of clubs and pubs).
- Ensuring that problem pubs/clubs use toughened glassware or plastic glasses as a condition of license renewal and advising on prompt removal of empty bottles.
- Ensuring physical arrangements of bars do not invite confusion about the order in which people are served.
- Having adequate bar staff to reduce conflicts (e.g., in relation to drinks ordering).
- Staggering closing times as this reduces the numbers of people on the streets at the same time. Provision of public transport and the physical arrangement of taxi ranks relative to pub and club exit points are also worth consideration.
- Using registered doormen schemes to strengthen control of licensed venues (Deehan, 1999).
- Having ‘Pub-Watch’ schemes to help pubs and clubs share information about troublemakers.

The motivating power of Section 17 of the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act can, of course, be brought to bear on the licensing environment. There may also be potential in using custody suites not only to divert offenders into treatment but also to deliver a public health message about the dangers of the inappropriate use of alcohol (Deehan, 1999). Further relevant guidance is available from the Alcohol Related Crime Toolkit – a web-based source of information on partnership approaches, good practice, tackling local problems and funding sources. This can be accessed at www.crimereduction.gov.uk/toolkits.htm.

It is also noteworthy that significant proportions of violent incidents are work-related and that occupation is the main risk factor. Employers have a legal duty under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 to ensure, so far as reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of their employees. The Management of Health and Safety Work Regulations require employers to assess the risks to employees’ health and safety including, where appropriate, risks from exposure to reasonably foreseeable violence. Attention should be given to:

- Identifying the extent and nature of the risk of violence at work.
- Designing and implementing intervention strategies to minimise this risk (e.g., arranging for staff to be accompanied if they have to meet suspected aggressors in their homes).
- Monitoring the extent of violence at work to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions and identifying new problems as they arise.
- Providing advice on security and technology to control access to premises.
- Training staff to spot the early signs of aggression and either avoid it or cope with it.
- Ensuring staff are aware of systems set up for their protection and, where possible, have information about clients with a history of violence.
- Issuing good practice guidance (see HSE, 1997).

Further guidance is contained in HSE (1997) which can be accessed at www.hse.gov.uk/pubs/indg69.htm.

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Box 1 The British Crime Survey

The British Crime Survey (BCS) measures crime against people living in private households in England and Wales. It has been conducted by the Home Office eight times since 1982 – the most recent sweep was in 2000. Each sweep measures crime in the year preceding the survey. The 2000 BCS had a nationally representative sample of 19,411 adults aged 16 or over living in private households in England and Wales. The National Centre of Social Research and the Office for National Statistics conducted interviews between January and July 2000. The response rate was 74%.

The BCS and recorded figures are complementary series which together provide a better picture of crime than could be obtained from either series alone. The BCS in general has more restricted coverage than police figures (e.g., it does not include homicides), its estimates are subject to sampling error, and it is less able to pinpoint local area differences. For the offences it covers, though, the BCS gives a more reliable indication of trends in crime. This is because it estimates are unaffected by any changes in levels of reporting to the police, or in police recording practices. The BCS is also able to provide information about the victim, such as their age and sex, and the circumstances of the incident (e.g., whether a weapon was used etc).

Further information about the BCS is available at http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/bcs1.html.

12 Section 17 requires all local authorities, including joint authorities, police authorities, National Park authorities and the Broads Authority to consider crime and disorder reduction while exercising all their duties.
References

Acknowledgements
Thanks are also due to colleagues within RDS and Prof. Ken Pease of Huddersfield University who provided valuable comments on an earlier drafts of this note.