

Guest editorial

Tim Prenzler

The impetus for this special issue of *The Journal of Criminological Research, Policy and Practice* is the continuing growth in the fraud problem internationally. Fraud is one of the largest areas of increasing crime, going against the overall downward trend in crime in the last 30 years. This broad category of offending is increasingly a major topic of academic research, with Criminal Justice Abstracts listing over 5,700 publications in the area, while Google Scholar lists 1.8 million. It also constitutes a major issue of policy concern for governments.

The scale of the fraud problem and the issue of rising rates of fraud draw attention to the problem of prevention. Why is fraud increasing and why have not established techniques of crime prevention been applied successfully in this area? While “the internet” provides the obvious likely main answer to the issue of causality – through increased offender access to victims and enhanced offender anonymity – the internet should also provide a variety of situational tools that work against victimisation. Consequently, internet-based fraud and victim vulnerability via the internet are major themes of this special issue. Researchers with expertise in these areas were sought out and invited to provide content. The result is a set of six papers demonstrating cutting edge research across diverse aspects of the fraud problem – including traditional areas of fraud – and of innovations in prevention.

The first paper is titled “The Media, Personal Digital Criminal Legacies and the Experience of Offenders Convicted of Occupational Fraud and Corruption” – authored by David Shepherd, Emma Beatty, Mark Button and Dean Blackburn. The paper is unusual in examining the issue of rehabilitation and stigma from the perspective of offenders, using interviews with convicted fraudsters and content analyses of selected newspapers in the UK. The findings are important in showing how the internet creates long-lasting “personal digital criminal legacies” that can inhibit offenders’ successful social reintegration and desistance from offending.

The second paper – “A Study of Cybercrime Victimisation and Prevention: Exploring the Use of Online Crime Prevention Behaviours and Strategies” – makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of factors behind self-protection strategies adopted by internet users. Drawing on Australian survey data, Jacqueline Drew shows that efforts to educate citizens about prevention strategies – often favoured by governments – are unlikely to be effective unless they are prefaced by increased knowledge about the prevalence and harms of cybercrime.

The next paper – “Who’s to Blame? Exploring Accountability in Fraud Victimisation” – by Cassandra Cross, addresses the challenging issue of victim facilitation in fraud. Cross interviewed anti-fraud professionals in England and Canada, with results highlighting how responsibility for fraud applies across a range of actors and agencies. In particular, the paper draws attention to the issue of negative stereotypes about victim culpability and the ways in which victimisation experiences can be worsened by inappropriate responses by authorities.

The fourth paper – “Vulnerability as a Driver of the Police Response to Fraud” – by Mike Skidmore, Janice Goldstraw-White and Martin Gill maps out a range of recent anti-fraud initiatives in the UK. “Vulnerability” has been a core component of these initiatives, partly in an effort to direct scarce resources to areas where there is likely to be maximum benefit. This data-rich paper deploys victim variables from a large official database of cases, as well as

Tim Prenzler is based at the Department of Law, University of the Sunshine Coast, Sunshine Coast, Australia.

data from interviews with anti-fraud practitioners and analyses of policy documents. The overall results show the need for a clearer definition of the concept of vulnerability and for a more consistent and effective approach to victims that elevate the seriousness of fraud.

The fifth paper, by David Lacey, Sigi Goode, Jerry Pawada and Dennis Gibson, on “The Application of Scam Compliance Models to Investment Fraud Offending”, uses data from interviews with Australian victims of investment frauds who sought assistance from a specialist victim support agency. The study found that adverse psychological impacts tended to be stronger than financial impacts and that policing and regulatory authorities simply failed to even try to assist victims in many cases. In terms of designing prevention strategies, the paper identified a number of potentially fruitful aspects of offending scenarios, including “a strong reliance or dependency on legitimate service provisioning on the part of the fraudster” and that “offending relied upon the participation of trust building signals and measures and tended to follow a number of distinct but connected phases”.

The final paper in the set – “What Works in Fraud Prevention: A Review of Real-World Intervention Projects” – was initiated by me in response to the surprising lack of systematic reviews in this area – symptomatic of a focus in the literature on descriptions of fraud dimensions and causal factors rather than evaluations of interventions. A detailed search of major international databases produced very few studies demonstrating major reductions in fraud, and many of these were relatively old – from pre-internet days. Some important lessons were apparent all the same. The main finding related to the value of applying situational prevention measures, particularly “enhancing rule setting, reducing anonymity, extending guardianship and formal surveillance, and facilitating compliance”.

These papers add to our stock of knowledge about fraud and fraud prevention. In particular, they emphasise the need for governments to focus more on the dynamics of victimisation in finding productive clues to effective prevention measures. Neglect of victims has been a key feature of the fraud problem around the world, and the time is overdue for authorities to give much more serious attention to mitigation and primary prevention. Reducing the harm done to victims, even if this occurs post-victimisation, should be part of any comprehensive prevention programme. Of note is the fact that available evidence indicates that a properly resourced and scientific approach to prevention should generate savings that outweigh input costs. Rather than recycling old approaches that have limited or no benefits, governments need to step up and invest in bold experiments in prevention and share the results with the international law enforcement community.

I would like to conclude by thanking all the authors who provided papers for the special issue. Your contributions are greatly appreciated. I would also like to make a special vote of thanks to the anonymous reviewers who helped in improving the overall quality of the issue, often within very tight timelines. It is also a pleasure to express my gratitude to the Editors of the journal, Michael Lewis and Jane Ireland, and the Publisher Hazel Goodes and Content Editor Abi Masha, who provided prompt and professional assistance throughout the development and production process.