USING THE THEORY OF PLANNED BEHAVIOR TO PREDICT CRIME REPORTING INTENT

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There is a disparity between the number of crimes committed and number of reports victims file with police, often called the "reporting gap" (Baumer & Lauritsen, 2010). The reporting gap makes it important to understand what influences victims' decisions to report crimes. Previous research has indicated that a variety of factors influence reporting intentions but most research does not rely on a behavioral theory. This research uses the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) to predict crime victims' intentions to report their victimizations to police. Using a mock crime scenario and survey questions, this research explored whether the TPB model factors (i.e., victims' attitudes, perceived social norms, and perceived behavioral control (PBC)) predict crime reporting intentions. A second "expanded model" included traditional predictors of reporting (e.g., perceived severity, victim characteristics) in addition to the TPB factors. The TPB model predicted crime reporting intent. The enhanced model did not increase predictive power over the TPB model. The most influential TPB factor was social norms. The strong predictive power of social norms was greater than attitudes, PBC, and even traditional predictors of reporting. This expands the behavior and decision-making contexts in which this model can be used. Knowing what factors (e.g., social norms) predict victim reporting could assist in implementing programs to increase crime reporting and improve policing.

Keywords: crime reporting; victim reporting; policing; Theory of Planned Behavior

Controlling crime and deviant behavior is one of the main responsibilities of governing bodies and the American criminal justice system (Baumer & Lauritsen, 2010; Ratcliffe, 2008). The modern criminal justice system relies heavily on victim crime reporting in order to reach these goals. Victim reporting is commonly referred to as the "gatekeeping" of the criminal justice system because it accounts for 95% of the criminal incidents that are brought to the attention of criminal justice enforcement agencies (Goudriaan, Lynch, & Nieuwbeerta, 2004; Goudriaan, Wittenbrood, & Nieuwbeerta, 2006; Greenberg & Beach, 2004). Self-initiated activities by the police and non-victim (bystander) reporting make up the balance. The victim's decision to report is pivotal to all subsequent actions by enforcement agencies (Goudriaan et al., 2004; Greenberg & Beach, 2004). For example, law enforcement and correctional agencies use crime reporting data for systematic resource planning, workload forecasting, and budget development (Ratcliffe, 2008).

Recognizing the importance of victim reporting, the government began keeping track of crime by recording the numbers and types of crime reported to police (Baumer & Lauritsen, 2010). Subsequently, the government also began conducting surveys of citizens,

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asking whether they had been victimized. Interestingly, 40 years ago as well as today, large disparities exist between crime *reporting* and crime *victimization*. This "reporting gap" indicates that only about half of all crimes are reported to authorities. Crime reporting rates vary by type of crime, with homicides being reported more often than petty larcenies, but typically 40% to 70% of crime incidents are unreported (Baumer & Lauritsen, 2010; Catalano, 2006; Rand, 2006).

Many studies have indicated that the most important factor in determining whether someone reports a criminal victimization is perceived seriousness of the crime (Felson, Messner, Hoskin, & Deane, 2002; Goudriaan et al., 2004). Other studies have found that influences are victim-specific, incident-specific, or environment-specific variables (Zhang, Messner, & Liu, 2007). Research also has suggested that the victim's decision is the result of a cost-benefit analysis (Goudriaan et al., 2006; Ratcliffe, 2008). Results of such studies affect how law enforcement resources are deployed. For example, because individuals disproportionately report serious crimes, police might focus their efforts mainly on serious crimes (e.g., placing valuable resources in detectives for homicides and sexual assaults). Focusing primarily on serious crimes would leave fewer resources for addressing misdemeanor offenses, conducting cybercrime investigations, or hiring community policing officers who assist with non-emergency criminal incidents which involve more citizens (Ratcliffe, 2008). An increased focus on serious crime also limits funding for local community programs that provide services to citizens, such as education programs as well as neighborhood and personal safety outreach (Goudriaan et al., 2004). While solving serious crimes is important, low severity crimes affect a greater portion of the overall public (Ratcliffe, 2008). Thus, it is important to find what factors encourage victim reporting and use that information to develop strategies to increase reporting and help law enforcement to become more effective in reducing crime.

The traditional approaches to studying factors that influence reporting often have neglected the social and personal decision-making dynamics suggested by the social science behavioral model called the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991). The current study evaluated the ability of the TPB to predict intent to report a crime. In addition to TPB factors, other variables that might influence crime reporting were added to the traditional TPB model to determine if this "enhanced model" increases the model's predictive power. Ultimately, understanding a broad range of influences on victim reporting could narrow the reporting gap.

Crime Reporting Research

Researchers have investigated various influences on crime reporting (Goudriaan et al., 2004). Some researchers contend that the victim's decision to report is made through cost-benefit analysis to determine whether the benefit of contacting the police and completing a crime report outweighs the costs, such as stress and embarrassment (Baumer & Lauritsen, 2010; Goudriaan et al., 2006; Greenberg & Ruback, 1992). However, researchers continue to search for other factors to explain reporting behavior because cost-benefit models do not sufficiently predict crime-reporting behavior.

Other research has focused on factors that influence the cost-benefit analysis and affect whether a victim will report the crime. The most robust finding in this body of literature is that victims are more likely to report serious crimes (i.e., greater harm or loss) than less serious crimes (Baumer & Lauritsen, 2010; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1988; Goudriaan et al., 2004).

Beyond severity, there are a plethora of factors that might influence the decision to report a crime. The reasons for non-reporting may vary significantly based on the type of crime and victimization. For less serious crimes, victims might not report a crime to the police because they believe that their victimization is a private matter or too small to involve the police or courts (Baumer & Lauritsen, 2010; Goudriaan et al., 2004; Greenberg & Beach, 2004). Victim reporting surveys typically group the reasons for not reporting into categories, such as it was a personal matter and did not need to involve the police, it could be handled in another manner, there was nothing that could be done, or it was my fault the incident occurred (Goudriaan et al., 2004; Greenberg & Beach, 2004; Xie, Pogarsky, Lynch, & McDowall, 2006). Even with more specific questions and research, researchers have found that there are still a significant number of reasons for not reporting that are placed into the "other" category (Goudriaan et al., 2004; Greenberg & Beach, 2004). For consistency, many victim reporting studies place crime reporting questions into three general categories: 1) victim-specific (individual or household); 2) incident-specific; and 3) environment-specific variables (Goudriaan et al., 2004; Zhang et al., 2007). Victim-specific variables that affect crime reporting include most of the major demographic characteristics, such as gender, age, and race. There are also household factors, such as previous victimization (Xie et al., 2006). In early studies, these factors were thought to be significant but over time researchers have determined that victim-specific variables have a small influence, if any, in predicting crime reporting (Goudriaan et al., 2004; Zhang et al., 2007). Some victim-specific variables hold more promise for predicting crime reporting. Greenberg and Beach (2004) conducted a community phone survey of property crime victims that included specific victim questions, including some which were emotion-driven (e.g., personal anger or fear). Participants who felt more anger were more likely to report the crime. The current research studies victim variables including attitudes and perceived behavioral control, which are elements of the TPB. Additionally, the study tested victim variables (e.g., gender, anger) for significance in the enhanced TPB model.

Incident-specific variables that influence reporting include characteristics of the crime, such as the type of crime, physical injury, monetary loss, and the victim-offender relationship. These variables are often the strongest predictors of victim reporting. Skogan (1976) identified crime seriousness as the most influential factor, and many studies have replicated this finding (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1988; Goudriaan et al., 2004). The current study tested an incident-specific variable (i.e., severity) in the enhanced TPB model.

Environment-specific variables include neighborhood characteristics, such as neighborhood disadvantage, social control, advice from others, and social cohesion. Social contexts are difficult to measure and difficult to incorporate into the models of crime reporting. Ruback, Menard, Outlaw, and Shaffer (1999) conducted a study on a college campus and

identified norms that affect reporting. However, these variables were weaker predictors of reporting than seriousness of the incident or injury. The current study investigates whether reporting is influenced by perceived social norms, as this is a factor in the TPB model.

THEORY OF PLANNED BEHAVIOR MODEL

By relying on theory, it may be possible to better predict crime-reporting behavior. TPB suggests that behaviors can be predicted by the individual's intent to perform (or not to perform) when other constraints on behavior (such as opportunity to act) are taken into account. Intention in this theory is predicted by three basic factors: attitudes, social norms, and perceived behavioral control (PBC) (Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). The TPB has predicted a variety of behaviors (Ajzen, 2008), including exercise behavior and health behaviors (e.g., drug use, smoking). More recently, it was used as a model to predict online gambling behavior in college students (Martin, Usdan, Nelson, Umstattd, & LaPlante, 2010), exercise (Nigg, Lippke, & Maddock, 2009) and downloading music from the internet (Morton & Koufteros, 2008).

The current study measured each of the TPB factors (i.e., attitudes, social norms, PBC) in order to assess their relationship with intent to report a crime. Past crime reporting research has categorized factors influencing reporting as victim-specific, incident-specific, and environment-specific (Goudriaan et al., 2004; Zhang et al., 2007). The TPB factors somewhat emulate this categorization as attitudes, PCB are victim-specific, and social norms are environment-specific.

Attitude. Attitude toward behavior is measured by the extent a person regards that behavior (e.g., crime reporting) positively or negatively. The more positive a person's attitude is toward crime reporting, the more likely it is that the person will intend to report the crime.

Social norms. Social norms are the perceived social pressure to perform or not to perform a behavior. The more the person believes that reporting a criminal act is expected and acceptable, the more likely a person will intend to report the crime.

Perceived behavioral control (PCB). PCB concerns a person's belief in his ability to do the behavior (e.g., report the crime). PCB is a reflection of the individual's past experience as well as perceived obstacles or impediments to performing the behavior. The greater the PCB, the more likely one is to intend to report a crime.

If the TPB model is effective at predicting *intent* to report crime, it could enhance understanding of *actual* victim reporting and provide important information for the criminal justice system and social science researchers. Specifically, researchers can develop programs to encourage crime reporting by better understanding what factors encourage or discourage crime reporting. This could assist in reducing the reporting gap between the number of crimes that occur and the number of crimes that are reported.

METHOD

Overview. A questionnaire given to 985 participants was used to measure attitudes, social norms, and PCB (TPB factors); other factors that might affect reporting; and crime reporting intention. The following hypotheses and research question were tested.

Hypothesis 1: The TPB model (including attitude, social norms, and PCB variables) will significantly predict participants' intent to report a crime.

Research Question: Of the TPB factors (attitude, social norms, or PCB),

which factor is the strongest predictor of intent to report

a crime?

Hypothesis 2: Enhancing the TPB model with other variables which have traditionally been related to crime reporting will increase the model's ability to predict intent to report a crime.

Procedure and Participants

Participants first read a 120-word scenario in which they were instructed to imagine themselves as the victim of a non-violent crime. Specifically, they were to imagine that a criminal snuck up behind them and stole their purse or wallet. Participants then answered questions measuring factors that would influence their decision whether to report the crime. The survey was administered using Survey Monkey, an online data collection website. The survey was also available in paper form for participants who did not have internet access or preferred not to take it on a computer. The average age was 29.9 and the median age was 21.0 (*N*=882).

Approximately 80% of the participants were students. The other 20% were community members recruited from community groups and community centers. They were 40% male, 7.9% Hispanic, 14.2% Native American, and 68.7% white. Participants were from various communities in rural, suburban, and urban areas in Nebraska, Kansas, New York, and Nevada. The survey was conducted in different cities and towns, to include a variety of states and settings (i.e., rural, suburban, East Coast, West Coast, and Mid-West).

MEASURES

The dependent variable was the intent to report a crime. Specifically, they were asked to imagine that a criminal came up behind them and stole their purse or wallet. Participants then answered several questions measuring factors that would influence their decision whether to report the crime (Appendix A). Three questions were selected to represent attitudes. Two questions asked if they would encourage a male/female friend to report the crime if it happened to the friend. Two other questions measured the likelihood that the participant would report if a friend encouraged them, and whether it was their duty to report a crime. These were the measures of the social norms. One question, which measured perceived behavioral control, asked if it was easy to contact the police and report a crime.

The second purpose of this study was to test an enhanced TPB model, which included variables added to the TPB factors (Appendix B). Past research has indicated that seriousness of the crime is one of the most important predictors of reporting. Other questions measured emotions (e.g., anger, embarrassment), how much the victim felt at fault for the crime, if they had been previously victimized, and whether reporting would make an impact on the crime being solved.

The "Measures of Legal Attitudes" scale (Wrightsman, Batson, & Edkins, 2004) contained three different subscales designed to measure attitudes relating to the criminal justice system. The subscale that measured attitude toward integrity of the criminal justice system was selected to represent an environmental influence. The first test of the "integrity" subscale revealed it had low reliability, as the Cronbach's Alpha was only 0.4. After eliminating several questions with low correlations, the Cronbach's Alpha increased to 0.70. The remaining five subscale questions were averaged to create the "integrity the justice system" subscale variable (Appendix B). The categorical measure for gender was adjusted so male = 1 and female = 0, and race was adjusted so white = 1 and non-white = 0.

RESULTS

A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted using principal component analysis and varimax roatation in Predictive Analytics Software (PASW). The variables loaded into three factors that represented the three TPB factors, as expected, with the exception of a question that measured whether it is important to report a crime. It was originally intended to measure attitudes, but it loaded with the social norms factor. The social norm questions all loaded between .625 and .887. The attitude questions loaded between .838 and .897. The questions measuring social norms were averaged together (α = .87) and the questions measuring attitude were averaged together (α = .77). Perceived behavioral control was measured by a single question.

A two-step linear regression model was conducted, using a one tailed significance test (Table 1). The TPB factors were predictors in the first step, and the TPB and traditional reporting variables were predictors in the second step (i.e., the "enhanced model"). The regression model for the first step significantly predicted participants' intent to report crime (R^2 = .509; adjusted R^2 = .507; F [3, 877] = 303; p < .001). The strongest predictor was social norms (β =.702, t [881] = 26.8, p < .001), which accounted for the majority of the model fit. This indicated that the more participants believed that crime reporting was socially normative, the stronger their intent to report. The attitude factor (β =.057, t [881] = 2.1, p < .05) was also significant and indicated that attitudes were positively related to intent to report. PBC (β =-.054, t [881] = -2.16, p < .05) was also significant and indicated that the more participants felt they were in control, the less intent they had to report.

Step 2 in the regression tested the relationship between the enhanced TPB model and intent to report. The enhanced TPB model only marginally improved the basic model ($R^2 = .514$; adjusted $R^2 = .507$; F [10, 867] = 70.5; p < .001). Consistent with the Step 1 analysis, social norms accounted for the majority of the model fit ($\beta = .664$, t [881] = 20.46,

p < .001) and was positively related to intent to report. As with Step 1, the attitude factor was positively related ($\beta = .063$, t [881] = 2.3, p < .05), and PBC was negatively related ($\beta = -.057$, t [881] = -2.22, p < .05) to intent to report. In the enhanced TPB model (Step 2), the following variables were not significant: perceived severity; the integrity of the justice system scale; gender; and race. Additional variables that were not significant included: if the participant knew the offender, felt foolish, was a previous victim, was angry about the incident, felt at fault, and thought the case would be solved.

Table 1
Multiple Regressions of TPB models

	TPB Model (Model 1)			Enhanced Model (Model 2)		
Variables	В	t	β	В	t	β
Attitude scale	.084*	2.1	.057	.093*	2.258	.063
Social Norms	1.07***	26.8	.702	1.013***	20.461	.664
PBC	070*	-2.16	054	073*	-2.222	057
Gender				052	36	009
Race				041	284	007
Feel foolish				.036	1.038	.030
Knew offender				.016	.560	.014
Previous victim				.205	1.455	.036
Belief in the system scale				078	697	017
Seriousness				.071	1.733	.054
Angry				.004	.117	.003
Feel at fault				.003	.066	.002
How likely case will be solved				.026	.549	.014

 R^2 = .507 (Model 1), R^2 = .514 (Model 2) N=881, *** p < .001, ** p < .01, * p < .05

DISCUSSION

The main purpose of the study was to investigate whether the TPB predicts intent to report a crime and whether the TPB model can be improved by adding other factors which previous research indicated might be influential. The first hypothesis was supported; the TPB model significantly predicts intent to file a crime report. The research question asked which factor in the TPB model was most predictive; analyses revealed that the answer was social norms. The second hypothesis was that expanding the TPB model to include other variables would create a more robust model with higher predictive power. This was not confirmed, because the enhanced model tested in Step 2 of the regression analysis was

only slightly more predictive than the TPB model tested in Step1 of the regression analysis. Only the TPB factors were significant, even when testing the enhanced model.

Results have implications for psychology and the criminal justice systems. The psychological importance of this study is the finding that the TPB can be used to explain intent to report a crime. The TPB model has been used to explain intention to engage in behaviors in regards to sex, exercise, shopping, eating habits, and gambling (Conner, Norman, & Bell, 2002; Hansen, 2008; Martin et al., 2010; Mausbach, Semple, Strathdee, & Patterson, 2009). These results expand the arenas which TPB model can be used.

This study also has implications for criminal justice. Because the TPB factors were related to intent to report, similar items could be included in future victim report survey questionnaires and victim decision-making research. Including questions based on the TPB in the government's surveys of crime victims could address the external validity concerns present in this study (which did not survey actual victims). Additionally, TPB factors can be used to create media campaigns designed to encourage reporting. Because social norms were the strongest predictor of intent to report, community and local organizations can reprioritize the importance of encouraging crime reporting. Police agencies might utilize social network sites in the same manner as secret witness call. These sites could communicate the expectation that citizens and bystanders should report crime and provide convenient methods for reporting criminal incidents through a safe and anonymous internet site.

Increasing crime reporting is important in helping police identify trends in crime and victimization. Because police use sophisticated crime analysis software and mapping programs, it is important to include as many criminal activities as possible to improve trend analysis. If these large computer programs are successful, it could lead to significant changes in police management information technology. What can be predicted can be better prevented, and better analysis could allow for less reactive policing and more proactive and predictive policing. If federal programs would mandate minimum reporting levels in order for criminal justice agencies to receive federal funding, it would increase database information details of crimes to create better predictive models.

LIMITATIONS

This study had several limitations. The first limitation concerns problems with generalization. The survey was given to mostly college age students and members of community groups. It was not a true random sample of the population. This prohibits generalization of the results to all the polity. The second limitation, also related to the sample, was that participants only pretended to be victimized. Thus, results might not apply to real life situations if participants imagining being victimized make decisions differently than actual victims. Next, a limitation was that the survey only measured *intent* to report a crime, not *actual* reporting. This is a limitation because intent to report might or might not lead to actual reporting. Although the complete TPB model would predict a relationship between intent and actual reporting, this study was unable to test that part of that model. Another limitation was that only one crime scenario was used. The scenario was chosen because it

was representative of a common crime incident (e.g., more people will experience a minor theft than a major assault). However, this study may not generalize to more serious offenses if victims' decision-making is different for crimes of varying severity. Despite these limitations, the study is valuable and future research can address these limitations.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to explore whether the TPB model predicts intent to report a crime. The short answer is that it does. Adding traditional factors that were expected to predict reporting to the TPB model only increased the model's predictive power slightly. None of the traditional factors were significant predictors; only the TPB factors predicted intent to report. This study thus revealed that TPB can predict intent to report a crime—in addition to the many other behaviors it has been used to predict in past studies (Nigg et al., 2009). Of the TPB factors, social norms were the most strongly related to intent to report. Thus, the criminal justice system could utilize this in many ways, including development of programs to encourage people to report crime through communicating that reporting is expected and typical.

Victim reporting is a critical element of the criminal justice system. Without victim reports, police cannot investigate crimes and achieve justice. Yet, nearly half of all crimes go unreported (Ratcliffe, 2008). Thus, it is essential that researchers find the factors that influence victim reporting. This study, along with others in the future, can help policing agencies be more effective in crime prediction and prevention.

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APPENDIX A

Dependent Variable and TPB Variables

Dependent Variable

The question is about reporting the incident to the police. Reporting would involve calling the police, being interviewed by an officer, and completing a police report. This may be done either at the scene of the crime or at the police station.

• How likely would you report this incident to the police? Please circle ONE number (1-9) of your answer. On the scale 1=Not likely and 9=Very likely.

Attitude Questions

TPB Variables

- Reporting crimes is a waste of my time (reverse coded)
- Reporting crime is not useful because police rarely solve crimes (reverse coded)

Social Norms Questions

• It is important to report all crimes to the police*

*note that this question was originally intended to measure "attitude" but in the factor analysis described in the text, it loaded with "social norms" and was ultimately included in the social norms scale

Instructions: Imagine that this incident occurred to a **FEMALE FRIEND** of yours (instead of happening to you). Please answer the following questions:

FEMALE:

• How likely is it that you would encourage her to report the incident to police?

Instructions: Imagine that this incident occurred to a **MALE FRIEND** of yours (instead of happening to you). Please answer the following questions:

MALE:

• How likely is it that you would encourage him to report the incident to police?

Instructions: The following statements examine how certain factors influence your likelihood of reporting a crime **in general** (not specific to the incident above). Please indicate the number that corresponds to how each factor would influence whether or not you report a crime to police.

• If a friend told me that I **should** report the crime

• It is my duty as a citizen to report crimes to the police

Perceived Behavioral Control Question

• It is easy to contact the police to report a crime

APPENDIX B

Traditional Crime Reporting Questions

Incident-specific

Severity variable:

How serious do you feel this incident is?

Not serious Somewhat serious Very serious

Relationship variable:

If I know the criminal personally

Discourage Encourage Me from Reporting Me to Report

Victim-specific

Previous victimization variable:

Have you ever **reported** a crime? Yes No (reverse coded)

Anger variable:

How **angry** are you about this incident?

Not Angry Somewhat angry Very angry

Fault variable:

How much do you feel at **fault** for the incident?

No fault Some fault Very much at fault

Embarrassment variable:

How **foolish** do you feel as result of this incident? (reverse coded)

Not at all foolish Moderately Very foolish

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Environment-specific

Solvability variable:

How likely is it that the police will **solve** this case?

Not likely Somewhat likely Very likely

Justice system integrity variable:

Instructions: Each of the following reflects an opinion about the legal system and the courts. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement by circling the appropriate number below the statement. Use the following scale:

Defense attorneys are dishonest if it means they can win a case. (reverse coded)

Lots of police are corrupt and hypocritical. (reverse coded)

Judges are easily "bought off" by corrupt politicians. (reverse coded)

Because lawyers can pick jury members, juries can no longer be trusted. (reverse coded)

Prosecuting attorneys are dishonest if it means they can win a case. (reverse coded)

Instructions: The following questions are demographic questions and are used to determine information about participants. All information will be kept confidential.

Gender: (check one) _____ Male ____ Female

African-American

What is your racial/ethnic background?

		
Asian-American	White American	
Hispanic-American	Other (please specify)

Native American