

The victimisation of backpackers

Mark Israel

Backpackers are vulnerable to various predatory and property crimes.

Tourism has emerged as an important part of the Australian economy. The specialist sector of the market devoted to backpackers is surprisingly valuable: backpackers contribute just under \$900 million over the year to Australia, mostly in foreign currency. They represent at least 6% of all overseas visitors to this country and provide a consistent and dependable clientele to many regions normally overlooked by other tourists. In the last ten years, cheap, conveniently-located hostels, eating places, coffee houses, clubs, equipment shops, and magazines have all developed to service backpackers' needs.

Over the same period, several members of the backpacking industry have expressed concern at the effect on the development of their industry of a number of well-publicised cases of the death of backpackers, in particular the murder of seven backpackers at Belanglo by Ivan Milat and the deaths of six travellers as a result of an arson attack on a Kings Cross hostel. Anyone who might have wanted to explore the victimisation of backpackers would have found little in the academic literature to help them. While there is a growing international literature on backpacking, this is largely confined to work on topics such as backpacker roles and motivation, marketing opportunities and the road culture of backpackers.¹ No studies have been done on their vulnerability to crime. Indeed, there have been very few studies of the effect of crime on tourists at all. Since the importance of tourism to Australia is likely to grow, this article examines the possible contribution that victimology and criminology might make to the continued expansion of the backpacking industry.

Who are backpackers?

The modern phenomenon of backpacking draws on older traditions of long-term travel for the purpose of education, escape, health or occasional work. Contemporary backpackers are not easily distinguished by their economic or demographic characteristics. Instead Australian researchers prefer to use social criteria. Backpackers are generally distinguished by their approach to travel and holiday taking, namely their preference for budget accommodation, independently arranged and flexible travel, and informal and unstructured leisure activities. As *Kakadu Plus*, a backpacker's guide to the Top End announced in 1993, '... backpackers are not tourists, they are travellers. They do not travel just to see the sights but to experience the places they visit.'

Backpackers do usually visit tourist sights but also seek non-tourist experiences. They place emphasis 'on travel rather than tourism, on individual choice, on avoiding the package holiday-maker, on the need to be an educated traveller, and on a global operation that permits individual care and attention'.²

Over the past ten years, a number of national and regional studies have provided profiles of backpackers in this country. We now know that most backpackers are 20-29 years old and are either still studying or

Mark Israel teaches criminology in the law school at Flinders University of South Australia.

are young professionals in their first jobs. A majority of backpackers usually travel alone or with just one other person, and most come to Australia on holiday, though some may work while they are travelling here. An Australian Bureau of Tourism Research survey published in 1997 found that almost 20% of backpackers were British, 14% North American, 11% German, while Scandinavians, New Zealanders and Japanese each comprised between 6% and 8%. Other travellers came from Singapore and South-East Asia, Switzerland, the Netherlands and other parts of Europe.³

The safety of backpackers

Generally, there have been very few studies of the incidence of crime on tourists. The findings are not straightforward though they do point consistently to the vulnerability of tourists to particular kinds of offences including property crimes, robbery, assault, larceny, fraud and even murder. For example, in the United States, Chesney-Lind and Lind found that tourists holidaying in Hawaii were subject to higher rates of robbery and rape than locals. In southern Spain, Per Stangeland reported that a major part of all burglaries and petty thefts in the province of Malaga were perpetrated against tourists. Consequently, people faced a greater chance of becoming a victim of crime if they came on holiday to the region for two weeks than permanent residents did over an entire year. In Australia, James Walmsley and his colleagues found that tourist areas experienced higher than expected rates for theft, though tourists were not necessarily the victims. On the other hand, they found that these same areas had lower than expected incidences of sexual assault and drug offences.⁴ It is possible that concern with personal safety is a major factor influencing the decisions that tourists make about where they will go. Indeed, the travel industry has expressed its anxiety that panics about the safety of non-budget tourists may lead to a decline in Australian market share. Reports in the Australian media have suggested that conventional Japanese tourists have been put off travelling to Australia because of the high risk of criminal victimisation.⁵

We know less about the levels of crime against backpackers or what importance backpackers attach to personal safety when planning where to go. However, there are good reasons to believe that backpackers are particularly vulnerable to victimisation, either aimed against their person or their property. If commentators have addressed the issue, they have attributed backpackers' high risk to a series of personal and situational factors. These have included: backpackers' position as strangers in the places that they visit; their preference for independence which removes them from the protection of package travel; their desire to travel within a limited budget; their vulnerable strategies for transporting and storing possessions; and the development of myths about backpackers among host populations. I wish to examine each of these possibilities in more detail.

As strangers, backpackers are not known in the local community; they are often highly visible, may be unaware of local 'predatory hot spots', and may undertake risky



activities such as purchasing drugs from new sources or moving in the company of strangers. Local offenders may find it easier, safer and more profitable to rob a tourist than a local. They may also find it less morally troublesome. As Cohen reported in Thailand, tourists may be considered 'fair game', and may be less likely to report offences or turn up to court to give evidence.⁶

For many backpackers, one of the joys of travel is the opportunity it offers to develop independence. For some, travelling alone is preferable, since it allows more interactions with locals and other travellers, and might provide a better chance of receiving free rides or local hospitality. However, this also increases the chances of contact with strangers in situations that the backpacker may find difficult to control:

... since they do not enjoy the protection of the environmental bubble of conventional tourism, and are often prepared to engage in interaction with locals of whose background and intentions they are ignorant, they are more exposed than conventional tourists to acts of theft and robbery perpetrated by local criminals.⁷

Put more luridly by the *Age*, the travellers' culture 'boasts freedom and fast friendship but can make people easy prey for creeps, con artists and killers'. Many of the precautions that urban residents routinely take are less attractive to backpackers either because they are more difficult for them to take or because they are less desirable on holiday. Indeed, there is some suggestion that travellers are more likely to drop their inhibitions while on holiday. Although Kelly attributes this to higher rates of alcohol or drug consumption while on the road, we might speculate that travellers prefer to ditch their 'everyday concerns' in favour of a more carefree lifestyle.⁸

Backpackers often cannot or choose not to afford to take safer options: hitch-hiking is cheaper than paying for a ticket. However, travelling as cheaply as possible, and paying as little as possible for accommodation affords backpackers access to the least desirable aspects of a society:

Like the mass-tourist, the mass-drifter also gets a biased picture of the host society; the latter's perspective, however, is diametrically opposed to that of the former: the one looks at the host country from the lofty heights of an air-conditioned hotel room; the other from the depths of the dust-bin.⁹

In the 1990s, hitch-hiking has come to be seen as a potentially deadly experience. Magazines such as the *Backpackers Guide* warn against it: '... with some nutters around — you are not even safe in pairs! We could suggest travelling with a machine gun, but since this is illegal, another form of transport is advisable and mum and dad will sleep a lot better, as well.' The *Lonely Planet* books now also advise against it. Nevertheless there is plenty of evidence that backpackers do continue to hitch, and often see it as a good way of meeting Australians and other travellers. In addition, backpackers may be travelling with larger amounts of cash or with more expensive goods like cameras or portable CD players than locals might normally carry. They

may also have less control over where and when they leave them.

Finally, myths surrounding travellers may encourage locals to target them for victimisation. Breach of local social customs and restrictions such as moral notions of the appropriate behaviour of women, may help local offenders justify or neutralise offences against backpackers. For instance — according to media reports — sexual assault in South Australia has been justified by a senior police officer in terms of male Australian fantasies of sexually and morally loose backpackers. In August 1993, a senior South Australian police spokesman was quoted in the *Advertiser*: 'It is a well-known fact many of these young girls travelling around are short on cash so they prostitute themselves in order to keep travelling'.

What is often overlooked is that even if backpackers behaved in the same way as their local peers they would still fall into the most vulnerable of groups: they are young, mobile, travel on public transport and go to places of entertainment in the evenings.

The typical backpacker appears to place security behind price, cleanliness, location, hours of access and cooking facilities in factors that influence his or her choice of accommodation and the choice of destination is more likely to be influenced by natural attractions, friendliness of the locals, or the interesting local culture than by whether it is safe to travel there. However, despite such findings, we do not really understand how fears about safety influence the choice of travel destinations by backpackers. Sadly several recent events suggest that the Australian industry may have to find out.

In September 1989, four men and a woman suffocated in a fire deliberately lit at the Downunder Hostel in Kings Cross, Sydney. One other tourist later died in hospital from burns. According to the local mayor, the building had failed to meet fire safety requirements for the previous six years, in part because there was combustible material in the fire stair area and the main stairwell had not been fully isolated. When the fire occurred, the fire doors to the main stairwell had been jammed open and fire equipment installed in the hostel proved useless. The State coroner later wrote about who could be held responsible: 'Who, I asked, was negligent? The answer was, "Just about everybody"'. The management had failed to minimise recognisable risks, the chief building engineer of the local council had failed to inform management or the council of various threats to fire safety that he had seen during an inspection, and the council had put in place procedures for regulating hostels that were slow, haphazard and uncertain, in short, wholly inadequate for the task of protecting the public. Indeed, the hostel may have only stayed in business because of poor co-ordination between Sydney City and South Sydney council authorities. Some of the recommendations of the coroner were incorporated in the *New South Wales Local Government (Backpackers' Hostel) Act 1990*, though this does not seem to have ended the existence of potential fire-traps in the State.¹⁰

Several disappearances and murders of backpackers have also heightened fears in the industry that the backpacking sector of the market is particularly vulnerable. Between September 1992 and November 1993, police discovered the remains of seven bodies in the Belanglo State Forest 120 kilometres south-west of Sydney. The victims were British, German and Australian backpackers who had been either

stabbed or shot in the previous four years. Many of the victims had disappeared while hitchhiking south of Sydney. The British tabloids splashed coverage of the death of two young English women: 'Cold-blooded murder of girl adventurers', 'Beast of the Bush', 'Crocodile Dundee Adventure Girls are found Dead in Wood'. In 1996, Ivan Milat was tried and convicted of the murders.

In June 1993, fears arose that a serial killer might be operating in Coober Pedy, a town 950 kilometres north of Adelaide. An Aboriginal woman, Karen Williams, had disappeared in 1990, an Italian tourist in 1991, and Anne Neumann, a 22-year-old German backpacker — the third woman to disappear in four years — went missing in 1993. The media suggested that the disappearances were part of a pattern whereby 'female backpackers often were lured into threatening situations' near the town. Police warned backpackers, particularly young women, not to walk alone in the town. After the third disappearance, the Chairman of the town's Retail, Business and Tourism Association was reported in the *Adelaide Advertiser* in July as saying that businesses were worried by the loss of tourist revenue. Neumann's body was later recovered in a mine shaft and, in September 1994, a local man was convicted of the murder.

Although the tourism industry has expressed concern about the effects of incidents such as the murders at Belanglo and Coober Pedy, we really have very little idea how many backpackers know about these events, and whether, if they do, it has any effect on where and how they travel in Australia. Throughout this period, researchers have remained silent.

Future research

Any future work on the victimisation of backpackers needs to be able to respond to the issues raised by both the Kings Cross and the Belanglo deaths. We need to have a clearer idea of how, to what extent, and why backpackers might be vulnerable to crimes against their person and their property in specific places and at particular times. Current official statistics are woefully inadequate. This means either that tourists need to be persuaded by criminal justice agencies to report offences against them or that we need to develop victimisation surveys that look at the incidence of crime against travellers.

Once we have established what sort of problem might exist, we can then look for ways of preventing crime. These might include finding ways of changing the behaviour of potential victims by encouraging people to carry fewer possessions or store them more securely, publicising safer types of transport or informing backpackers about relatively dangerous areas. They may also involve focusing on the difficulties that might be faced by particular groups of travellers — targeted perhaps because of their gender, sexuality, nationality or race — who may be vulnerable to predatory or hate crimes.

However, these forms of responses invite us to attribute blame to the victim, a tendency often associated with advice traditionally offered to women in public. They would also miss one of the more salutary lessons of the Kings Cross fire. The fire was lit by an arsonist. However, the flames took hold quickly and those who died were unable to escape because of the neglect of the management and a failure of local councils to respond to repeated breaches of fire regulations. Apart from paying attention to issues of racism and sexism, any critical work worth contemplating should also investigate

the role of economic development and corporate greed in the victimisation of backpackers and consider the possibilities for undertaking the prosecution of corporate or state offenders.

Conclusion

Backpackers form a significant client group for the tourism industry in Australia. They are particularly important to remote and rural regions that are too far off the beaten track for conventional international tourists. Unfortunately, there are good reasons to believe that backpackers are vulnerable to various predatory and property crimes. Their vulnerability stems, in part, from their age, their budget, the ways they travel, the places they go and the kinds of accommodation they seek. Australian tourism and criminal justice institutions might respond to the threats to backpackers by trying to limit what backpackers do. All they would have to do is proffer the same kinds of crime prevention advice traditionally targeted at other vulnerable groups such as young women and the elderly. Apart from harming the tourism industry, however, these kinds of responses would do nothing to address the underlying causes of victimisation. These may range from poor regulation of the tourism industry, through corporate greed to the prevalence of various sexist and racist attitudes in our society. If we are serious about trying to reduce the victimisation of backpackers we need to develop strategies that respond to the needs of backpackers and are far more sensitive to why people backpack. Future research needs to investigate how and why backpackers might be vulnerable, how they can and do respond to threats of victimisation, and how institutions and societies that wish to promote backpacking might be able to help reduce both victimisation and its effects.

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Conclusion

Customary law will remain significant to its adherents whether or not it receives formal endorsement in a constitution. The majority of those subject to customary law would regard a constitution as an exotic document. Thus intensive explanation and discussion with those whose interests are directly affected is essential in any process towards agreeing a formula for cementing customary law into the legal structure. Pluralism spawns weighty difficulties that demand both effort and tolerance if they are to be resolved. What is inexcusable is to create a hierarchy of sources that belittles customary law.

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