

# First Generation Immigrant Judgements of Offence Seriousness: Evidence from the Crime Survey for England and Wales.

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## Abstract

This exploratory paper delves into differences and similarities in the rated seriousness of offences suffered by victims of different national origin. The issue is important because a mismatch between police and victim assessments of seriousness is likely to fuel discord. It was found that first generation immigrants did not differ in their rating of the seriousness of offences against the person from either the indigenous population or according to region of birth. However those of Asian origin rated vehicle and property crime they had suffered as more serious than did other groups about crimes they suffered. The anticipated higher seriousness rating of offences reported to the police was observed for all groups. People of Asian origin reported to the police a smaller proportion of offences they rated trivial than did people in other groups. Analysis of seriousness judgements in victimization surveys represents a much-underused resource for understanding the nexus between public perceptions and criminal justice responses.

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## Introduction

A problem with which police are routinely presented is how, with sensitivity, to enforce the law in immigrant communities whose values may differ, or be perceived to differ, from those of the host community. The difficulty lies, at least in part, in uncertainty about the perceived seriousness of offences which members of the immigrant community suffer or commit. Even if there is consensus about seriousness across groups within the community, presumptions that there is not will lead to misunderstanding. Specifically:

- For offences deemed *more* serious by an immigrant community than by the host community, immigrant *victims* will consider police efforts to help them or solve crime committed against them to be inadequate.
- For offences deemed *less* serious by an immigrant community than by the host community, immigrant *perpetrators* will feel their treatment to be harsh.
- For offences deemed *equally* serious by host and immigrant communities but perceived to differ, well-meaning attempts by the police to explain the action being taken may be seen as unnecessary or patronizing.

In the present exploratory study, data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (hereinafter CSEW) will be used to examine the rated seriousness of offences of various kinds committed against them. The CSEW's routine elicitation of offence seriousness judgements made by victims are of immense potential usefulness in a variety of contexts and have been woefully neglected. They are, after all, the closest one gets to assessments of the nastiness of crime events experienced by the person who was there and was victimized. Data from CSEW, including as they do

responses from those who do not report the offence to the police, allow one to compare thresholds of seriousness at which citizens with different national origins inform the police.

The present study focuses narrowly on seriousness ratings according to the region of birth of victims. Thus a review of the quite meagre literature on seriousness judgements is outwith the paper's scope, as are a multitude of other analyses which would be of interest. The basic question addressed here is whether there is a mismatch between indigenous and immigrant groupings in the seriousness with which they regard crimes which they suffer. The same question should certainly be asked about other demographics. The writers' hope is that the present modest paper may stimulate research along these lines. For now, we are exclusively concerned with first generation immigrants compared to UK born citizens. To avoid tedious repetition, the qualifier 'first generation' should be understood in what follows.

The pioneering study of judgements of offence seriousness is conventionally attributed to Sellin and Wolfgang (1964). The present writers would give priority to Thurstone (1927) but this paper has a focus and scholarly archaeology is not it. Sellin and Wolfgang's point was that (for example) assaults causing serious injury should not be lumped together with assaults occasioning little or no injury, and robberies with a lot of money taken should not be lumped together with those where little is taken. This is true both when thinking about criminal careers and victim experiences. In both cases judgement of offence seriousness provides a more appropriate metric than legal offence category. This view has enjoyed a recent renaissance, though the word used has been harm or severity rather than seriousness. The focus seriousness has semantically morphed into a focus on harm or severity. The approaches are identical in weighting crime counts so as better to reflect impact of crimes on victims. (Sherman et al., 2014; Ignatans and Pease 2015; Herzog and Einat 2016). Semantics aside, seriousness/harm as judged by victims is surely a valuable measure in any weighting process. The approach to harm measurement adopted by Sherman et al. (2014) is to anchor it to sentencing guidelines. While this approach is likely to be the one generally adopted, and the present writers regard it as an advance on current practice, they are concerned that sen-

tencing guideline starting points are very remote from victim experience. Indeed there is some question about whether guidelines structure judicial sentencing in any substantial way (Ranyard et al. 1994; Heberton et al. 2009). Put simply, we prefer victim judgements of offence seriousness in the assessment of harm. Certainly (as Sherman et al would agree) for the question addressed here, seriousness is the only viable measure.

The obvious problem when here comparing immigrant and host groups can be expressed as follows. Any difference may be interpreted in one of two ways. Either the groups differ in their assessment of the same event, or the events differ in some way. For example, if immigrants rate assaultive crime as more serious, it may be that they differ in their rating of what is objectively the same offence, or alternatively that the events they suffer are truly more serious. Attempts will be made to tease out these alternatives, but a more conclusive demonstration must await the inclusion in CSEW of a question to *all* respondents asking for their judgement of offence categories in the abstract. This was an approach adopted in some early sweeps of CSEW. The provisional conclusion (see Pease 1985 and text below) was a surprisingly high level of consensus in perceived seriousness of crimes across cultures, with some important exceptions. Despite criticisms of the assumptions of additivity between components of complex offences (Wagner and Pease 1978), the Wolfgang and Sellin (1964) opus inspired research on the topic over the following two decades. The irony is that the research 'fashion' of seriousness judgements petered out as the victimization survey became more common. Thus the means of studying seriousness more thoroughly and cheaply coincided with declining interest in the topic. The question addressed by the post-Sellin and Wolfgang spate of work, relevant to our present purpose, is the degree to which there is at least approximate cross-culture consensus in judgements of the *relative* seriousness of crimes. Such evidence as exists suggests substantial consensus is also to be found *across national groups* (Akman et al. 1967; Veles-Dias and Megargee 1970; Rossi et al. 1974; Pease et al. 1975).

## Methods

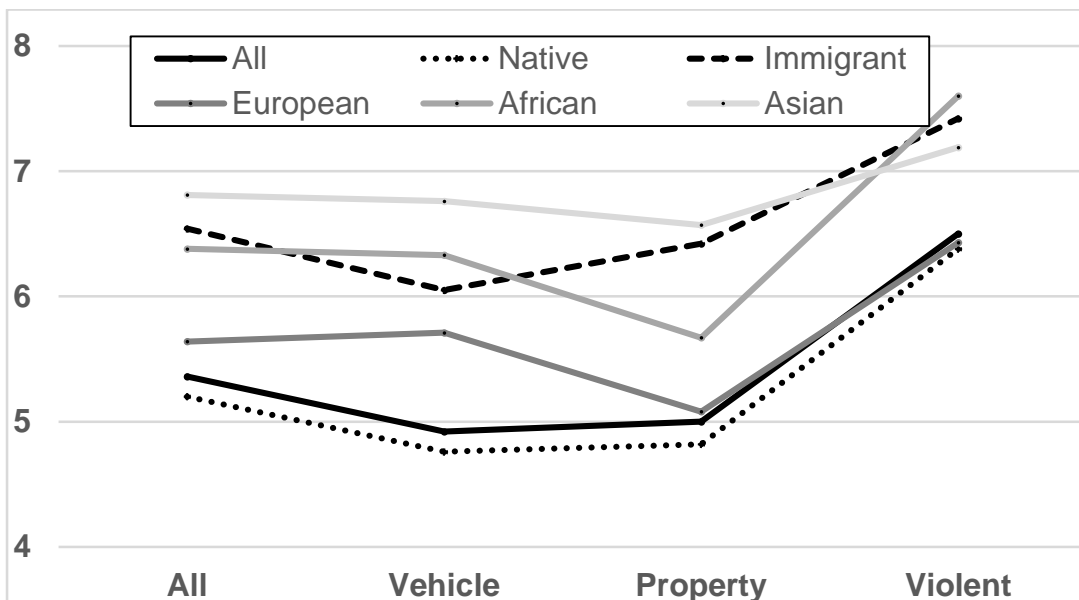
CSEW victim form data from sweeps 2009/2010 -2014/2015 were pooled yielding a over 55000 victimization events, using the convention described as follows. Except where otherwise stated, these form the data for the present study. In CSEW a distinction is made as follows. If there are a series of events against the same victim of the same type and presumably by the same perpetrator, *one* victim form is completed (rather than a victim form for each of the events in the series). The event on which the victim of a series was invited to concentrate was the most recent one in the series. It was this event whose seriousness had to be rated. For present purposes, a series was thus counted as a single event because a seriousness score was assigned only to the most recent event in the series. To do otherwise would be to assume that event seriousness was identical across all the incidents in the series so that perceived seriousness would not have diminished (or escalated) throughout the series. The sample size of 55000 events was thus calculated on the basis of a series being counted as a single event.

CSEW victim forms contain detail of offence context, circumstances and consequences. The key question on seriousness took the form "How serious a crime do you think this was (scale of 1 to 20)". Analyses compared seriousness judgments made by British born people and first generation immigrants. Immigrant *region* of origin was not identified by all immigrant victims. Where it was (in 2022 cases) the sample was split between European, African and Asian born first generation immigrants.

## Results

Mean seriousness (the scale being 1-20) were calculated for all respondents, all native born respondents (native), all first generation immigrants (immigrant) and where available (see above) immigrants of European birth (European), of African origin (African) and Asian origin (Asian). The offences suffered were aggregated as follows: vehicle crimes (vehicle theft, theft from vehicle, damage to vehicle) property crime (theft from and outside the property, theft of belongings in absence of the owner, criminal damage), and violent crime (robbery, theft from the person, domestic violence, sexual offences, harassment). These means are presented as Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Mean Crime Seriousness Score by Respondent Region of Birth.**



The results are here presented as text. Details of ANOVAs conducted are available from the second author on request. Comparing the native subgroup with all immigrants, the average seriousness of each of the crime types (violent, property and vehicle) was significantly higher for the latter ( $p < .001$ ). So in these crudest of terms, immigrants see the crimes they suffer as more serious on average than do indigenous people. In an attempt to look at ratings of all crime suffered in more detail, multiple comparison tests (Student-Newman-Keuls) were conducted and show the following patterns. *For all crime combined*, native-born British people and immigrants of European origin did

not differ in the rated seriousness of crimes suffered, but their rated seriousness was significantly less than that of immigrants of African origin, which was in turn significantly less than the mean seriousness rating of immigrants of Asian origin, This is expressed more succinctly as follows.

Groups with a common underlining do not differ reliably in seriousness ratings, so Native, European, African, Asian summarizes the preceding text description of the results.

We now consider individual crime types. Taking vehicle crime alone, the Asian sample rated them as significantly more serious than the African group, who in turn rated such crime as significantly more serious than European origin and indigenous groups, who did not differ significantly from each other. Summarized in increasing order of seriousness, we thus have Native European African Asian. Thus native born people rated such crime as significantly less serious than did European immigrants, who in turn rated it as less serious than immigrants of both the other origins, who did not differ reliably from each other. For property crime, the pattern was Native European African Asian so groups other than those of Asian origin did not differ reliably in rated seriousness, with those of Asian origin seeing such crimes as more serious. For crimes against the person, interestingly the groups did not differ reliably Native European African Asian.

We should be clear about what the above analysis does not say. It does not say that (for example) Asian immigrants suffer the most serious vehicle crime. Neither does it imply that Asian immigrants inflate the seriousness of crimes they suffer. The analyses below do show whether the decision to report a crime to the police is a function of their assessed seriousness of what has happened.

### ***Seriousness Scores and Report to the Police***

Figures 2-5 show the cumulative proportion of crimes reported to the police, by their rated seriousness by native and immigrant sub-groups. Figure 2, depicting the pattern for all crime, shows clearly that indigenous people report more crime to the police that they have rated as of low serious-

ness. At the other extreme, immigrants of Asian origin report far fewer such crimes. The same pattern, more marked, appears for vehicle and property crime but not for crimes against the person. We thus speculate that crimes of lower rated seriousness are converted into reports to the police less often by immigrants of Asian origin, but crimes of high rated seriousness and crimes against the person across the board are converted into report to the police to a similar extent across groups of different regional origin.

**Figure 2. Cumulative Report to the Police by Rated Seriousness: All Crime**

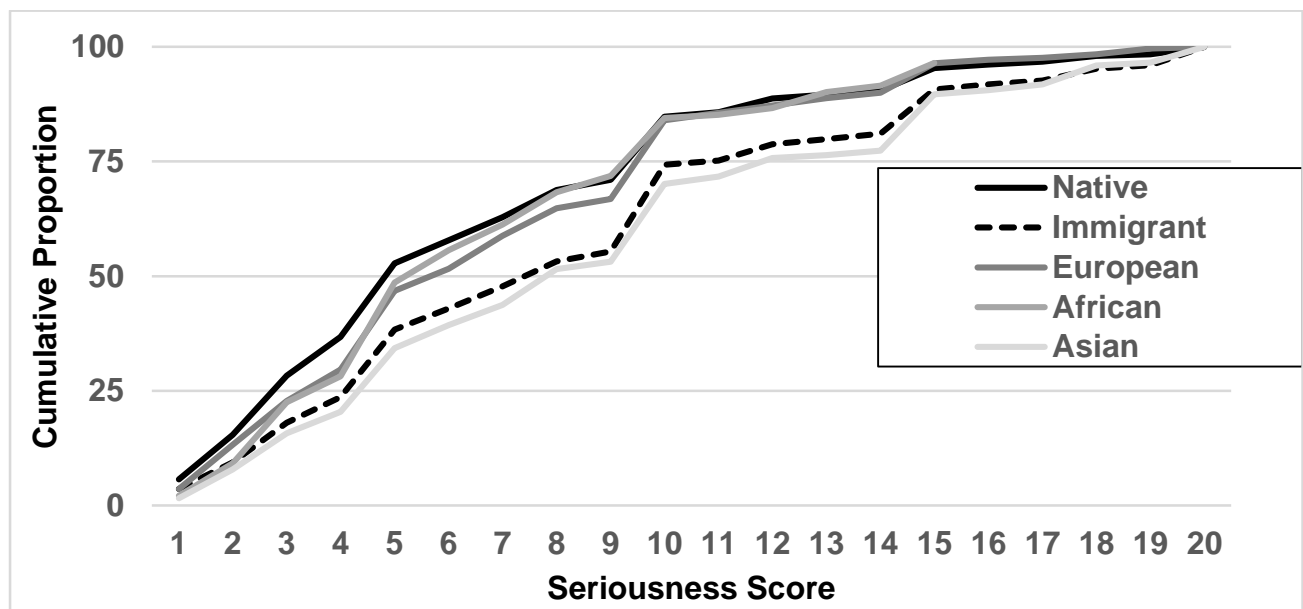




Figure 3. Cumulative Report to the Police by Rated Seriousness: Vehicle Crime

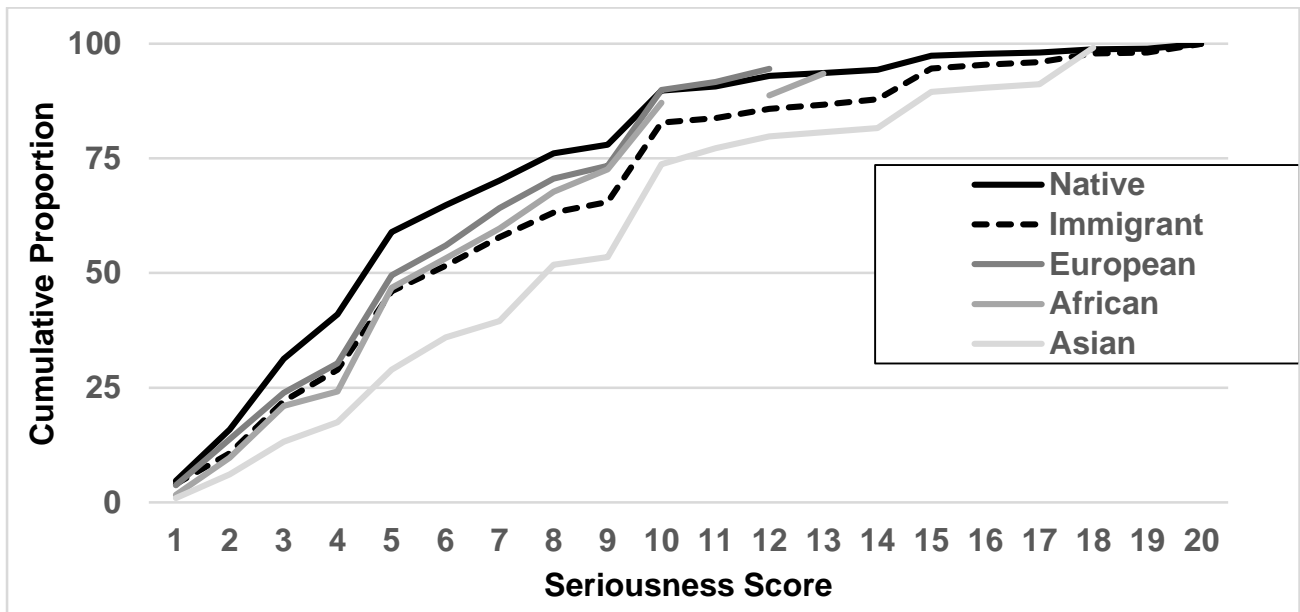
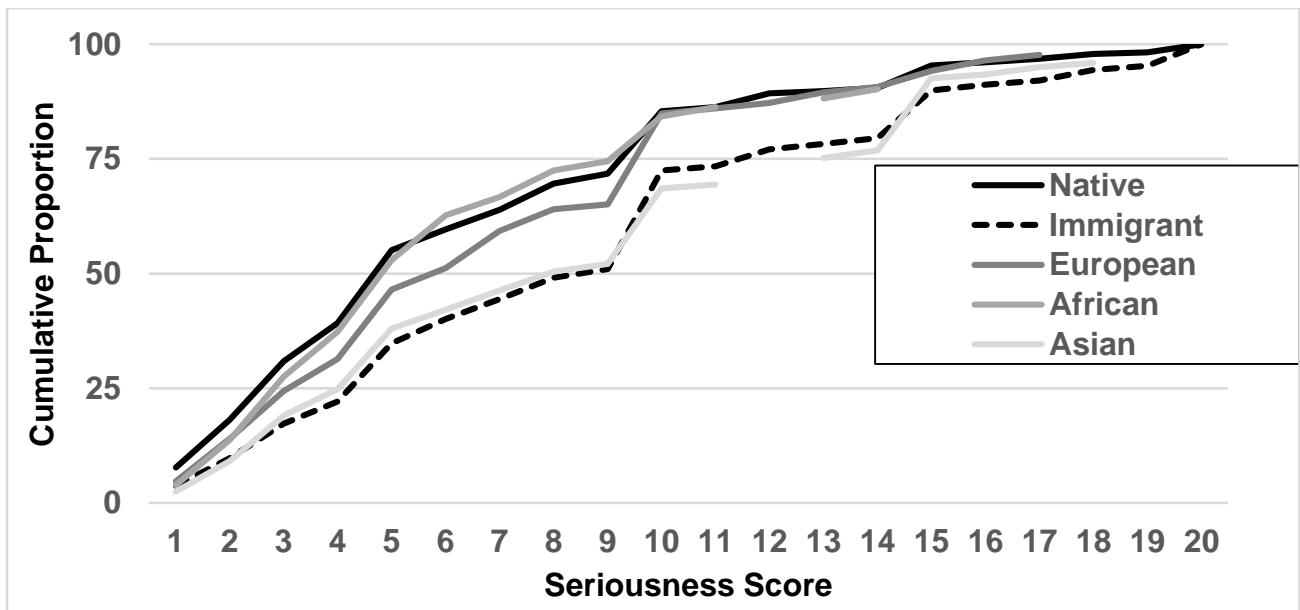


Figure 4. Cumulative Report to the Police by Rated Seriousness: Property Crime



**Figure 5. Cumulative Report to the Police by Rated Seriousness: Personal Crime**

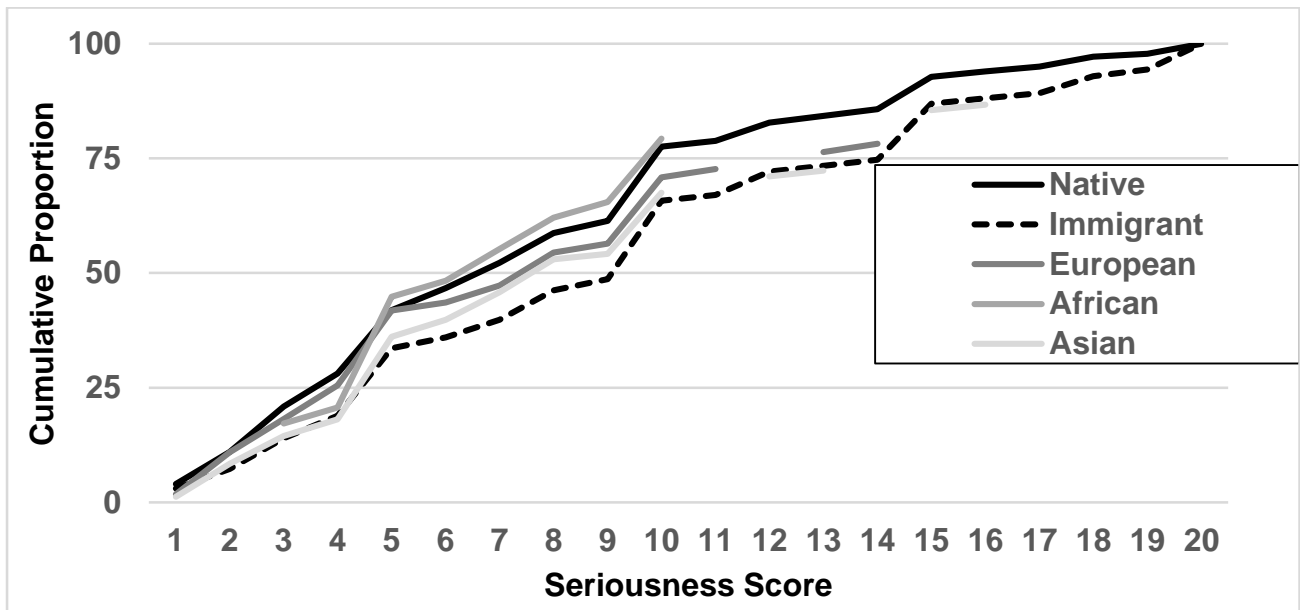


Table 1 provides an alternative depiction of the relationship between seriousness and report to the police.

**Table 1. Mean Seriousness Score for victimizations reported and not reported to the police between Native as well as European, African and Asian immigrant people.**

Average Seriousness Score		All	Native	Immigrant	European	African	Asian
All	Reported	6.97	6.77	8.52	7.17	7.09	8.97
	Unreported	4.34	4.20	5.37	4.71	5.95	5.65
Vehicle	Reported	6.23	6.06	7.41	6.53	6.92	8.90
	Unreported	4.16	3.99	5.34	5.15	5.97	5.85
Property	Reported	6.83	6.58	8.84	7.15	6.71	8.77
	Unreported	3.82	3.69	4.90	3.97	4.95	4.99
Personal	Reported	8.07	7.89	9.48	8.47	8.14	9.34
	Unreported	5.41	5.31	6.09	5.21	7.32	6.03

Helpfully, in CSEW sweep of 2014/15 respondents were asked for reasons why they did not report a crime to the police. Where one or more of the groups gave a reason in more than 10% of cases the reason is included in the table below.

**Table 2. Common Reasons for Non-Report by Group**

	Native (n=4031)	European (n=209)	African (n=113)	Asian (n=169)
Too Trivial, not worth reporting	42%	41%	37%	37%
Police could have done nothing	26%	27%	30%	35%
Police would not have bothered	17%	18%	19%	21%

The differences are too slight to be statistically reliable, but if replicated with data as it becomes available, may suggest that police impotence or indifference plays a slightly greater role in non-report by immigrants of Asian and African origin. If the differences between groups giving triviality as a reason for non-report hold up with more data, it may suggest that the Asian group would report more were they to have greater confidence in police capacity or willingness to investigate, since they give triviality less as a reason for non-report.

## ***Does the Same Rating Mean the same Thing Across Groups***

We left this question unresolved. We address it now by looking at whether factors one might suppose to make an offence serious do in fact account for all differences in seriousness ratings, or whether there remains something which must be put down to cultural differences in offence perception. In order to explore whether various factors affect the crime seriousness score differently for native and immigrant populations, separate linear regressions (OLS) were carried out for offender characteristics<sup>1</sup>; losses incurred from theft or burglary<sup>2</sup>; losses incurred in the case of a vehicle crime<sup>3</sup> and physical injuries<sup>4</sup>. Loss of an item or presence of an injury was coded as 1 and absence of such factors as zero. Cases with missing factors were omitted.

The approach taken involved checking whether the variance in rated seriousness explained by the characteristics listed changed non-trivially when a particular immigrant group was removed from the sample. This was done separately for each general offence type. The measure of variance explained was the coefficient of determination  $R^2$ . The changes in  $R^2$  are displayed in Table 3 below. So, Detailed statistics and variable definitions are available from the corresponding author. Only the main findings will be discussed here. Table 3, to re-iterate, has been created by deducing the  $R^2$  value of every population sub group from  $R^2$  value of overall sample, thus a positive value in Table 3 indicates that those factors are more closely associated with seriousness judgements for those populations, and a negative value indicates factors being associated less with seriousness scores given. Before getting to specifics, the central conclusion to be drawn from Table 3 is that

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<sup>1</sup> Gender, Age, Race, Influence of alcohol, Influence of drugs, Possession of a weapon, Affiliation to a gang.

<sup>2</sup> Vehicle Parts, Money/Wallet/Purse/CreditCard, Mobile Phone, Jewellery, Clothes, Documents, Electrical Goods, Computer, CDs/Games, House Keys, Car Keys, Tools, Bicycle/Parts, Garden Furniture, Bins, Bag/Briefcase, Purse/Wallet, Cash, Cigarettes/Food.

<sup>3</sup> Vehicle, Valuables, Electrical Goods, Speakers, Mobile Phone, Tools, Bicycle/Parts, Camera, CDs/Games, Household Items, House Keys, Car Keys, Exterior Fittings, Garden Furniture.

<sup>4</sup> Minor Bruising/Black Eye, Severe Bruising, Scratches, Cuts, Broken Bones, Broken Nose, Chipped Teeth, Concussion/Loss of Consciousness, Facial/Head Injuries.

the R<sup>2</sup> changes are generally very small, suggesting that by and large event characteristics contribute in a similar way to judgements of offence seriousness across respondent groups.

**Table 3. Difference in Coefficient of Determination R<sup>2</sup> value compared to total sample.**

	<b>Native</b>	<b>Immigrant</b>	<b>European</b>	<b>African</b>	<b>Asian</b>
<b>Offender Characteristics</b>	R <sup>2</sup> =Same	R <sup>2</sup> =+.042	R <sup>2</sup> =+.308	R <sup>2</sup> =+.501	R <sup>2</sup> =+.202
<b>If Burgled/Household Theft</b>	R <sup>2</sup> =+.001	R <sup>2</sup> =+.012	R <sup>2</sup> =+.085	R <sup>2</sup> =+.093	R <sup>2</sup> =+.087
<b>If Vehicle Theft</b>	R <sup>2</sup> =Same	R <sup>2</sup> =+.023	R <sup>2</sup> =+.126	R <sup>2</sup> =+.022	R <sup>2</sup> =+.039
<b>If Injuries</b>	R <sup>2</sup> =+.004	R <sup>2</sup> =-.013	R <sup>2</sup> =-.025	R <sup>2</sup> =-.009	R <sup>2</sup> =+.001

First, in regards to the characteristics of the offender, all of the traits except gang affiliation and influence of alcohol were found to be significantly impacting the seriousness score of the overall sample. For the native population, the only difference found was the perception of perpetrator race, as it was not found to be significantly related to the seriousness score. In contrast, for the immigrants' scores only perpetrator race and possession of a weapon were significantly related to seriousness. When split by region of origin, seriousness scores of the European immigrant population were most strongly (positively) influenced if the race of the offender was non-white, and if a weapon was involved. For Asian immigrants on the other hand, presence of a weapon was most significant and made the greatest difference. Interestingly, for the immigrant population as a whole, as well as for the disaggregated immigrant populations, other offender characteristics were largely non-significant.

In terms of the economic losses incurred, the majority of the items were found to be significantly related to seriousness score for the whole population as well as for natives. The immigrant sample as a whole demonstrated crime ratings significantly more severe in cases where loss of documents was experienced. When divided by the region of origin, all three groups of immigrants on average have given higher seriousness scores in incidents where minor losses were incurred such as loss of clothes, tools, bag/briefcase, etc. While loss of jewellery was much more influential for all three immigrant groups, loss of documents, tools and cigarettes was especially highly influential for European immigrants. On the other hand, loss of bicycle parts seemed particularly influential for African immigrants and the loss of documents, cash and electrical goods for Asian people.

In relationship to vehicle theft, all variables were significantly related to the seriousness for the total and native population. Immigrant people as a whole did not find loss of tools, cds/games, house keys, or household items to increase seriousness significantly. However, when segregated, loss of a vehicle itself as well as loss of a camera or mobile phone from a vehicle was significantly influential on increasing the seriousness judgements of European immigrants. Loss of CDs/Games was seen as enhancing seriousness for African people, and loss of valuables and electrical goods for Asian people.

Finally, the perception of seriousness according to injuries sustained illuminates further differences between the cultural constituencies. Immigrant people found any sort of physical harm much less associated with seriousness (besides chipped teeth) relative to the indigenous group. For European immigrants (the group with the lowest  $R^2$  value change for the injured) chipped teeth were found to be significantly related to an increased seriousness score whereas minor bruising/black eyes were linked with *lower* seriousness scores. Additionally, cuts were significantly associated with enhanced seriousness for African people and severe bruising and broken bones for Asian people.

Across all the analyses, crimes with financial loss were rated much more serious by immigrants than natives, even in a case of injury. For example, chipped teeth (the only injury that would not be covered by cost-free NHS care, or heal by itself), were found to increase seriousness for European immigrants who were otherwise least influenced by injuries. Cultural differences and lifestyle differences are likely to have contributed to the seriousness judgements amongst the immigrant sub groups due to the large differences in seriousness scores provided and their significance.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

The present paper has sought to explore differences and similarities in the rated seriousness of offences by victims of different immigrant origin. It was found that immigrant groups did not differ in their rating of the seriousness of offences against the person, Asian immigrants rated vehicle and property crime they had suffered as more serious than did other groups. While the expected difference in seriousness rating between offences reported to the police and other offences appeared for all groups, people of Asian origin reported a smaller proportion of offences they rated trivial than did people in other groups. There was a suggestion that this was a consequence of less belief in the capacity or willingness of the police to deal properly with offences of low rated seriousness, but this has to be tested with larger samples as they become available.

Analysis of the features of offences which were associated with high seriousness scores yielded interesting differences in the importance of race of offender, weapon, and type of injury caused. Again more data and a wider range of modelling approaches would yield a more nuanced view of group differences in the assessment of offence seriousness.

To advance the understanding of group differences necessary to optimal policing policy and practice, reinstatement of the seriousness question asked of all CSEW respondents in early sweeps of the survey is necessary because it separates out personal experience from a more general social

value set. This work could alternatively be done as a separate research exercise, perhaps using decision board methodology.

Beyond the specific but important issue of immigrant perceptions, seeking to synchronize police and diverse community views of what is and is not serious, we believe that victim seriousness ratings represent a rich opportunity for research setting out to advance understanding the relationship between public perceptions and criminal justice responses. We hope for another epoch of interest in how seriously people feel are the offences committed against them, similar to that which followed the Sellin and Wolfgang (1964) book, but this time given a fair wind by the greater current recognition that the equal weighting of all crime is a parody of the the impact of crime on people, risible were it not so apparently indifferent to the distribution of crime-caused suffering.

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