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CRIMINAL JUSTICE BOOK SUMMARIES

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Victims of Crime and Violence: JAN 26 1988

Final Report of the American Psychology Association Task Force

ACQUISITIONS

Introduction

Each year the cost of apprehending, prosecuting, incarcerating, re-habilitating, and studying criminals exceeds billions of dollars. At the same time almost nothing is spent to compensate, rehabilitate, and study the victims. Yet, the experience of being criminally victimized has profound consequences, both immediate and long term. Research indicates that loss of personal property and bodily injury, commonly thought to be the most unsettling aspects of victimization, may in fact be less important than the psychological damage the victim suffers.

Thus, in June 1982, the American Psychology Association established the Task Force on Victims of Crime. In three main sections of its resulting report to the American Psychology Association's Board of Directors, the task force (1) describes victims of crime and violence, (2) surveys current theories about the psychology of victimization, and (3) explores past and present public and legal policies regarding victimization with special emphasis on the interface between psychology and law.

Describing the victims of crime and violence

Anyone can be a victim of crime—certain groups, however, are more at risk than others. The typical victim of a violent crime is between 12 and 24 years old, black, single or divorced, living in an urban area, unemployed, and has an annual income of less than \$3,000.

Those who are most vulnerable usually have had a prior relationship with the offender, live near the offender, are intoxicated at the time of the victimization, or have placed themselves in a vulnerable position.

The reactions of victims

Victims of crime and other traumatic events show a surprising commonality in their reactions.

During the first few hours and days after the victimization, the victim may feel numbness, disorientation, denial, disbelief, loneliness, depression, vulnerability, and helplessness. Anxiety may be accompanied by sleep disturbances and nightmares, as well as by such physiological re-

actions as diarrhea, headaches, and aggravations in psychosomatic symptoms.

Short-term reaction usually occurs shortly after the victimization and lasts from 3 to 8 months. The victim may experience swings in feelings from fear to anger, sadness to elation, and self-pity to guilt. Some victims report feeling guilt and remorse as well as shame and disgust at being helpless and out of control.

Many crime victims are believed to resolve the trauma of victimization within 6 months to a year. Other victims, however, experience chronic stress. Rape victims in particular report that they still feel they have not recovered from the attack after a year. They still feel low self-esteem, depression, guilt, fear, and have difficulties with relationships.

Explaining the reactions of victims

Theories that explain the victim's stressful reaction focus on the sense of having been violated, having been treated unfairly, feeling vulnerable to additional victimization, and perceiving that victims are in some way deviant.

In crime victimization, the central source of stress is the violation of one's self, including one's home. A victim who has never developed an evenly regulated level of self-esteem may experience further diminishing

Summarized from *Victims of Crime and Violence—Final Report of the American Psychology Association Task Force on Victims of Crime and Violence* NCJ 96862, with permission from the APA. November 1984. 154 pp. including references. Summary published January 1986.

Victims of Crime and Violence—Final Report of the American Psychology Association Task Force on Victims of Crime and Violence is available from the APA, Order Department, P.O. Box 2710, Hyattsville, MD 20784. Price: \$10.00.

of an already weak self. Ultimately, the more solid the sense of self, the less likely the victim is to experience long-term stress.

The Task Force reported that although the feeling of unfair treatment is strong, it can be alleviated. The report explains that most people believe that if one treats others fairly, one will be treated fairly in return. When this precept is violated, the result is a feeling of inequity that can be reduced by decreasing any benefit the perpetrator may gain. Hence, recovering stolen property or obtaining compensation from a third party can alleviate the stress of having been treated unfairly.

After a crime, the victim must cope not only with the direct consequences of the crime itself, but also with feeling that one is now vulnerable. Fear of future victimization often leads victims to develop more stringent personal safety rules.

Studies suggest that people who have not been victims of crime are likely to feel increased vulnerability and fear when they come into contact with a victim of crime, particularly when they perceive themselves to be similar to the victim. "Secondary" victims vicariously feel vulnerable to crime and perceive themselves to be weak or easy targets. This is particularly acute for women, the elderly, blacks, Hispanics, and the poor.

Victims also may feel they were victimized because they acted inappropriately or appeared different than others who were not victimized. They may judge themselves as deviant in some way and may react to their own victimization with aversion and pity.

Coping with victimization

The task force states that successful coping is a function of individual values and knowing about the common experiences of all victims.

Whether or not an individual perceives him or herself as a victim depends, in part, on the appraisal of the event, which, in turn, leads the victim to minimize, maximize, or nullify what has occurred. Thus one individual whose purse is snatched might experience posttraumatic symptoms, whereas another might perceive that she has escaped serious harm.

Victims define their experiences in three primary ways: (1) They may make downward social comparisons; i.e., comparing themselves with another victim who suffered even more than they did. (2) They may compare themselves to a hypothetical worst world; i.e., they could have been killed or subjected to even more humiliating circumstances than those that occurred. (3) They may minimize the episode by reconstructing the event as one leading to personal growth or to some other benefit.

Self-blame

Blaming oneself for one's victimization may appear to be maladaptive, but self-blame can be beneficial. Victims who see themselves as responsible are able to take control psychologically: to avoid future victimization, they must only behave in a different way.

Behavioral coping

Taking self-defense classes, making one's home more secure, demanding compensation or return of stolen property, and seeking retaliation are all actions victims take that can serve to deter further victimization. Each action discourages the offender from repeating the offense. On the other hand, avoidance—not leaving home, fleeing from the environment, avoiding social contact—do little to reduce fear of victimization.

Reaction of others to one's victimization

Sad, but true, people tend to view victims as responsible for their fate or fear guilt by association. According to the just world theory, people get what they deserve. Observers thus assume that something the victim did caused the victimization. Sympathy is more forthcoming if the victim is viewed as truly victimized.

Care and esteem shown by family, friends, and neighbors can help the victims recover. If social supports are unavailable or reactions are negative, victims may feel more distressed by social reactions than by the initial victimization.

A victim's involvement with the criminal justice system also involves lost time from work and may result in negative treatment and judgmental attitudes. Victimization surveys reveal that only one out of three victimizations is reported to the police. Notifying the police may reduce the victim's stress and sense of injustice, particularly if the offender is caught or property is recovered.

Psychological help for victims of crime and violence

The report suggests four premises for psychological support:

- Intervention is better if guided by theory and research where possible.
- A variety of helpers, including lay persons and professionals in mental health, medicine, and criminal justice can make the victim's recovery process faster and easier.
- Careful and deliberate intervention is improved if it is initiated early by those who are in first contact with the victim and is continued later.
- Corrective therapies, one part of an overall system of possible interventions, can be reduced by constructive early intervention.

Intervention to help a victim takes into account the type of victimization, the victim's support network, and the victim's personal psychological state at the time of the crime. Stringent efforts can be taken to prevent "the second wound," i.e., the tendency of the helping network to revictimize people through callous or inadvertent inattention to their needs.

Because police are often the first on the scene, their attitudes and behavior are crucial to the severity of the victim's stress and prospects for recovery. The police literally serve as front-line mental health agents in the community.

Police can provide the greatest help by administering psychological first aid while they gather information that will lead to an arrest. By listening to the victim without imposing their views and being sensitive to identifying victims in need of psychological services, the police can become par-

ticipating professionals in the helping system.

Training programs for crisis intervention have improved the ability of the police to handle victimization, but these training programs can be improved to help the police deal with victims who require special attention, especially victims of domestic violence, rape, and elderly victims. Alcohol and mentally ill victims also require special assistance.

Evaluation and accountability in services to victims

The history of attempts to ameliorate human suffering is replete with false starts, marginally effective interventions, and even harmful practices. The report emphasizes that psychologists and other professionals can exercise leadership by developing mechanisms to ensure that state-of-the-art interventions are implemented and by promoting systematic improvements in victim services.

Evaluation of an intervention activity involves:

- specifying the goals and objectives of services to victims;
- assessing the costs of alternate services;
- promoting safe and effective services;
- fostering access to appropriate services;
- facilitating the development and effective functioning of services to victims;
- promoting communication about the nature, extent, and cost of services to the public and to providers; and
- assessing unintended or alternate consequences of services to victims.

The most straightforward way to increase effective services is to build on existing theory, research, and practical experience and then to design, implement, and rigorously evaluate interventions during field trials. Field trials translate theories into treatment, practical experiences into theory, and provide information to avoid the common pitfalls of implementation.

Victims of crime and violence: legal and public policy issues

A growing body of evidence confirms that disregarding the rights of victims as a matter of public and legal policy has placed a serious psychological and often economic burden on crime victims. For example, victims are often responsible for their own physical, mental, or economic problems resulting from the crime. They must provide their own transportation to and from court-related events and are not compensated for loss of time from work.

The victim's limited participation in the legal process stems from the view that the State (not the victim) takes legal action against the offender. There is fear that pervasive input from victims might jeopardize the rights of offenders. But ignoring the needs of victims can only increase society's disillusionment with the legal system. Furthermore, by limiting the participation of victims, the legal system may be overlooking important perspectives that may render just verdicts to all parties.

The Task Force report identifies potential problems that arise for victims at each stage in the criminal justice process and how the process could be or is modified in some States to alleviate these problems. For example:

- During the arrest stage, police discretion, departmental policy, and lack of current updates on the status of the case may cause anxiety for victims who are unfamiliar with the process and who are naturally interested in knowing when the offender will be brought to trial.
- At the pretrial stage, the bail decision often directly affects the victim, but victims in most States have no input into the decision and often fear that if the offender is released, he or she will return to harm again.
- At the trial stage, most jurisdictions allow victims to hire a private attorney to assist the public prosecutor. However, it is rare that a victim will have input into the plea bargaining decision—a decision that weighs heavily on the offender's sentence.
- In jurisdictions with judicial discretion at sentencing, the victim, as

the injured party, can have input. This may be particularly important to victims who have followed the case and expended effort and expense into seeing the defendant convicted.

- Finally, after the defendant has served part of the sentence, some victims may want to be notified about the parole hearing and if the offender is released.

Benefits and services for victims

Many States currently have laws that are specifically designed to provide compensation to victims. In most cases, the laws provide short-term assistance. Most compensation statutes require that the victim cooperate with the criminal justice system in the prosecution of the offender, restrict the number of victims who are eligible, or restrict victims who in any way are related to the offender. In practice, a burden of proof is placed on the victim to make a strong case for why he or she should receive compensation.

Victim-witness assistance programs are generally housed in criminal justice and law enforcement agencies. Three general categories of services are provided: (1) Court-related services designed to make the process of coming to court more pleasant. (2) Counseling and social services to alleviate the trauma associated with the victimization and the participation in the criminal justice process. (3) Public education and crime prevention services that involve citizens with crime prevention.

Statutes that guarantee victim rights have been introduced in many jurisdictions. Massachusetts, for example, has one of the most comprehensive bills. It provides for notification of all court proceedings, secure waiting areas, employer and creditor intercession, child care, protection against intimidation and property loss, information about financial assistance and other available services, return of property, and an oral or written report from the victim to be used during the course of processing an offender through the system.

The Task Force report suggests that research is needed to determine the effect that these legal rights have on the creation, maintenance, scope, and quality of benefits and services for victims. To some extent these laws are likely to significantly aid victims and reduce the impact of the victimization experience. It also is likely, however, that some of the provisions will have just the opposite effect or ignore important possibilities for legal intervention that could benefit both victims and the system. The report calls for psychological research to assess the validity of the assumptions behind current and proposed policies.

Other sources of information

National Organization for Victim Assistance (NOVA)
Micheala Cohan
717 D Street NW
Washington, DC 20004
202-393-6682

Provides general brochures, publication lists on the aftermath of criminal victimization.

Office for Victims of Crime
Cindy Stein
633 Indiana Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20531
202-724-5947

Provides program listings, grant information, general information on victim-related topics.

National Victim Resource Center
Marie Pirog
P.O. Box 6000
Rockville, MD 20850
Responds to written requests for information; provides program listings, publication lists, and general information about victims.

Further readings

If She Is Raped: A Book for Husbands, Fathers, and Male Friends. NCJ 96509. By W. McEvoy and J.B. Brookings. 1984. 134 pp. Availability: Learning Publications, Inc., P.O. Box 1326, Holmes Beach, FL 33509. Price: \$9.95.

"Self in Victimization: Conflict and Developmental Perspectives." NCJ 95559. By S. Hymer. In *Victimology* 9, no. 1 (1984), pp. 142-150.

"Implications of the Victimization Syndrome for Clinical Intervention With Crime Victims." NCJ 92783. By D.E. Kennedy. In *Personnel and Guidance Journal* 62, no. 4 (December 1983), pp. 219-222.

Counseling Crime Victims in Crisis. NCJ 94257. By D.A. Lowenberg and P. Forgach. 1982. 54 pp. Availability: Aurora Associates, 1140 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Suite 1200, Washington, D.C. 20036. Price: \$7.50.

Criminal Justice Response to Victim Harm. NCJ 93664. By B.E. Forst and J.C. Hernon. Research in Brief. Sponsored by the National Institute of Justice. Availability: NCJRS. Free single copy.

Crime File: Victims. One in a series of 22 videotapes on crime. Moderated by James Q. Wilson. Sponsored by the National Institute of Justice. Availability: NCJRS. Price: \$17.00 BETA and VHS, \$23.00 3/4-inch tape.

For additional information write to NCJRS, P.O. Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20850, or call toll free at 800-851-3420 (301-251-5500 in Metropolitan Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Alaska).