

The Impact of Victimization

Prepared by the Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime

DISCLAIMER: This paper is intended as a general guide for people who may be harmed by crime or for victims/survivors who are already involved in the criminal justice system. Please do not hesitate to contact our office if you require clarification, or for a referral to an agency in your community that may be able to provide support services to you. We encourage all victims to discuss the information provided in this paper with their local victim service provider prior to undertaking any action.

Introduction

Criminal victimization is a frightening and unsettling experience for many Canadians. It is unpredictable, largely unpreventable and often unexpected. Unlike normal life experiences, victimization is not sought out and never welcomed. It is debilitating and demoralizing. Its effects can be often long-term and difficult to overcome.

Victims may be confused, fearful, frustrated and angry. They want to know why this happened, and why it happened to them. Victims often have no knowledge of who or where to turn in the aftermath of crime. They feel insecure and do not know who to trust or rely on for support, understanding, and help. Not only do they suffer physically, emotionally, psychologically and financially from their victimization, they are also often burdened by the complexity of the criminal justice system.

What is crime?

Crime occurs when someone breaks the law. In Canada, what constitutes unlawful behaviour is recorded in the *Criminal Code of Canada*. When someone commits an act that is a violation of the *Criminal Code*, they may be charged with a crime and arrested.

Some crimes are against property (for example, break and enter and fraud) and other crimes are committed against persons (for example, physical and sexual assault). Some crimes involve both property and people.

All crime is serious and should be treated as such. It is important to remember that even relatively “minor” crime can be devastating to a person’s life.

Crime Prevention

Some Canadians try to avoid victimization by being aware of their surroundings, having safety plans and perhaps even taking self-defence classes. Having a safety plan is a good idea, but it cannot guarantee personal safety. Keep in mind that most people are victimized by people who are known to them, not strangers.

Who is a crime victim?

In Canada, a victim of crime may be defined differently depending upon which province you live in. For the purpose of preparing a victim impact statement under section 722 (4) of the *Criminal Code*, a victim is defined as:

- (a) *the person to whom harm was done of who suffered physical or emotional loss as a result of the commission of the offence; and*
- (b) *where the person described in paragraph (a) is dead, ill or otherwise incapable of making a statement referred to in subsection (1) includes the spouse of any relative of that person, anyone who is in law or fact the custody of that person or is responsible for the care of support of that person or any dependant of that person.*

In general, crime victims are those people most directly affected by crime. Even if an offender is never found, the person who has been victimized should still be considered a victim. It is a myth that if no offender is caught, then no victim exists.

Family members, friends and others who care about the victim may also be affected when a crime is committed. These people, along with the victim, may need information and support.

How does crime affect people?

Crime affects everyone differently. Victimization often causes trauma and depending upon the level of trauma that a person has already experienced in their lifetime, crime can be devastating. In general, victimization often impacts people on an emotional, physical, financial, psychological, and social level.

The Emotional Impact of Victimization

Shock, disbelief and denial – Initially, victims may find it difficult to believe they have become a victim of crime. They may even pretend that it did not happen at all. These reactions can last for a few moments or they may be present for months and even years. It is not uncommon for victims to assume a ‘childlike’ state and may even need to be cared for by others for some time. It is also common for victims to feel as though the crime occurred when they were in a dreamlike state.

Once the initial shock of the crime has worn off, victims may experience other emotions such as anger, fear, frustration, confusion, guilt, shame, and grief.

Anger or rage – Victims may be angry with God, the offender, service providers, family members, friends, the criminal justice system, or even themselves. Many victims experience strong desires for revenge or getting even. Hate may even be felt by victims. These strong emotions are often disapproved of by the rest of society, which can leave the victim feeling like an outcast. It is certainly justified for victims to feel anger toward the person or people who harmed them.

Fear or Terror – It is common for victims to feel terror or fear following a crime that involved a threat to one’s safety or life, or to someone else a victim cares about. Fear can cause a person to have panic attacks if they are ever reminded of the crime. Fear can last for quite some time following the commission of a crime and under certain circumstances, it can become debilitating. Fear or terror that becomes overwhelming is unhealthy and victims should consult their family physician about it as soon as possible.

Frustration – Many victims are frustrated by the feelings of helplessness or powerlessness that surface when the crime takes place. This can be especially true if victims were unable to fend off an offender, call for help or run away. After the crime, victims may continue to feel frustration if they cannot access the support and information that is necessary to their healing.

Confusion – Victims of crime may become confused if they are unsure of what actually happened, as crimes often occur quickly and are chaotic. Victims might also become confused while searching for answers to questions like “why did this happen to me?” It may be impossible to find out why someone else intended to hurt them.

Guilt or self-blame – Blaming oneself is common. Many victims believe they were “in the wrong place at the wrong time.” If the victim does not have someone to blame, they will often blame themselves. Guilt is also common when no offender is found. Later on, when reflecting upon the crime, victims might feel guilty for not doing more to prevent what happened. Lastly, some victims will experience ‘survivor guilt’ – they feel guilty that they survived while someone else was injured or even killed. If a loved one is murdered, surviving family and friends may even blame the victim. Too often, society blames victims as well.

Shame and humiliation – Sadly, some victims blame themselves, particularly victims of sexual abuse/assault or domestic violence. In crimes involving sexual acts, offenders often degrade the victim by making them do humiliating things. Victims of rape, for example, have long-lasting feelings of “being dirty”, and those feelings cannot be “washed away.” Some victims even feel self-hatred because they believe that they can no longer be loved by those who are close to them.

Grief or Sorrow – Intense sadness is often the most powerful long-term reaction to crime. It is common for victims to become depressed after a crime occurs.

The Physical Impact of Victimization

At the time of the crime, or upon discovering that a crime has occurred, victims are likely to experience a number of physical reactions. These may include an increase in the adrenalin in the body, increased heart rate, hyperventilation, shaking, tears, numbness, a feeling of being frozen or experiencing events in slow motion, dryness of the mouth, enhancement of particular senses such as smell, and a “fight or flight” response. It is also common for people to lose control over their bowel movements. Some of these physical reactions may occur immediately and others may occur after the danger has passed. Physical reactions to crime can be so powerful that they reoccur quite some time after the crime, for example with the victim’s memory of the events.

Physical injuries that result from crime may be classified as: minor (bumps, scratches), moderate (bruises, broken bones), and severe (stabbing, gun shot wounds). Some physical injuries will be visible, while others will not. It may not be possible to see all physical injuries such as internal organ injuries or a brain injury, or those internal injuries caused by a sexual assault. Also, physical injuries arising from victimization may not always be immediately apparent. This may be particularly true in cases of domestic violence where the injuries

occur on parts of the body that are normally clothed. It is important not to assume that a victim is uninjured simply because there are no visible signs.

After the crime, victims may suffer a range of physical effects including insomnia, appetite disturbance, lethargy, headaches, muscle tension, nausea, and decreased libido. It is common for these reactions to persist for some time after the crime has occurred.

Some victims may experience long-term side effects as a result of the crime committed against them. Other victims may experience ongoing health-related problems such as headaches, stomachaches, and emotional outbursts. Even after the physical wounds have healed, some victims may experience pain or discomfort for a period of time or even for the rest of their lives.

In extreme cases, victims may suffer disfigurement or permanent disability as a result of the crime. Research evidence exists to prove that such an outcome has a negative effect on long-term psychological recovery of the victim since the physical scars or disability serve as a constant reminder of the crime. A victim's culture, gender, and occupation may also influence their reaction to permanent scarring or disability. The reaction of others to the victim's physical injuries may also be difficult to accept or become accustomed to.

Some victims may never be able to return to work as a result of the crime. Victims who are unable to return to work or lead a "normal" lifestyle following victimization are constantly reminded of the pain and suffering they have endured at the hands of another person. This can cause a great deal of mental anguish, not to mention social isolation and dependency upon social assistance or crimes compensation awards.

Victims who have suffered physical injuries as a result of an assault or the negligence of another person may experience strong feelings of fear, anger and bitterness. This sort of victimization is a life altering experience that may leave victims questioning their personal safety for many years to come.

The Financial Impact of Victimization

Victims who may have money stolen, or possessions stolen or damaged have been financially injured. In many cases, stolen money and prized possessions are never recovered. Understandably, this is very distressing to victims who may feel guilt, anger, and frustration if they are unable to recover a family heirloom.

Although the financial impact of crime is less documented than the physical, emotion or social impacts, victims may certainly incur costs in the following ways:

- Repairing property or replacing possessions.
- Higher insurance premiums as a result of victimization.
- Installing security measures.
- Accessing health services.
- Medical expenses.
- Participating in the criminal justice system, for example traveling to court, child care and attending the trial.

- Obtaining professional counselling to come to terms with the emotional impact.
- Taking time off work or from other income generating activities.
- Funeral or burial expenses.

In some cases, such as stalking, victims may feel a need to move, a process likely to incur financial costs. Also property value may diminish as a result of a violent crime occurring in the house.

In the long-term, crime can adversely impact the victim's employment. The victim may find it impossible to return to work, or their work performance may be adversely affected, resulting in demotion, loss of pay, and possibly dismissal. This is particularly likely where the crime occurred at work, as it may be difficult for the victim to avoid people or situations which led to the initial victimization.

Marital and other relationships are also likely to be affected by crime and this may have a significant effect on the family's financial position.

Research shows that the shock waves from victimization touch not only the victim but also the victim's immediate family and next of kin, neighbors, and acquaintances. This holds true for the emotional and the financial consequences, and the effects can endure for years or even for a lifetime. In the case of child abuse, exposure to violence, and abuse of power, the effects can be passed on from one generation to the next. While this is to be expected in connection with offences such as murder, torture, and rape, the crimes of assault, robbery, and burglary can also leave enduring feelings of powerlessness, insecurity, anger, and fear. Communities and organizations can also be victimized leading to their deterioration over time.

The effects of victimization hit particularly hard on the poor, the young, the powerless, the disabled, and the socially isolated. Research shows that those already touched by prior victimization are particularly susceptible to subsequent victimization by the same or other forms of crime. These repeat victims are often found to reside in high-crime communities in many countries.

The Psychological Impact of Victimization

It is almost impossible to predict how an individual will respond to crime. Psychological injuries created by crime are often the most difficult to cope with and have long-lasting effects. As crime is usually experienced as more serious than an accident or misfortune, it is difficult to come to terms with the fact that loss and injury have been caused by the deliberate act of another human being.

Common reactions to crime can be split into four stages:

The initial reaction may include shock, fear, anger, helplessness, disbelief and guilt. As mentioned previously, some of these reactions may reoccur at a later stage as well, for example when attending a trial or going to hospital for medical treatment.

A period of disorganization may follow these initial reactions. This phase may manifest itself in psychological effects such as distressing thoughts about the event, nightmares, depression, guilt, fear, and a loss of confidence and esteem. Life can seem to slow down and become meaningless. Previously held beliefs and faiths may no longer provide comfort. Behavioral responses might include increased alcohol or substance abuse, fragmentation of social relationships, avoidance of people and situations associated with the crime, and social withdrawal.

The third stage is reconstruction and acceptance, which leads to the fourth stage of normalization/adjustment. Victims often try to come to terms with crime by longing for everything to be as it was before and to turn the clock back. In this crucial stage of recovery victims begin to fully accept the reality of what has happened. Victims may try to reinterpret their experience and possibly find an explanation for what has happened or to decide that the crime has led to personal growth.

The boundaries between these different stages are not as clear-cut as outlined here and victims may not progress smoothly through the stages, but at times hover between them.

The extent to which people (victims, witnesses, family members, community members) may be affected by crime will vary enormously among individuals; at one extreme people may shrug off very serious crimes with no noticeable effects, while at the other extreme people become "stuck" in a particular stage and never move on.

Stress

When a person is under great stress, as many people are who are victimized, he or she may have more difficulty than usual thinking clearly, keeping their emotions under control, staying physically healthy, or behaving appropriately in social situations. The trauma of being a crime victim can definitely impact on a person's ability to function.

Becoming a victim of crime is a major stressor in one's life. A victim may feel continuously uncomfortable or in a state of crisis. It may be difficult to restore a state or sense of balance to one's life. As their outlook on life is changed significantly by the crime, some victims cannot ever restore that sense of balance. They may have trouble trusting others, taking part in activities they used to enjoy and be fearful of places or strangers.

Social Injuries & Secondary Victimization

Social injuries are those that may be caused by society in the aftermath of the crime. They may include being treated insensitively or not receiving the services and/or information that a victim requires. Anyone can cause a social injury: a family member, a friend, a law enforcement officer, a Crown prosecutor, a member of the clergy, a crisis counselor or a victim services worker.

Secondary victimization refers to the victimization which occurs, not as a direct result of the criminal act, but through the response of institutions and individuals to the victim. The following are a few examples of secondary victimization:

- The refusal to recognize their experience as criminal victimization.

- Intrusive or inappropriate conduct by police or other criminal justice personnel.
- The whole process of criminal investigation and trial (decisions about whether or not to prosecute, the trial itself, the sentencing of the offender, and his or her eventual release).
- The victim perceives difficulties in balancing their rights with those of the accused or the offender.
- Criminal justice processes and procedures do not take the perspective of the victim into account.
- Relatives may have restricted access to the body of a loved one due to hospital policies and procedures.
- The hurried schedule of the emergency room may affect a sexual assault victim's privacy or sense of dignity.
- School personnel may discount child disclosure of abuse.
- Doctors may not acknowledge signs of spouse abuse.
- Spiritual leaders may attempt to guide victims into paths of forgiveness or accommodation before they are ready or against their wishes.
- Intrusive or inappropriate investigation and filming, photographing, and reporting by the media.

Even agencies set up to help the victims of crime, such as victim services, victim compensation systems, refugee services, and mental health institutions may have some policies and procedures that lead to secondary victimization.

The attitude of individuals is also important. Some people with whom the victim has contact (e.g. family, friends and colleagues) may wish to distance themselves from the distress of the crime by blaming the victim for what has occurred. They may view the victim's behavior as having contributed to, or even having caused, the victimization. They may deny the impact of the crime on the victim by urging them to forget about the crime and "get on with their lives." Families can be a particularly powerful influence in this respect.

Victims of abuse of power have particular difficulty in gaining recognition of the fact that they have been victimized. The essence of abuse of power is that it is committed by those who should be expected to protect the population. The shock and loneliness of victimization can be much greater for these victims.

After Victimization

What happens if there are no charges laid?

The criminal justice process begins when an offence is reported, yet the suspect may not necessarily be charged with a criminal offence. The police may question a suspect, but that does not mean that formal charges will be brought against him or her. If the police and the Crown Attorney do not believe that enough evidence exists to have the accused found guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law, they may not lay an information (lay charges). If charges are not laid in your case, it does not mean that the police and Crown Attorney don't believe you or that a crime did not take place. It may mean that there is not enough evidence to prove the charge in court.

Victims understandably become very frustrated with the criminal justice system when charges are not brought against the person who caused harm to them or their family. A victim may interpret the response of the system as a let down and become bitter, angry and disillusioned with the entire criminal justice process. This response is not unexpected, as people believe that social institutions exist to protect them and address their needs if and when they are called upon. There is often a sense that someone “got away with it” and that “there was no justice.”

In some cases, plea-bargaining occurs when the Crown and the defence come to an agreement wherein the accused pleads guilty. The guilty plea usually comes in exchange for a benefit such as reducing the charge against the accused or where the two sides agree upon a sentence. Plea-bargaining is often used when either the Crown or the defence’s case is weak. It is used to save both time and money, as the court system could not handle the volume of cases that come before it without the plea bargaining system. Unfortunately, some victims think this process diminishes the crime and harm done to them.

What do victims need after a crime is committed?

Victims need a variety of services and understanding in the aftermath of crime.

- Victims need to feel safe as crime often leaves them feeling helpless, vulnerable, and frightened.
- In addition to fear, victims often have feelings of self-blame, anger, shame, sadness, or denial. Their most common response is: “I don't believe this happened to me.” Emotional distress may surface in seemingly peculiar ways, such as laughter. Sometimes victims feel rage at the sudden, unpredictable, and uncontrollable threat to their safety or lives. This rage can even be directed at the people who are trying to help them.
- Victims should be able to express their emotions. Victims often need to air their emotions and tell their story after the trauma of the crime. They may also need to have their feelings accepted and have their story heard by a nonjudgmental listener.
- Victims may need to know “what comes next”. Following victimization, victims often have concerns about their role in the investigation of the crime and in the legal proceedings. They may also be concerned about issues such as media attention or payment for health care or property damage. Victimization is stressful and knowing what to expect in the aftermath of crime can help relieve anxiety.

What are crime victim services?

Crime victim services are programs that have been established to assist a victim through the criminal justice system. There are essentially four types of programs in Canada to provide services to victims.

Police-based victim services

Several communities have established police-based victim service units/programs available. Trained personnel generally provide these services and the programs are affiliated with the local police department. Services are confidential and provide immediate crisis intervention to victims and their families for a specified period following a crime. Police-based services also provide emotional support, practical assistance, general information about the criminal

justice system and referrals. These services are often limited to a specific time period following the crime (for example, two weeks).

Crown/court-based services

Most communities with courthouses have Crown or court-based services such as Victim/Witness Assistance Programs. Such programs are designed to help enhance the understanding and participation of victims and witnesses in the criminal justice system. The program may provide victims and witnesses with courtroom orientation, information regarding the criminal justice system, information specific to their case, such as bail, probation conditions, etc., court accompaniment and referrals to community agencies for counseling and other support services.

Community-based services include sexual assault centres, distress centres, victim advocacy groups and safe homes.

The fourth type of service involves a system-based approach and provides a broad range of services from one location.

Most provinces use either police-based, Crown/court-based or community based approaches (or a combination thereof) for service delivery. A few of the smaller provinces use the system-based approach.

Recovering from Victimization

Putting the pieces of one's life together following a crime can be a complicated task. It is often an emotional process filled with ups and downs. For most victims, a new sense of equilibrium can eventually be reached, but this process can be time consuming and difficult. For some victims, support groups and/or counselling may be necessary.

The healing process is often slow and can be complicated by family, friends and service providers who may not show understanding. Asking why the victim has not "gotten over it yet" or when he/she is going to "put it behind her and get on with the rest of her life," are some examples of insensitive remarks that are often made to victims in the aftermath of crime.

It is possible for the recovery process to involve the following long-term crisis reactions:

- Health problems related to the stress of the victimization (i.e., headaches, high blood pressure);
- Eating problems (not having an appetite, eating too much, feeling nauseated);
- Sleeping problems (insomnia, nightmares); and
- Relationship problems (being cranky and irritable, not being able to trust others).

These reactions can last for years following a crime. They are all normal responses for people who have survived a traumatic event.

Memories of the crime can trigger the long-term crisis reactions. When memories are re-awakened, it can be as painful as the original crime, and at the same time, be confusing for the victims. Reminder events will vary with different victims but may include:

- Seeing the offender again.
- Sensing (seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, tasting) something similar to what the victim sensed during the crime.
- Media coverage of the crime or similar crimes.
- Anniversaries of the crime.
- Holidays or significant life events.
- Going through the criminal justice process.
- Going through civil proceedings.

The intensity and frequency of these crisis reactions usually decrease over time. Patience and time are important factors in the healing process. A victim's cognitive state and the familial and social supports available to them can also greatly influence their recovery.

Working for Positive Change

Many victims have chosen to speak out and help others who may become victims of crime by advocating for changes to laws, joining support groups as counselors or story tellers or working within the victim services sector. Doing so has allowed many victims to feel as though they are contributing to society following their victimization. For many victims, destructive, unwanted victimization has given rise to highly motivated efforts to make our communities safer and more secure.

Conclusion

It is important to remember that victims do not choose to be victimized. Sexual assault victims do not choose to be raped; parents do not raise their children to be murdered; and women do not get married to be abused.

Becoming a victim of crime is an unpleasant and unwanted life experience at best. The impact of criminal victimization is serious, throwing victims into a state of shock, fear, anxiety and anger. The emotional, physical, psychological and financial ramifications of crime can be devastating to victims. Coping with and recovering from victimization are complex processes. With time and support, most victims of crime can feel better following victimization although their existence will never be quite the same as it was prior to the crime occurring.

References

“VICTIMS' RIGHTS - A VOICE, NOT A VETO”, Report of the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights, October 1998.

“Handbook on Justice for Victims”, United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention, 2000.

“Psychological Trauma of Crime Victimization”, National Organization for Victim Assistance, 2001.

“From Pain to Power: Crime Victims Take Action”, U.S. Department of Justice – Office for Victims of Crime, September 1998.

“The Trauma of Victimization”, National Organization for Victim Assistance, 2001.