



**CENTRE CANADIEN DE RESSOURCES POUR
LES VICTIMES DE CRIMES**

**THE CANADIAN RESOURCE CENTRE FOR
VICTIMS OF CRIME**

VICTIM BLAMING IN CANADA

This paper is intended as a general guide for people who may become susceptible to crime or for victims that 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 services to you. We encourage victims to verify the authenticity of any information within this paper with their service providers prior to engaging/using the service suggested within.

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Violence is always a choice that an individual makes. People who are harmed by violent acts sometime receive very negative responses from their loved ones, as well as from various social institutions. Why is it that some victims and survivors of violent crime get blamed for what has happened to them through no fault of their own? Crime victims are often scrutinized as to who they were with; what they were wearing; or what they might have done to cause the crime against them. Instead, society should question the violence and speak out against those who choose to use violence as a means to an end.

What is Victim Blaming?

Victim blaming is a devaluing act that occurs when the victim(s) of a crime or an accident is held responsible . in whole or in part- for the crimes that have been committed against them.¹ This blame can appear in the form of negative social responses from legal, medical, and mental health professionals², as well as from the media and immediate family members and other acquaintances.

Some victims of crime receive more sympathy from society than others. Often, the responses toward crime victims are based on a misunderstanding by others. People may think they deserved what happened to them or that they are as passive individuals who search for violence. As a result, it can be very difficult for victims to cope when they are blamed for what has happened to them or their loved one.

Why Do People Blame Victims?

There are a number of reasons why people choose to blame victims for the crimes that have happened to them. These reasons stem from misconceptions about victims, perpetrators, and the nature of violent acts. Victims are sometimes wrongfully portrayed as passive individuals who seek out and submit to the violence they endure. Offenders are seen as hapless individuals who are compelled to act violently by forces they cannot control. The most popular reasons for blaming victims include belief in a just world, attribution error, and invulnerability theory:

Just World Hypothesis

The just world hypothesis is based on an individuals belief that the world is a safe, just place where people get what they deserve. Many people prefer to believe that the social system that affects them is fair, legitimate, and justifiable.³ When an individual has such a strong belief it can be challenged when they encounter victims of random misfortunes, such as violent crime victims. If people perceive themselves as good people then good things will happen to them, whereas if a person is perceived to be bad then bad things will happen to them⁴. Moreover, this hypothesis presents the world as a safe and protected place even when in the face of hardship⁵.

Literature on the just world hypothesis also states that people judge the harshness of events as a function of harm caused. Thus, if a victim is not harmed in a severe manner, then what happened to them can be seen as an accident. However, as the severity of harm increases the more people begin to think that this

¹ "Victim Blame." (2007). Retrieved March 3, 2008 from <http://www.ibiblio.org/rcip/vb.html>

² Coates, L., Richardson, C., & Wade, A. (2006, May). *Reshaping Responses to Victims of Violent Crime*. Presented at Cowichan Bay, B.C., Canada.

³ Kay, A.C., Jost, J.T., & Young, S. (2005). Victim Derogation and Victim Enhancement as Alternate Routes to System Justification. *Psychological Science*, 16 (3), 240-246.

⁴ Idisis, Y., Ben-David, S. & Ben-David, E. (2007). Attribution of blame to rape victims among therapists and non-therapists. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, 25, 103–120.

⁵ Idisis, Y., Ben-David, S. & Ben-David, E. (2007). Attribution of blame to rape victims among therapists and non-therapists. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, 25, 103–120.

could happen to me? Therefore, by blaming the victim for what has happened to them is a way for them to cope and restore faith in the world⁶.

Many people may be reluctant to give up their belief that the world is just. When someone has such a strong belief they may try to eliminate the suffering of innocent victims or they will blame them for their misfortune. It is impossible to reverse the acts of violent crime and the suffering of its victims, therefore blaming the victim is often common. That way, one who believes in a just world can maintain their belief because there is no longer an innocent, suffering victim, but someone who ~~deserves~~ their misfortune⁷. Blaming the victim maintains beliefs of personal responsibility and controllability over social outcomes⁸. Those who believe in a just world tend to believe that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. Therefore, when people with these beliefs view victims they believe that their victimization was caused through some fault of their own⁹.

Attribution Error

According to Kelly and Heider there are two kinds of attributions, internal and external. Individuals make internal attributions when they recognize that a person's personal characteristics are the cause of their actions or situation. Whereas, external attributions have individuals identify the environment and circumstances as the cause for a person's behaviour¹⁰.

Attribution error occurs when individuals overemphasize personal characteristics and devalue environmental characteristics when judging others. This results in victim blaming as people view the individual victim as partially responsible for what happened to them and ignore situational causes. So-called ~~internal failings~~ take precedent over situational contributors on part of the subject being judged. Thus, it is easier for a person to attribute others' behaviour or situation to individual characteristics because it is easier to produce an explanation this way. On the contrary, people may have the propensity to attribute their own failure to environmental attributes, and own success to personal attributes¹¹. Further, coping with victimization can be rather difficult. When a victim of crime is blamed for what has happened to them it can effect their over ability to move on afterwards.

Invulnerability Theory

The literature on invulnerability theory and attitudes towards victims shows that there is a propensity for others to blame the victim to protect their own feelings of invulnerability¹². The Invulnerability Theory is based on people blaming the victim in order to feel safe themselves. Even friends and family members of crime victims may blame the victim in order to reassure themselves. A common statement may sound like ~~She was raped because she walked home alone in the dark. I would never do that, so I won't be raped~~ (~~Blaming the Victim~~, 1998)¹³. The theory states that victims are a reminder of our own vulnerability. Individuals do not want to consider the possibility of losing control over their life or body; by deciding that a victim brought on the attack themselves creates a false sense of security. This reassures people that as long as they don't do whatever the victim was doing at the time of the attack that they will be invulnerable¹⁴.

⁶ Walster, E. (1966). Assignment of responsibility for an accident. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 3, 73-79

⁷ "Victim Blame." (2007). Retrieved March 3, 2008 from <http://www.ibiblio.org/rcip/vb.html>

⁸ Kay, A.C., Jost, J.T., & Young, S. (2005). Victim Derogation and Victim Enhancement as Alternate Routes to System Justification. *Psychological Science*, 16 (3), 240-246.

⁹ Johnson, L. M., Mullick, R., & Mulford, C.L. (2002). General Versus Specific Victim Blaming. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 142(2), 249-63.

¹⁰ Heider, F. (1958) *The psychology of interpersonal relations*. New York: Wiley. & Kelley, H.H. (1972). *Casual schemata and the attribution process*. Morristown, NJ: General Learning Press.

¹¹ Johnson, L. M., Mullick, R., & Mulford, C.L. (2002). General Versus Specific Victim Blaming. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 142(2), 249-63.

¹² Andrew, B., Brewin, C. R., & Rose, S. (2003). Gender, social support, and PTSD in victims of violent crime. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, (4), 16, p.421-427.

¹³ "Blaming the Victim." (1998). Retrieved March 3, 2008, from http://www.feminist.com/resources/ourbodies/viol_blame.html.

¹⁴ "Victim Blame." (2007). Retrieved March 3, 2008 from <http://www.ibiblio.org/rcip/vb.html>

Types of Crime Victims Are Blamed For

Violence Against Women

In cases of intimate partner violence where females are abused by male perpetrators, women are often blamed for the actions of their abusive male partner. Male offenders often use external attributions to justify their abusive behaviour. They may blame their partner or claim that they deserved the abuse because of their offensive personality. Male offenders may also attribute their behaviour to occupational stress or substance abuse, without taking ownership of their actions. These characteristics all work to minimize a perpetrator's culpability for abusive actions¹⁵.

Further, it is also common for women to be blamed for being masochistic, withholding, asking for it, or ~~deserving it.~~ Questions such as, ~~why didn't she just leave,~~ are commonly heard and reinforce the notion that a woman likes to be beat and therefore stays in the relationship. These are devaluing actions and remove the responsibility from the offender¹⁶. Blaming the victim releases the man who commits the violence from the responsibility for what he has done¹⁷.

Sexual Assault

The most obvious manifestations of victim blaming appear in sexual assault cases. Adult female victims of sexual assault are often blamed for being provocative, seductive, suggestive, teasing, or ~~asking for it.~~ Before 1982, when there was a case of sexual harassment or rape before the court, it was very likely that the victim's dress, lifestyle, and sexual background became more important than the incident that had occurred and the role of the victim switches to the role of the accused. The introduction of rape shield laws in 1982 in Canada gave victims protection in a rape trial. Rape shield laws do not allow the defence in a rape trial from asking the victims questions regarding her sexual history, thus diminishing the likelihood of discrediting the victim.

In contrast, men in this myth are seen as helplessly sexually frustrated beings, responding to sexually provocative women¹⁸. There have been incidences where not guilty verdicts have been returned on the basis that the women somehow precipitated the rape¹⁹. These myths are especially prominent in acquaintance rape cases. Acquaintance rape victims are more often blamed than stranger rape victims. This is reflective of the mistaken traditional belief that sexual assault can only involve strangers. This furthers the belief that the acquaintance rape victim brought the attack on herself²⁰.

There can also be an attribution error: female reactions to trauma and their behaviour are often pathologized by family members, friends, criminal justice personnel, and professionals alike. There is a myth supported by some that women tend to exaggerate their symptoms.

Sex Trade Workers

Are some victims' lives worth less? Are some victims seen as expendable? For example, the whore stigma, or the idea that women labelled as whores are somehow disposable or less human is common, ~~those whores got what they deserved.~~ As a society we consistently demean any woman considered to be sexually deviant or promiscuous. Some people may deem those who work in the sex trade as ~~low~~

¹⁵ Henning, K., & Holdford, R. (2006). Minimization, Denial, and Victim Blaming by Batterers: How Much Does the Truth Matter? *Criminal Justice and Behaviour*, 33 (1), 110-130.

¹⁶ Zur, O. (1994). Rethinking "Don't Blame the Victim." *Journal of Couple Therapy*, 4(3/4), 15-36. Retrieved March 3, 2008, from <http://www.zurinstitute.com/victimhood.html>

¹⁷ "Blaming the Victim." (1998). Retrieved March 3, 2008, from http://www.feminist.com/resources/ourbodies/viol_blame.html.

¹⁸ Zur, O. (1994). Rethinking "Don't Blame the Victim." *Journal of Couple Therapy*, 4(3/4), 15-36. Retrieved March 3, 2008, from <http://www.zurinstitute.com/victimhood.html>

¹⁹ Johnson, L. M., Mullick, R., & Mulford, C.L. (2002). General Versus Specific Victim Blaming. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 142(2), 249-63.

²⁰ George, W.H., & Martinez, L.J. (2002). Victim Blaming in Rape: Effects of Victims and Perpetrator Race, Type of Rape, and Participant Racism. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 26(2), 110-119.

always+and not care when they all of a sudden go missing. The demeaning of sex trade workers can have a very negative impact on the parents who have children involved in the sex trade. It may be difficult for family members to move forward when their child was seen as a %whore+ or %got what they deserve+ because they obviously do not see them in this manner, yet society blames them for what happened; or does not seem to care about their murder or disappearance. Instead of recognizing sex trade workers as being particularly vulnerable, society blames them for choosing a dangerous lifestyle.

Homicide

The violent death of a loved one can be devastating for a family. Losing a loved one through an act of violence is a very traumatic experience. No one can ever be prepared for such a loss. No amount of counselling, prayer, justice, restitution or compassion can ever bring a loved one back. The survivors world is abruptly and forever changed. The awareness that your loved ones dreams will never be realized hits. Life has suddenly lost meaning and many survivors report that they cannot imagine ever being happy again.

Further, victims of homicide are often undervalued because of the apparent or real blame that is attributed to them²¹. Friends and family may question the victim's lifestyle, wondering how they knew the murderer. The might make comments such as %he was in the wrong place at the wrong time, when this is simply not true. Questioning the innocence of the victim is very hurtful to surviving family members.

Effects of Victim Blaming

Victim blaming can have many negative and devastating effects on the innocent victims whom have been deemed at fault even though they bear no responsibility for the crime which has occurred against them.

One effect of victim blaming is the subsequent effect it has on the reporting of further crime. Victims who receive negative responses and blame tend to experience greater distress and are less likely to report future abuse²². Victims who have been blamed would rather avoid secondary victimization in the future and they can do this by not reporting further crime²³.

Victim Blaming, along with effecting a victim's decision to report can also impact on a confidante's willingness to support a victim's decision, a witnesses willingness to testify, authorities commitment in pursuing cases and prosecuting offenders, a jury's decision to convict, a prosecutor's decision to recommend incarceration and a judge's decision to impose incarceration²⁴.

The Media and Socially Marginalized People

Why is there outcry over certain missing persons and not others? The criminal justice system's response can be very hurtful to families such as in the case of Maisy Odjick, 17, and Shannon Alexander, 18, who went missing from their Aboriginal community near Ottawa on Sept. 5, 2008. The Quebec provincial police initially believed the girls ran away. The Aboriginal community asked for help after a group of 500 people finished a journey from Vancouver to Parliament Hill to ask the federal government to launch an inquiry into decades of cases of missing women. This case is just one example of how no care or attention is paid when an Aboriginal person goes missing.

²¹ Spungen, D, (1998). *Homicide: The hidden victims- a guide for professionals*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc

²² Coates, L., Richardson, C., & Wade, A. (2006, May). *Reshaping Responses to Victims of Violent Crime*. Presented at Cowichan Bay, B.C., Canada.

²³ George, W.H., & Martinez, L.J. (2002). Victim Blaming in Rape: Effects of Victims and Perpetrator Race, Type of Rape, and Participant Racism. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 26(2), 110-119.

²⁴ George, W.H., & Martinez, L.J. (2002). Victim Blaming in Rape: Effects of Victims and Perpetrator Race, Type of Rape, and Participant Racism. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 26(2), 110-119.

Why do some crimes evoke the national outpouring of rage, grief and sympathy for the victim and her/his relatives? What happens when there are no sympathetic, human interest stories about the survivors and their pain and suffering?

Victim blaming in the media can have numerous negative effects on crime victims. For one, the media can be callous and insensitive when discussing what happened to the victim. They may paint the victim in a negative light by saying they somehow deserved what happened to them, or perhaps that they were not really the victim but the offender.

Conclusion

Victim blaming effectively states that a victim deserved the crime that they endured. Crime is often about violence, power, and control; it needs to be clear that no one deserves it. Most importantly, the victim blame approach is neither effective in resolving problems of violence, nor in protecting the victim from further victimization, nor in protecting future generations from continuing the cycle of abuse²⁵.

Therefore, it is important that we shift the focus from blaming the victim to ensure that the offender has taken responsibility for the crime that they have committed. One way of assuring that an offender is held accountable for their actions is to have a community response. This could be through the police, courts, schools, clergy, health care providers, and social service agencies. The justice system and social agencies need to work together in order to promote offender accountability while helping victims of violence to recover from what has happened to them.

²⁵ Zur, O. (1994). Rethinking "Don't Blame the Victim." *Journal of Couple Therapy*, 4(3/4), 15-36. Retrieved March 3, 2008, from <http://www.zurinstitute.com/victimhood.html>

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