



Canadian
Resource Centre for
**VICTIMS
OF CRIME**

— Dedicated to Justice —

VICTIM BLAMING IN CANADA

PREPARED BY THE CANADIAN RESOURCE CENTRE FOR VICTIMS OF CRIME

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.

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Violence is always a choice that an individual makes. People who are harmed by violent acts sometimes 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. This blame can appear in the form of negative social responses from legal, medical, and mental health professionals, as well as from the media, 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 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 ones.

Why Do People Blame Victims?

There are several reasons why people choose to blame victims for the crimes they have experienced. 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 individual's 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. When an individual has such a strong belief it can be challenged when they encounter victims of random misfortunes, such as violent crime. 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 them. Moreover, this hypothesis presents the world as a safe and protected place even when in the face of hardship.

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 severely, then what happened to them can be seen as an accident. However, as the severity of harm increases, more people begin to think that this could happen to them. Therefore, blaming the victim for what has happened to them is a way for them to cope and restore faith in the world.

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 misfortune. Blaming the victim maintains beliefs of personal responsibility and controllability over social outcomes. 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 by some fault of their own.

Attribution Error

According to Kelly (1972), there are two kinds of attributions: internal and external. Individuals make internal attributions when they recognize that a person’s 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 behaviour.

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 failure to environmental attributes, and their success to personal attributes. Further, coping with victimization can be rather difficult. When a victim of a crime is blamed for what has happened to them it can affect their ability to move on afterward.

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 feelings of invulnerability. The invulnerability theory is based on people blaming the victim to feel safe themselves. Even friends and family members of crime victims may blame the victim 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). The theory states that victims are a reminder of our vulnerability. Individuals do not want to consider the possibility of losing control over their life or body; 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, they will be invulnerable.

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 partners. 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 some perceived slight or offence. 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 actions.

Furthermore, 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 if the abuse was truly that bad, then she would leave, therefore she must have decided to stay because she is perhaps making it up, exaggerating, or misinterpreting her partner's actions. These are devaluing actions and remove the responsibility from the offender. Blaming the victim releases the perpetrator who commits the violence from the responsibility for what they have done.

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". 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 to ask the victim questions regarding her sexual history, thus diminishing the likelihood of discrediting the victim. However, despite the change in law, victims in cases of sexual harassment or rape are often still blamed for the attack by others as they target how they were dressed, their lifestyle, and/or their sexual background. This removes the onus from the perpetrator of the crime to the victim.

In contrast, men in this myth are seen as helplessly sexually frustrated beings, responding to sexually provocative women. There have been incidences where not guilty verdicts have been returned on the basis that the women somehow precipitated the rape. These myths are especially prominent in acquaintance or "date rape" cases. Acquaintance or date 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 also furthers the belief that the acquaintance or date rape victim brought the attack on herself.

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

Society may perceive certain victims as less worthy and therefore expendable, much to the detriment of the lives and safety of those within that segment of the population. This can be seen in the stigma attached to sex workers, or those who are seen as promiscuous, especially women. As a society, we consistently demean women who are thought of as sexually deviant or promiscuous. Some people may deem those who work in the sex trade as “expendable” and not care when they go missing. The disparaging of sex trade workers can also 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 by the criminal justice and others as if they “got what they deserve” or the families are met with indifference when asking for help. 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 changed forever. The awareness that your loved one’s dreams will never be realized hits. Life has suddenly lost meaning and many survivors report that they cannot imagine ever being happy again.

Furthermore, victims of homicide are often undervalued because of the apparent or real blame that is attributed to them. Friends and family may question the victim’s lifestyle, wondering how they knew the murderer. They 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. This is an added layer of trauma for survivors and can impact the healing journey immensely.

Effects of Victim Blaming

Victim blaming can have many negative and devastating effects on innocent victims who have been deemed at fault.

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 abuse. Victims who have been blamed would rather avoid secondary victimization in the future and they do this by not reporting further crimes.

Victim-blaming, along with affecting a victim's decision to report can also impact a confidante's willingness to support a victim's decision, a witness' willingness to testify, authorities' commitment to 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 incarceration. In the case of sexual assaults, victim-blaming is a huge aspect of why victims do not report the attack. Victim-blaming attitudes can also reinforce to the victim that the assault was their fault, especially if they may already be struggling with self-blame (a common reaction to being assaulted).

The Media and Socially Marginalized People

Why is there outcry over certain missing persons and not others? Such as the case of Tina Michelle Fontaine who was a 15-year-old girl from the Sagkeeng First Nation in Manitoba. She went missing in July 2014 and her body was found in the Red River in Winnipeg, Manitoba on August 17, 2014. There was much controversy over the case due to child welfare workers mismanaging her case and police treatment of Tina Fontaine in the days before she disappeared. The Winnipeg Police Service charged a 53-year-old white man, Raymond Cormier, with second-degree murder. Unfortunately, on February 22, 2018, a jury acquitted Mr. Cormier. The crown decided they would not appeal the case, much to public dismay.

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 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, in protecting the victim from further victimization, nor in protecting future generations from continuing the cycle of abuse.

Therefore, we must shift the focus from blaming the victim to ensuring that the offender has taken responsibility or is seen as the responsible party 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 to promote offender accountability while helping victims of violence to recover from what has happened to them.

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