



Understanding the Experiences and Needs of Crime Victims

Crime Victims' Institute

at the Criminal Justice Center at Sam Houston State University

2005

by **Elizabeth Q. DeValve**, Fayetteville State University; **Jim Marquart**, Sam Houston State University; **Phillip Lyons**, Sam Houston State University; **Glen Kercher**, Sam Houston State University

Research suggests that many, if not most, citizens of this country will be victims of crime during their lifetimes. In 2002 15% of households surveyed by the National Crime Victimization Study reported being victims of at least one violent, personal or property crime. Theft was the most frequently reported crime. In 2003 it is estimated that approximately 23 million crimes, both violent and property, occurred in about 16 million households in this country.

Research has demonstrated that the effects of criminal victimization can range from relatively mild distress (discovering and initially reacting to an offense) to major traumatic psychological effects. Criminal victimization often affects the victim's physical health, family and social relationships, work performance, and finances. To assist victims and to minimize the adverse reactions they experience, it becomes important to inform people who work with them to understand what they go through. This is particularly important for criminal justice personnel who interact with them either at the scene of the crime, through interviews, during the prosecution phase, and in the sentencing and parole aftermath. Many victims need assistance in filing for crime victim compensation. Research has demonstrated the criminal justice system has at times further harmed victims when there was insufficient understanding

of the victim experiences and needs. Lack of communication by all agencies, including victim services personnel, can exacerbate victimization and further harm the victim.

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of criminal victimization on both primary and secondary victims. More specifically, this study looked at the effects of crime on the person's lifestyle (e.g., job, living situation, support system), fear of crime, attitudes toward the offender, physical health, psychological adjustment, and economic wellbeing.

Crime victims were recruited in two ways. In the fall of 2003 the Crime Victims' Institute at Sam Houston State University and the Public Policy Research Institute at Texas A& M University conducted a random telephone survey measuring participants' experiences with property and personal crime. Of the 700 persons who were interviewed, 152 had been crime victims in the past two years. Forty-three respondents agreed to being interviewed at length by a follow-up phone call.

During that same time the Crime Victims' Institute sent out public service announcements to 100 radio stations across Texas, to victim services coordinators, and victim advocacy groups around the state inviting crime victims to call a 1-800 number to share their experiences with victimization. Structured interviews were conducted which documented victim experiences.

Thirty-six focused interviews with victims of crime were conducted from across the state of Texas. Most participants were female

This research was made possible by the generous support of the Crime Victims' Institute at Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, TX 77341.

...from the Director

Crime can have a life-altering effect on the lives of victims. In the past several decades, lead by the efforts of many victims and victim advocates, there has been an increasing awareness and appreciation of the plight of crime victims. We have seen a fundamental shift in the response to victims of crime in our State and across the nation. Police departments have adopted new policies to more effectively and sensitively assist victims. Prosecutors have increasingly moved away from the view that the crime victim is a mere witness at a trial, toward an understanding that victims are key participants with rights and legitimate concerns. Medical personnel and social service providers have come to view their interactions with crime victims as critical opportunities to help victims secure their own safety and recover from the trauma of the crimes committed against them. However, with all of the advances we have made, much remains to be done on behalf of victims.

Following the report of their experiences to the police, the lives of victims will revolve around coping with the aftereffects of their victimization and following the case through the criminal justice system. Unfortunately, in all too many cases, they may experience another type of victimization, which sometimes occurs as a result of insensitivity and lack of support shown by the persons who are supposed to be helping them. Ultimately, most crime victims end up moving on with their lives, but sometimes it is not the same life they lived prior to the victimization. This study has identifies the experiences of crime victims that either help them in effectively coping with their experiences or hinder their recovery.

Our hope is that this report will encourage a fresh look at our State's response to all victims of crime. We encourage you to use this report to raise awareness about the impact of crime on victims.

Glen Kercher

Director of the Crime Victims' Institute

(n=33), between 31 and 53 years of age (n=26), Caucasian (n=26), married (n=14), employed full time (n=17), and owned their own home (n=20). The vast majority of participants had a high school education or above (n=33). The sample was primarily Christian (n=34) in religious affiliation; however, the majority of participants (n=25) rarely attended religious services.

Twenty participants were secondary victims, meaning the crime occurred to someone close to them, and sixteen were primary victims.

Nineteen participants were survivors of homicide victims, three were victims of assault, two were sexual assault victims, two were victims of attempted homicide and kidnapping, and the remaining categories with only one participant were (a) sexual assault and theft, (b) attempted kidnapping and assault, (c) attempted murder and kidnapping, (d) suicide, (e) attempted break-in, (f) arson and robbery, (g) kidnapping and sexual assault, (h) vandalism and theft from car, (i) attempted robbery and assault with a vehicle, and (j) gunshot wound (see Graph 1).

Twenty-two participants' incidents occurred at the victim's home (see Graph 2). Two participants reported incidents occurring at the workplace and the remainder of incidents occurred at a variety of places including (a) within the same apartment complex, (b) at a day care center, (c) in the downtown area of the city, (d) in the driveway of the house, (e) at a drug house, (f) at an ex-girlfriend's house, (g) in a parking lot, (h) on the street near a friend's house, (i) at a grocery store, (j) in the woods and (k) at secondary homes or parents homes. The majority of crimes occurred between 6:01 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. (n=22) with the greatest number occurring between 6:01 p.m. and midnight (n=12).

Twenty-six participants knew the offender before the offense occurred, eight reported not knowing the offender, and two were unsure because the offender had not yet been caught (see Graph 3). For those who reported knowing the offender (n=26), 11 reported the offender was a current or former partner/spouse/significant other, eight were acquaintances, two were relatives, two were neighbors, one was a friend and two were ex-tenants.

Effects of criminal victimization on psychological well-being and lifestyle changes

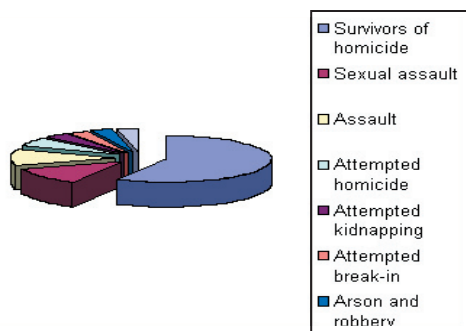
Table I illustrates reactions to victimizations, which include emotional and psychological responses and effects on daily lives from all respondents (n=36).

Statements indicating the highest levels of agreement included: "I was angry with the offender" (n=29), "I have had to take time off

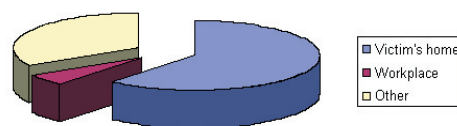
work as a result of the incident" (n=25), "I have suffered from panic/anxiety/other psychological disorders as a result of the incident" (n=24), "My work has been affected as a result of the incident" (n=22), "I felt isolated and alone" (n=19), "I was afraid a similar offense may happen again" (n=19), "I felt unsafe in my home alone (n=19), and "The incident has affected relationships with my family and friends" (n=19). Crime victim responses indicated that those who reported suffering from psychological disorders reported symptoms of panic and anxiety, depression and/or post-traumatic stress disorder. Additionally, in response to how friends and family reacted, a common theme of respondents was that friends tended to turn away from them after victimization, because they did not know how to respond. Some friends chose not to interact at all, leaving many victims feeling more isolated. Not surprisingly, many victims attended support groups for longer-term social support.

All respondents indicated some change in their lives after being victims of a crime. All changes seemed to be related to fear in one respect or another. The range of changes included: (a) no longer parking in the assigned apartment parking space out of fear that potential criminal perpetrators might associate the "car" with the "victim" and target her for other crimes; (b) no longer trusting people – sometimes specific groups of people, other times people in general; and (c) fear of revictimization or retaliation from offenders or offenders' family and friends.

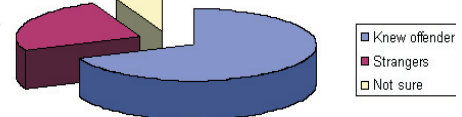
Almost all respondents reported that their lives had been changed. Specifically, it seemed that overcoming being a victim of crime entailed becoming accustomed to a different life as opposed to going back to "normal." In terms of psychological effects, some respondents contemplated suicide, others were diagnosed with depression, panic or anxiety disorders and some were diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, which is consistent with previous research (Freedy et al., 1997; Williams, 1999). Additionally, many respondents reported feelings of paranoia directly after the crime. For some victims paranoia was an ongoing effect. One respondent was convinced that she would be killed when her ex-husband was released from prison. This victim not only suffers from a permanent seizure disorder as a result of the assault she experienced but is in constant fear of continued retaliation from her ex-husband's family and friends. This respondent was attacked by her offender's friend in a public restaurant, has been harassed over the phone and in person by her ex-mother-in-law, has had feces thrown at her while driving and also while at home, has received threatening phone calls from her offender's friends and is no longer able to work because of the physical disability from which she suffers.



Graph 1. Types of Victimization



Graph 2. Place of Victimization



Graph 3. Relationship to Perpetrator

Table 1: Reactions to Victimization

Reaction statement n=36	Strongly agree/Agree	Disagree/Strongly	Unknown or not applicable disagree
I was angry with the offender	29	6	1
I was critical with myself	17	13	6
I felt isolated and alone	19	10	12
I was afraid of retaliation by the offender	14	10	12
I was afraid a similar offense may happen again	19	8	9
I wanted revenge	16	10	10
I felt unsafe in my home alone	19	9	8
I had to leave my home as a result of the incident	9	16	11
I have suffered from panic/anxiety attacks/other psychological disorders as a result of the incident	24	6	6
The incident strained the relationship with my partner	16	5	15
The incident ended the relationship with my partner	7	12	17
I have experienced problems in my sexual relationships	5	6	25
The incident has affected relationships with my family and friends	19	9	8
I have had to take time off work as a result of the incident	25	2	9
My work has been affected as a result of the incident	22	3	11
I have found the offense very difficult to cope with	16	7	13
I have made changes in the way I live because of the offense	17	8	11
I have been drinking/smoking/using drugs more often since the offense	6	17	13
The incident has affected by physical health	9	6	21
The incident physically disabled me for a time	4	6	26
The incident physically disabled me permanently	1	9	26

There is no question that criminal victimizations can have serious emotional and psychological effects on victims.

Sometimes offenders can help victims recover from the adverse reactions of victimization. Three statements by victims stand out as being particularly important in this regard: (a) understanding the motivations for the offense, (b) understanding how they were targeted, (c) informing offenders about the ways the crime has affected them, and (d) being assured that offenders are duly punished. About one-third of the victims wanted an apology from their perpetrators (n=12) or were concerned that the offender was receiving help in the form of a therapeutic program as a part of the sentence (n=11).

Treatment by criminal justice system representatives

Police

Thirty-five victims reported the crimes to the police. The reasons given for reporting the crime included: to stop the offense, because it was the right thing to do, and to see justice done.

The majority of respondents (55.6%) indicated they were dissatisfied with the police handling of the case. Just under a third of the respondents expressed satisfaction (30.6%). When asked if they were kept informed about the progress of the case 63.9% reported that they were not informed at all, 11.1% indicated that they were informed but would have liked more information, 16.7% reported

that they were very informed, and 8.3% could not recall how well they were kept apprised of progress in the case.

It appears that there are some police officers in this state who do not consistently adhere to the Texas statute outlining the rights of victims. Information and communication from the police were often cited as lacking in the experiences of victims. Two other main causes for the dissatisfaction reported by respondents included verbal abuse from individual officers and the lack of a timely response by the police, either to incidents leading up to the main incident or unnecessary delays in arriving at the scene of the incident.

Courts and court services

Twenty-five cases were referred to the courts. The majority of respondents indicated that the district attorney's offices kept them informed with the progress of their cases and informed them of court dates (73.9%). Satisfaction with the court system was considerably greater than that for the police. This appeared to be in large part due to the fact that respondents felt more informed

about their cases and because the district attorneys' victim liaisons were particularly helpful to respondents.

Seventeen cases went to trial. Most respondents (64.7%) were asked to provide victim impact statements. It was not clear at what point in the proceedings those statements were introduced. Two main themes were apparent in victim comments: (a) victim impact statements gave respondents the opportunity to have their voices heard and to tell the offender how the crime affected them; and conversely, (b) some who gave statements felt there was too much happening at the same time, and they wished they would have had better guidance on what to include and or how to articulate what they felt in the statements.

Victims reported being dissatisfied when prosecutors dropped charges, reduced charges, or accepted plea bargains without consulting the victims. Additionally, a number of respondents felt the district attorneys and/or judges in their cases were not concerned about the victims because of the perceived lack of attention to their cases or the insufficient notice given to victims that would have enabled them to attend the court proceeding.

A number of respondents remarked that offenders seem to have more rights in the system than do victims. Many wanted an opportunity to confront their defendants about the effects of their criminal behavior but may not have been afforded the opportunity to do so. Many victims were specifically instructed not to demonstrate noticeable emotional reactions to the things being said

or discussed during the trial, or they would be removed from the courtroom. This instruction is understandably given because of concern that juries might be swayed by the emotional reactions of victims or their families. It seems important from a victims' standpoint to explore alternatives to the existing courtroom framework that might serve both the needs of victims while protecting the rights of the accused. One suggestion is to allow victims to view the trial in a separate room through a closed circuit television system.

Twenty-five respondents (73.5%) filed for crime victim compensation through district attorney's offices. Most of the compensation went to cover the costs of funeral expenses and counseling fees. The median amount of compensation provided was \$4,500.00 per case. There was considerable disparity in the help provided through Crime Victim Compensation. Crime victims with similar circumstances were often treated differently depending on the perceived experience of the personnel assigned to their cases. Ineffectiveness and unwillingness to help were identified as being characteristic of many persons responsible for assisting victims with crime victim compensation. Even though there should be uniformity in the application of crime victims compensation guidelines, the victims reported a considerable variation in the assistance they received. It may be that more training is needed to insure that all victims are treated the same in this regard.

Forty-four respondents (n=25) were satisfied with the outcome of their cases. Forty percent either expressed outright dissatisfaction or tempered their satisfaction with the ways their cases were handled. Those who reported they were very satisfied with the way the police handled their cases were also more likely to report high satisfaction with the outcome of the case. Conversely, those who were highly dissatisfied with the way the police handled their cases, also reported high dissatisfaction with the case outcome.

Over half of the respondents reported feeling victimized by the police (55.6%) and/or the courts (50.0%). Specifically, respondents stated that the police were:

- (a) verbally abusive or did not believe the respondent,
- (b) did not investigate prior incidents that led up to current victimization or delayed investigation (did not respond promptly),
- (c) did not follow up on potential suspects suggested by the participant,
- (d) accused victims of harassing them with repeated phone calls and requests for information,
- (e) did not keep respondents informed,
- (f) gave information to people outside of the immediate family or to persons with whom the deceased did not have any contact but was related
- (g) closed the case too soon.

Comments reflecting the perception that victims were revictimized by the courts are seen in the following comments:

- (a) the sentence given was reduced,
- (b) the court process was not adequately explained,
- (c) the district attorney and/or judge seemed uncaring about the victim's concerns,
- (d) the victim felt as though he or she was put on trial,
- (e) the crime victim compensation representative was incompetent and did not provide sufficient help to the respondent,
- (f) explanations were not given about possible charges, the likelihood of early release and/or other components of the plea being offered

- (g) quite often respondents reported that they were distressed about not being allowed to show emotion in the courtroom and being threatened by the judge to be asked to leave the courtroom.

Conclusion

Crime can have a life-altering effect on the lives of victims. Emotional reactivity, occupational performance, social relationships, and daily activities can all be affected. Criminal victimization undermines a person's sense of safety and security. This is particularly true with personal crime victims. Following the report of their experiences to the police, the lives of victims will revolve around coping with the aftereffects of their victimization and following the case through the criminal justice system. Unfortunately, in all too many cases, they may experience another type of victimization, which sometimes occurs as a result of insensitivity and lack of support shown by the persons who are supposed to be helping them. Ultimately, most crime victims end up moving on with their lives, but sometimes it is not the same life they lived prior to the victimization. This study has underscored the experiences of crime victims that either assist them in effectively coping with their experiences or hinder their recovery.

Many police departments provide both pre-service and in-service training for their officers to acquaint them with the different kinds of victimization, the psychological effects crime can have on victims, victim rights, the importance of referring victims to hospitals and victim service agencies, how to interview victims, and how to encourage victim participation in the prosecution phase. The Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education provides online training modules on understanding and assisting victims of crime. However, this effort to educate the police is an ongoing one. It is still too often the case that officers do not assist victims in appropriate ways or investigate some cases in ways that will support a successful prosecution of the offender.

Police departments, sheriff departments, and district attorney's offices have made efforts to assist crime victims with a designated victim assistance coordinator in each department. The Texas Legislature has also instructed the Texas Attorney General's Office to implement a Statewide Automated Victim Notification System. Statewide and national crime victim associations have formed to provide assistance to and advocate on behalf of victims. All of these trends are designed to assist in the pursuit of justice while at the same time providing assistance and support to victims. Even though, much progress has been made on behalf of victims, much remains to be accomplished. For example some victim advocates have suggested that victims be provided with *ad litem* attorneys to represent them in criminal proceedings against their perpetrators. Another suggestion has been to require that victims be notified prior to court approval of a plea agreement with the offender, so that they may present their concerns to the court.



Crime Victims' Institute
Sam Houston State University
Criminal Justice Center
PO Box 2180
Huntsville, TX 77341-2180



Phone: (936) 294-3100 • Fax: (936) 294-4296
Toll Free Number: 1(877) 842-8463