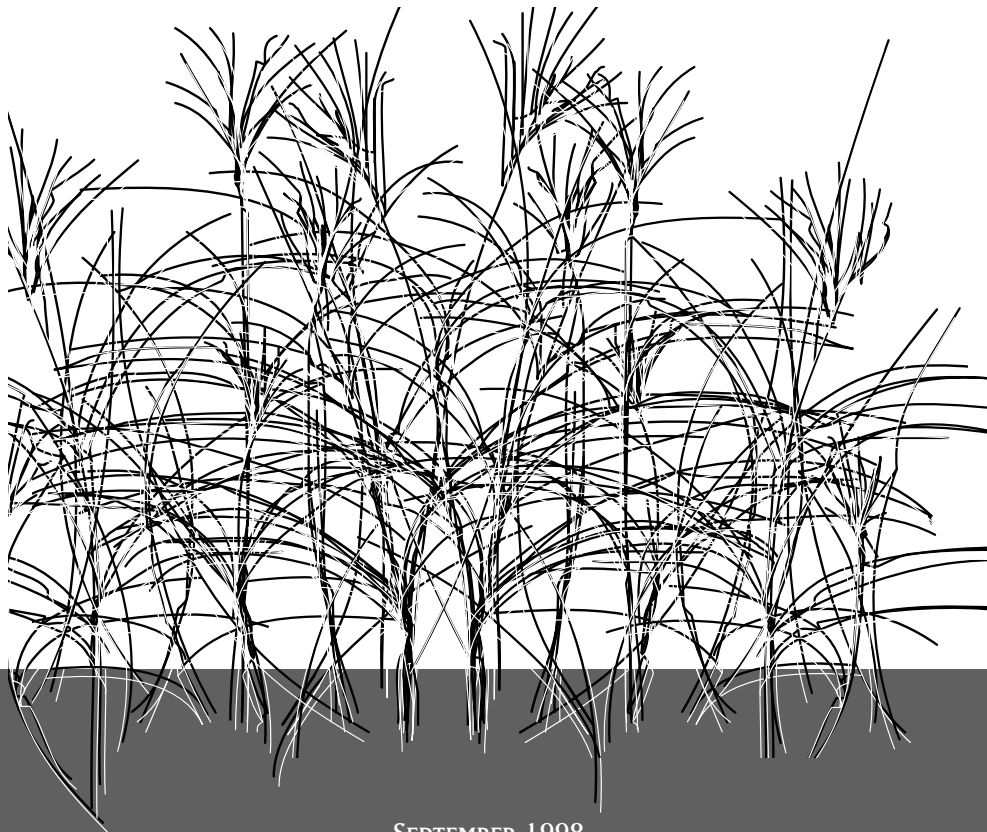




FROM PAIN TO POWER: CRIME VICTIMS TAKE ACTION



SEPTEMBER 1998

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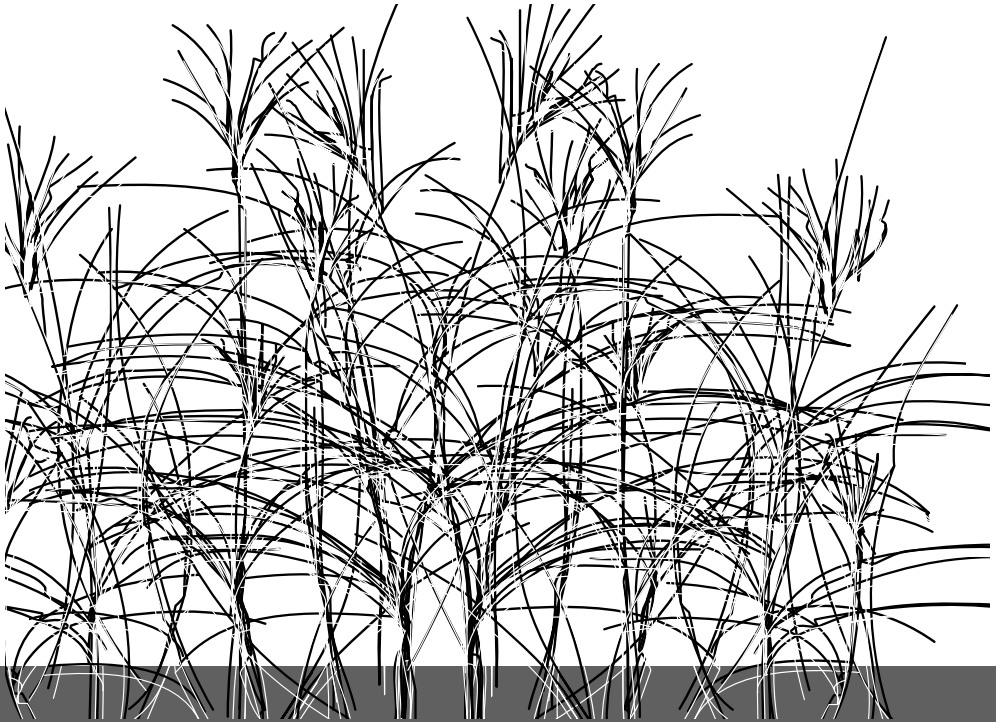
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FOREWORD

Across America, victims of crime have turned their agony into activism. Many have found that participating in community service—helping other victims and initiating crime prevention and awareness programs—contributes significantly to their own healing. These victims include extraordinary people such as Marilyn Smith, who founded a comprehensive victim service program in Seattle for deaf and deaf-blind victims of sexual assault after trying unsuccessfully to find services herself as a deaf sexual assault victim; Azim Khamisa, who joined with the grandfather of the 14 year-old gang member who murdered his son to provide gang prevention programs in San Diego schools; and the many parents who came together after their children were killed by drunk drivers to support Mothers Against Drunk Driving in its successful efforts to strengthen laws, provide victim impact classes, and educate the public about the devastating impact of this crime.

This monograph chronicles ways in which many crime victims are channeling their pain into helping others, improving their communities, and healing themselves at the same time. It describes opportunities for victims who want to become active and makes important recommendations for victim service programs regarding ways to involve victims in community service.

The monograph was written by Victim Services, a New York City-based program which is the largest victim assistance provider in the nation. The monograph is part of a larger document entitled *New Directions From the Field: Victims' Rights and Services for the 21st Century*, a comprehensive report and set of recommendations on victims' rights and services from and concerning virtually every community involved with crime victims across the nation.



Crime victims themselves have a critical role to play in the nation's response to violence and victimization. The purpose of this monograph is to foster increased collaboration between victims, service providers, and policy makers to ensure justice and healing for all victims of crime.

Kathryn M. Turman

Acting Director

Office for Victims of Crime



**"Pain falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own
despair, against our will, comes wisdom."**

—Agamemnon, *Aeschylus*



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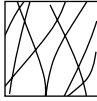
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Introduction: Two Stories



In 1985, Ralph Hubbard's 23-year-old son was shot and killed in New York City. After years of feeling angry, frustrated and powerless, Hubbard resolved to help other families work through their suffering. In a Victim Services support group for families of homicide victims in New York, he began to speak out, telling his family's story to the police, criminal justice officials, social service providers, and the public. He found that telling others what his family had gone through helped him cope with his pain and anger and inspired other victims to address their feelings. He started a self-help group for men who had lost family members to violence. He also became an adviser to New York's Crime Victims' Board, vice president of Justice For All, a victims' rights advocacy group, and a board member of the National Organization for Victim Assistance. A leading spokesperson for victims' rights in New York State, Hubbard feels no less compelled to be an advocate for victims ten years after his son's murder: "It's something I need to do. This is therapeutic for me."

Survivors from the 1993 Long Island Railroad massacre were determined to prevent similar atrocities from happening to others. Colin Ferguson's shooting spree transformed a number of those who were either on the train or lost family members into outspoken advocates for gun control and victims' rights. Today, they speak at vigils, rallies, on television talk shows, and with legislators about the

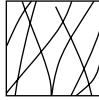


personal impact of the event, and they lobby for a ban on assault weapons, including the model used in the shooting. Tom McDermott, who was on the train that evening, believes he was spared in order to join the fight against gun violence. "I'm a radical now," he often says. "I'm a radical for the safety of us all."¹

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The Trauma of Violence Leaves Its Mark



Long after the physical wounds have healed, many crime victims continue to feel overwhelmed by the psychic pain of loss, powerlessness, low self-esteem, isolation, fear, rage—feelings that often are shared by their family and friends, as well as by the extended community.

From the ashes of criminal violence, victims and their families are struggling to rebuild their communities, as well as their own lives. Through community activism, individuals like Ralph Hubbard and Tom McDermott are transforming their pain into power, helping change society, and healing themselves in the process. Moving from the personal to the political, they work to correct causes of crime that are systemic, such as poverty, racism, sexism, the culture of violence and easy access to guns; to hold those who commit crimes accountable; and to enact victim-sensitive reforms and programs. As the crime victims' movement enters its third decade, advocates should look for ways to nurture victims' desires to help others by providing educational and organizational opportunities for community action.

Without intervention, victims can become chronically dysfunctional—afraid to venture out at night, unable to work productively, alienated from neighbors and friends, distrustful of police and courts, and overly dependent on social services. Their withdrawal from life hurts their families and weakens the fabric of the community.



Individual counseling and practical assistance help people deal with the psychological aftermath of crime and reconstruct a sense of equilibrium. When crime victims move from their personal experiences to a broader social analysis and to activism, they can also aid their own recovery from the trauma of victimization. Recognizing or addressing the social conditions that lead to violence and victimization is important. Helping other victims, working to change laws, or mobilizing violence prevention initiatives can help victims and survivors regain a sense of control and channel their fear and rage into efforts for reform.

The history of grass roots efforts in other movements shows that community activism can be a powerful catalyst for social change. Individual stakeholders—those whose lives were directly affected by the movement’s cause—have brought about landmark reforms. The movements for civil rights, elder rights, welfare, environmental protection, and AIDS research and treatment have been spearheaded by those directly affected by the issues. Like crime victim activism, each of these movements arose from victimizing conditions of neglect, persecution, or marginalization; and the involvement of “victimized” individuals legitimized the cause.

A crucial step toward activism may be the individual’s self-identification as a member of a group victimized by particular social conditions. Yet within the crime victims’ and battered women’s movements, the “victim” label remains controversial. Some believe it is a stigmatizing label that hinders recovery and reinforces society’s perception of victims as helpless, hopeless, and dependent. Others see it as an empowering identification that promotes connection with others and spurs community involvement.

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As Crenshaw points out, "[I]dentity-based politics has been a source of strength, community and intellectual development [for many individuals and groups], African-Americans, other people of color, and gays and lesbians, among others."² The individual's self-identification as a victim—as a temporary and active condition, as opposed to an inherent or static one—may be both a step toward recovery and a source of empowerment. Mahoney's framing of the controversy with respect to battered women may be equally applicable to other crime victims: "[F]irst, the abuse of women and its consequences must be explained without defining the woman herself by the experience of abuse; second, the woman's perceptions and the context of her life must be explained—defending the reality of this woman's experience—in a way that locates her experience within patterns of systemic power and oppression."³ By acknowledging themselves as victims and survivors, some people achieve a more realistic understanding of blame, realize a connection with other victims, and mobilize to address the social conditions that contribute to victimization.

The impetus for community involvement and political empowerment often comes from victims themselves or from their families and friends. Victim Services' Families of Homicide Victims program initially offered individual counseling. By talking with each other, participants found they were not alone in their suffering and could give each other valuable affirmation and support. They formed a self-help group, which provided the first real sense of community since their tragedies. When members wanted to become more politically active, the group spun-off as an independent organization. Those who wanted to help other survivors were trained to work with Victim Services staff as group co-facilitators. More recently,

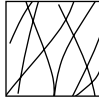


members have become involved in crime prevention. One participant who lost three sons to violence started an afterschool program for at-risk youth.

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Community Involvement Since the 1982 Task Force Report



The journey from victim to advocate taken by Hubbard, the Long Island Railroad victims, and participants in the Families of Homicide Victims program followed a line of recovery that was largely unrecognized when the 1982 Final Report of the President's Task Force on Victims of Crime was written. The report only indirectly touched on victim involvement in communities, addressing "involvement" primarily in terms of permitting victims to participate in their own court cases. Many of the 1982 recommendations for judicial reform have been enacted, including provisions for victim impact statements and victim allocution. In addition, 29 states have enacted some kind of constitutional amendment to guarantee victims the right to be involved in the prosecution of their cases. Many of these successes were attributable to the efforts of crime victims. For example, Mothers Against Drunk Driving and Parents of Murdered Children played a key role in moving the 1988 amendments to the 1984 Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) that expanded the kinds of victims eligible for services supported by the legislation.

Victim leadership and activism can be credited with many of the substantive public policy and legislative achievements that have been won over the past 20 years. Aside from its trauma healing benefits, victim involvement is important because it helps maintain the direction and integrity of the movement.

This paper expands the original focus of the 1982 Final Report of the President's Task Force on Victims of Crime by considering how victim

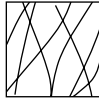


activism can help speed the individual's recovery from trauma, reform the criminal justice system, and promote crime prevention through addressing some of the underlying conditions of violence. Recognizing that community activism is not for all crime victims, it also explores the potential risks of activism and outlines considerations to guide activist efforts.

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The Impact of Crime



Crime victims often suffer a broad range of psychological and social injuries that persist long after their physical wounds have healed. Intense feelings of anger, fear, isolation, low self-esteem, helplessness, and depression are common reactions.⁴ Like combat veterans, crime victims may suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, including recurrent memories of the incident, sleep disturbances, feelings of alienation, emotional numbing, and other anxiety-related symptoms. Janoff-Bulman suggests that victimization can shatter basic assumptions about the self and the world which individuals need in order to function normally in their daily lives—that they are safe from harm, that the world is meaningful and just, and that they are good, decent people.⁵ This happens not only to victims of violent assaults but also to victims of robbery and burglary⁶ and to their friends and family.⁷ Herman has suggested that "survivors of prolonged, repeated trauma," such as battered women and abused children, often suffer what she calls "complex post-traumatic stress disorder," which can manifest as severe "personality changes, including deformations of relatedness and identity [which make them] particularly vulnerable to repeated harm, both self-inflicted and at the hands of others."⁸

The emotional damage and social isolation caused by victimization also may be compounded by a lack of support, and even stigmatization, from friends, family and social institutions, that can become a "second wound" for the victim. Those closest to the victim may be traumatized by the crime in ways that make them unsupportive of the victim's needs. Davis, Taylor and Bench found that close friends and



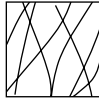
family members, particularly of a victim of sexual assault, sometimes withdraw from and blame the victim.⁹

Crime victims must also contend with society's tendency to blame them for the crime, which compounds the trauma of the event. To protect their belief in a just world where people get what they deserve, and to distance themselves from the possibility of random or uncontrollable injury, many prefer to see victims as somehow responsible for their fate.¹⁰ The lack of support for victims trying to recover from a crime can exacerbate the psychological harm caused by victimization and make recovery even more difficult.

When victims do seek help, they may be treated with insensitivity. They may feel ignored or even revictimized by the criminal justice process, which has traditionally been more concerned with the rights of the accused than with the rights and needs of the victim. Family members of homicide victims in particular may feel left out of the justice process. When one woman whose child had been murdered asked to be informed as the case progressed, she was asked, "Why do you want to know? You're not involved in the case."



Benefits of Community Involvement



Community involvement can help victims overcome feelings of low self-esteem, isolation, powerlessness, fear and anger. The process of connecting with others, confronting and overcoming real-life challenges, striving for justice and giving something back to the community can provide recovery benefits not achieved solely by traditional counseling or therapy.

Rebuilding Low Self-Esteem

Participating in peer self-help groups can improve victims' self-images by demonstrating they are neither abnormal nor guilty for the victimization. Before joining groups such as Families of Homicide Victims, survivors often blame themselves for their children's deaths, seeing themselves as inadequate parents because they could not protect their children from harm. By talking with other parents who seem nurturing and loving, they are able to look at themselves and the question of blame more realistically. When those who once lamented, "If only we had moved to a safer neighborhood," meet residents of safer neighborhoods who have also lost family members, they begin to recognize that it was not their fault. Self-help groups can create an "adaptive spiral"; acceptance by other group members boosts the individual's self-esteem, in turn increasing his or her empathy and support for others.¹¹

Community involvement generally involves some degree of risk; there is no guarantee that victims' efforts will pay off. Efforts to



pass legislation, increase services for victims, or establish prevention programs will often be disappointing. By standing up to these challenges and failures, victims prove to themselves and others that they are neither weak nor helpless, and that they are able to fight their own battles.

Self-esteem also can be enhanced by joining a particular cause "from which one derives reflected power and glory."¹² Creating psychological strength through numbers—banding together to advance the cause of victims or to reduce violence—can provide a dividend of empowerment that may be considerably greater than victims might receive through individual action. When victims share their personal experiences with others, they are no longer alone in their struggle.

Reducing Isolation

Victims of crime often feel alienated from family, friends and community. They may consider themselves stigmatized or tainted by the crime, a feeling reinforced by insensitive treatment from those who "shun victims, sensing their 'spoiled identities.'"¹³

Battered women are especially at risk of feeling isolated because they are often separated from society by their abusers. According to Stark, "the hallmark of the battering experience [is] 'entrapment'. . . a pattern of control that extends. . . to virtually every aspect of a woman's life, including money, food, sexuality, friendships, transportation, personal appearance, and access to supports, including children, extended family members, and helping resources."¹⁴

Lebowitz, Harvey and Herman describe the process of overcoming this isolation and reestablishing ties with others as one of the key stages of trauma recovery.¹⁵ Social action can serve as one effective means of achieving this reconnection. When victims work with those who have had similar experiences, they begin to realize they are not alone.



Peer support groups or victim-initiated advocacy groups may help to create a new community for victims that can be strengthened by grappling with the larger social problems that affect it,¹⁶ and may serve as a bridge to relationships outside the group.¹⁷ Publicly embracing the victimization experience through advocacy or other public actions can reduce feelings of deviance and stigmatization that perpetuate isolation from others.

Regaining a Sense of Power

A common reaction to crime is to ask, "Why me?" Unable to find a reason for their victimization, crime victims may feel a loss of control over their surroundings. By joining with others to prevent violence or improve the treatment of crime victims, victims can have an impact on the community and recapture a sense of power. They "transform the meaning of their personal tragedy by making it the basis for social action."¹⁸ Victims who are able to answer "Why?" perhaps by taking on a survivor mission, may be less likely to be psychologically incapacitated;¹⁹ they create something positive out of a negative experience by carving out an area of their lives where they are in control. Sarah Buel, a battered woman who became a district attorney specializing in domestic violence cases, said, "I feel very much like that's part of my mission, part of why God didn't allow me to die in that marriage, so that I could talk openly and publicly. . . about having been battered."²⁰

Dealing with Fear and Anger

Fear of revictimization, which is related to feelings of powerlessness and isolation, is a powerful, sometimes paralyzing result of crime. Fear of crime can be "divisive. . . creat[ing] suspicion and distrust,"²¹ but it also can "motivate citizens to interact with each other and engage in anti-crime efforts."²²



Crime victims can master their fear by working on community crime prevention projects. In a study not limited to crime victims, Cohn, Kidder and Harvey²³ found that those involved in community anti-crime projects felt more in control of their surroundings and had less fear of crime. Other studies linking isolation from the community with fear of crime suggest that, as victims become more involved with others, they become less afraid.²⁴ After witnessing the murder of his father, a student in a school-based victim assistance program overcame his fear of being victimized again by launching an anti-violence campaign in his school. By finding a more positive way to increase the safety of his environment, he no longer felt the need to be overly defensive or to resort to violence to protect himself.

The anger that follows victimization—at the offender, at the criminal justice system and at society for letting it happen—can productively be redirected through activism. By speaking out at conferences, schools, churches and public hearings, Tom McDermott found that he “transferred [his] hatred, bitterness and white-hot anger into something positive.” Some victims may focus on the pursuit of justice, not only for their own suffering but also because they recognize the detrimental impact of crime on society. Herman notes that in the later stages of recovery, victims often embrace abstract principles that “transcend [their] personal grievance against the perpetrator [and]. . .connect the fate of others to their own.”²⁵ Thus, in addition to wanting the individual offender brought to justice, they might work to ensure that victims are given the support they need or to fight the social conditions that may have contributed to the crime. In these ways, feelings of rage and anger are transformed into constructive social action.

Some victims find release by sharing their experiences with others, who also are helped in the process. After telling the story of his son’s murder at conferences, Ralph Hubbard found that his words helped

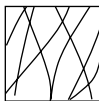


other men talk about the loss of their own child after years of silence and denial. Hubbard describes this experience as "one of the most rewarding things ever." Similar benefits from sharing have been described by victims of AIDS and other serious illnesses who, as Susan Sontag describes in *Illness as Metaphor*, have historically been ostracized and silenced.²⁶

Others feel compelled to testify publicly about their victimization—in court, in church, to community groups, or in print. Like the physician narrator of Albert M. Camus' *The Plague*, whom Felman and Laub describe as feeling "historically appointed 'to bear witness in favor of those plague-stricken people, so that some memorial of the injustice done them might endure,'"²⁷ victims sometimes need to testify to feel that some degree of justice is achieved. Describing the survivors of the Holocaust, Felman and Laub note that, "The witness's readiness to become himself a medium of the testimony—and a medium of the accident—in his unshakable conviction that the accident [or the crime]. . . carries historical significance. . . goes beyond the individual and is thus, in effect, in spite of its idiosyncrasy, not trivial."²⁸ By continuously reminding the populace of the injustice, victims prevent society from acquiescing to what they may prefer to deny or forget. Lorna Hawkins was frustrated that no one else seemed outraged by the death of her two sons by gang violence; random shootings were so common in Los Angeles that her story was not considered "news" by the media. To raise awareness about the pain, suffering, and injustice of urban violence, Hawkins began "Drive-By Agony," a weekly cable show.²⁹ Countless other victims have spoken out against violence and advocated for reforms. Since 1990, 72 noteworthy activists have been recognized by the President's annual National Crime Victim Service Award.



Examples of Community Involvement



Over the past two decades, the viability of community activism by crime victims has been demonstrated at the local, state and national levels. In general, victim activism has focused on three objectives: victim assistance, victims' rights advocacy, and violence prevention. (See appendix for more detailed descriptions of programs.)

Victim Assistance

If crime victims have sufficiently recovered from their own traumatic experiences and have received appropriate training, they often are well-suited to help other crime victims because of their capacity to empathize. Facilitating victim support groups (such as the Families of Homicide Victims or the nationwide Parents of Murdered Children (POMC)), accompanying victims through the criminal justice process, or becoming in-court advocates are practical, valuable services. The Youth Empowerment Association in New York City trained teenagers recovering from sexual assault to work as peer counselors with youth victims who were at earlier stages of recovery. Victims also have played large roles in establishing and staffing rape crisis centers.³⁰

Victims' Rights Advocacy

Having experienced poor treatment from the criminal justice and social service systems, some victims choose to advocate for social change. By speaking to government officials, legislators, or the press and by campaigning for reform, victims often find that they



are accorded greater respect than service professionals and that their words carry weight with decision makers. When Victim Services staff travel to Albany, New York, accompanied by crime victims, to talk with state legislators, they usually are met by the legislator; when they go alone, they are more likely to be met by staff. Victim Services offers public speaking training to crime victims, as well as to agency staff, and maintains a Crime Victim Speakers Bureau. Another good example of the effectiveness of this kind of victim advocacy is the Stephanie Roper Committee, which has contributed significantly to the passage of three dozen victims' rights bills in Maryland since 1983.

Some victims may work to ensure that the criminal justice system functions as it should and that offenders are brought to justice. The Roper Foundation, the direct service component to the Roper Committee, operates a Courtwatch program that places volunteers, many of them victims, in courtrooms to monitor whether victims' rights are being respected. Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) and Remove Intoxicated Drivers (RID) developed Victim Impact Panels, through which victims speak directly to offenders about the devastating impact of drunk driving. POMC's Truth-In-Sentencing program mobilizes its national membership to make sure that those convicted of murdering their children serve at least the minimum sentences; when an offender comes up for early parole, the network launches a letter-writing campaign to oppose the offender's release. Taking another approach, Murder Victims Families for Reconciliation, a national group based in Virginia, campaigns against capital punishment.³¹

Violence Prevention

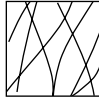
Victims often say that what they want most is for the crime never to have happened. Accordingly, some focus their efforts on crime prevention through public awareness and education campaigns or by creating programs for at-risk youth and self-defense training.



In its public education work, MADD launched the national Designated Driver program. The California-based Teens on Target (TNT) trains at-risk youth and young victims to be anti-violence advocates. Based on their first-hand experiences, these advocates talk to their peers about the causes of violence and suggest alternative approaches for resolving conflicts. In a new TNT project, "Caught in the Crossfire," advocates visit young gunshot victims who are still hospitalized to dissuade them from seeking revenge. In New York City, P.O.W.E.R. (People Opening the World's Eyes to Reality), a group of victims of gun violence who use wheelchairs, visit young people to show what can result from a life of drugs and violence. The group also has advocated for stricter state legislation against assault guns, and has testified in Washington, D.C. at a hearing on gun control before the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime and Criminal Justice.



Caveats Regarding Victim Activism



Though beneficial for many, becoming a victim activist is not a requisite step in trauma recovery and may be problematic for some. Because people recover in different ways and have different needs, community action is not necessarily appropriate for all crime victims. The individual's personality and history of victimization may play a role in determining whether community involvement will be helpful to recovery, while the availability of emotional and financial supports may be a factor in determining whether the victim has the time and energy to spend on community issues. Some victims of crime, though able to lead normal lives, may never feel prepared to deal with the pain of others or the frustrations of advocacy efforts. Being a victim may not be enough by itself to lead to activism; there is some evidence that victims who become active in community efforts are likely to have been activists before the crime.³² In the absence of clear criteria for when activism is likely to benefit a traumatized individual, a victim's own interest and desire to participate should be the determining factor. Rather than prescribing activism as a necessary part of the recovery process, professionals can provide people with opportunities for action, and support those who choose to get involved.

Timing is also an important consideration in community involvement. Advocating for legislative reform or helping others before coming to terms with their own trauma may impede some victims' recovery. Lebowitz, Harvey and Herman note that what they call the third stage of trauma recovery—reconnecting with others—should not be



attempted until the earlier steps of achieving a sense of safety and exploring and integrating the traumatic event have been achieved.³³ Unless they have reached this stage, victims may be unable to cope with other people's trauma on top of their own. Listening to others' crime stories may exacerbate fears and bring back disturbing, even overwhelming, memories of their own experiences, thereby retraumatizing them.³⁴ Research on MADD's Victim Impact Panels has shown that the act of speaking out was beneficial for the overwhelming majority (87 percent) of participants; the few participants (3 percent) who felt they were harmed by it had become involved too close to the incident—they were still using coping strategies, such as denial, that conflicted with telling their stories publicly.³⁵ This suggests that victims who invest themselves in advocacy efforts too soon may be taking on more than they are ready to handle. If individual change is difficult, societal change is even more so, especially in the face of political opposition. To avoid these pitfalls, activism generally should be encouraged later rather than earlier in the recovery process.

Certain types of activism may cause victims to feel exploited, potentially revictimizing them and setting back their recovery. For example, some victims who have spoken out through television and other news media feel that they have been taken advantage of—that their messages were misrepresented or their words cut or edited to alter their meaning. In an attempt to make a story more compelling, some journalists recast victim activists' identities, portraying them as powerless and pitiable rather than empowered and brave. As a result, victims may feel embarrassed or betrayed, and may be less likely to speak out in the future. To avoid revictimization and to appropriately access the power of the media, victim activists need to understand how the media works—for example, that their page-one story may fade completely from the news a day later. Victim services organizations can provide training for crime victim activists as to what they

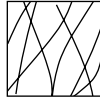


might expect from working with the media. And the news media need to become sensitive to the risk of revictimization as well as the value of victim activism.

Finally, some victims interested in activism may not feel comfortable getting involved through organizations that are labeled as "victim" activist or "victim" assistance, which is one reason why other community groups—religious institutions, community organizations, neighborhood and parent groups and other formal and informal organizations—should support crime prevention and activist efforts. Some individuals who already have ties with these groups may feel more comfortable taking action in familiar settings within their support networks than venturing into new organizations. Thus, institutions outside the victim field need to be supportive of victims, and recognize that victim involvement can benefit both their own individual members' well-being and their efforts for community improvement.



Barriers to Involvement



Given the successful programs described above and their benefits for both victims and communities, why is victim activism not more widespread? One reason cited by Skogan and Maxfield is that those crime victims who see conditions in their communities improving are more likely to try to do something about crime, whereas people living in more traumatized neighborhoods may feel relatively more "incapacitated" by fear for their safety.³⁶ Research has suggested that, although victimization may lead to community involvement, the very social conditions that contribute to victimization can also discourage activism. A disproportionate number of crime victims already feel disempowered by racism, poverty, sexism, and a lack of political power. Victimization makes them feel even more helpless and estranged from society. For many, the combined effects of living on the margins of society, being victimized and living in constant fear of crime can make social activism seem irrelevant and futile.

Society's tendency to blame victims further inhibits their ability to become effective public players. The common misperception that victims are responsible for their victimization (especially victims of domestic violence or sexual assault) can inhibit them from becoming advocates, damage their credibility as victim activists and cause them to pull back. In this way, some crime victims miss out on the recovery benefits of involvement, and society loses their potential contributions for social reform. This tendency to blame victims suggests that the friends or relatives of crime victims who fight on their behalf may



be less subject to personal criticism and social backlash than those victims who act on behalf of themselves.

Moreover, people who are subjected to on-going violence or abuse—victims of sexual assault, domestic violence,³⁷ stalking or gang violence and those who live in neighborhoods characterized by chronic violence—face multiple barriers to activism. For example, the feelings of low self-esteem and degradation resulting from the “coercive control” that characterizes partner violence, as well as the symptoms of what Judith Herman calls “complex post traumatic stress disorder,”³⁸ can inhibit the capacity of women (and no doubt others suffering persistent victimization) for living, much less taking public action.³⁹ In some cases, individuals may not even imagine the possibility of activism because they do not identify or label themselves as victims, or they may be silenced out of shame and embarrassment. This is often the case where community violence is the norm, when society explicitly or tacitly condones men’s power and control over women,⁴⁰ or if the violence occurring within families (against women, children or the elderly) is denied. Of course, real fear of being found or of violent retribution keeps other victims (women who have fled violent relationships, gang members) from going public who might otherwise want to.

In view of such substantial barriers, the effective activism of some victims is especially noteworthy. For example, Barbara Hart in Pennsylvania, Vickii Coffey in Chicago and Sarah Buel in Quincy, Massachusetts are formerly battered women whose names are synonymous with the leadership to end violence against women. Many others across the country—perhaps less publicly and without necessarily identifying themselves as battered women—work in shelters and provide peer counseling for other battered women. In recent years, adult victims of child sexual assault have become a vocal and effective force in raising awareness about the prevalence



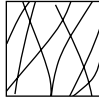
and trauma of incest. In many communities beset by violence, poverty and racism, committed residents—many of whom have lost friends and family to violence—have stayed to fight for education, job training and opportunities, especially for young people.

Building primarily on their own initiative, commitment and resources, crime victims have demonstrated the viability of activism and its value for themselves and society. The role of "victim as activist," however, has not yet become a recognized role in society, its benefits for victims' recovery have not been sufficiently examined, and most victims lack the opportunity or support they need to become involved. By creating structures for community involvement, forging links with existing victim programs and conducting further research, the public sector and victim assistance organizations could mobilize many more crime victims to help others and to participate in grass roots initiatives for victims' rights and crime prevention, thereby enhancing their recovery and helping to improve society.

The self-determination that contributes to victims' healing needs to be supported but not co-opted. By placing a higher priority on victim activism, government and assistance organizations can ensure that community involvement efforts remain community-based, rooted in the soil of individual victims' dedication and experience.



Victim Activism Recommendations



Recommendations for Victim Service Programs

Working directly with crime victims, victim service programs are in an excellent position to educate them about the larger political and social context of crime and violence and to create opportunities for activism. Victim service programs should:

1. Train staff to understand the benefits of community activism for victims and to be aware of opportunities for victims both within and outside victim assistance organizations.
2. Engage crime victims in the leadership and guidance of the organization through serving on boards and developing new services and programs.
3. Create speakers' bureaus which recruit and prepare victims to speak at conferences and with legislators, criminal justice officials, police, medical personnel, and others about the needs and rights of victims and the causes of violence.
4. Include battered women as presenters in domestic violence training programs for police, service providers and others.
5. Actively engage victims in paid and volunteer positions throughout the organization, from facilitating self-help groups to managing programs.



6. Prepare victim activists to work with the media.
7. Promote and disseminate information about the value of victim activism through local and national associations of victim assistance programs. For example, the National Organization for Victim Assistance and the National Victim Center have provided training and technical assistance to foster victim involvement.

Recommendations for Government

As new legislation and criminal justice reforms have increased the involvement of victims in their own cases, the public sector has gained the ability to expand victims' involvement in their communities, even with current financial constraints. Many of the following recommendations require little or no new resources; instead, they focus on shifting priorities for decision making or program funding. Public-sector agencies and organizations should:

1. Actively engage crime victims in the policy decisions that affect them. Public hearings on legislation and public policies that affect victim services, victims' rights, and violence prevention should always include testimony from victims themselves.
2. Require victim involvement as part of professional curricula in all disciplines that work with victims (e.g., criminal justice, social work, medicine, and law enforcement).
3. Incorporate community involvement as a funding guideline. This will encourage the creation of programs that engage crime victims in service, advocacy and violence prevention roles. Requests for proposals should require victim participation on advisory boards,



as designers of services and projects, and as paid or voluntary staff.

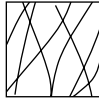
4. Launch demonstration programs to develop the most effective program models for victim involvement. One possible route might be AmeriCorps, where youth could work in their communities to engage crime victims in social action.
5. Create opportunities for battered women to become more openly and actively involved in their communities. Services to empower battered women and increase their sense of self-determination—including education, job training, and placement—would provide them with the skills and confidence they need to reach out to others. Public education programs that debunk the myth of battered women as helpless would increase society's acceptance of women who do speak out.
6. Engage crime victims through community policing programs. Designed to create partnerships between police and the communities they serve, these efforts are ideal situations for victims to work with police to reduce crime and help others in need.
7. Encourage the involvement of all citizens, along with crime victims, on issues of victim assistance and violence prevention, through public education (public service announcements, news and entertainment media). When victims initiate or join community-based efforts, they often do so with the understanding that the injustice they experienced affects all of society. A more widespread recognition that crime affects everyone would create a more supportive atmosphere for victim involvement, and could reduce some of the social barriers to community activism, such as the common tendency to blame the victim.



8. Support research to document more clearly the benefits of community involvement for victims' recovery. This would provide the rationale and motivation necessary for victim assistance programs to create opportunities for victim activism and establish links with victims' organizations.



Conclusion

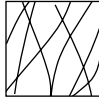


Victim assistance organizations, professionals and policymakers have much to gain by looking more closely at victim activism. A better understanding of the healing benefits of community involvement would encourage partnerships between victim assistance programs and community initiatives. Expanded opportunities for involvement would create new avenues for reintegrating crime victims into society while mobilizing a dedicated force for social change. Through better communication between groups, victim activists might stimulate victim assistance professionals to look beyond individual needs to the broader social conditions that lead to violent crime.





Appendix: Victim Involvement in Action



The following examples of victim activist efforts demonstrate the viability of victim activism and its benefits for both victims and their communities. They are both local and national in scope, and they include programs created to encourage victims to get involved, as well as entire organizations initiated and operated by victims.

Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD)

Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) was founded in 1980 by Candy Lightner and Cindy Lamb, whose daughters were, respectively, killed and maimed by drunk drivers. In the case of Cari Lightner, the driver, who was out on bail from another drunk-driving crash only two days before, had three prior drunk-driving arrests; sentenced to only two years, he was allowed to serve his time in a work camp and a halfway house. Laura Lamb became the country's youngest quadriplegic after being hit by a driver without a license who had a record of 37 traffic violations, three for drunk driving.

MADD is one of the most successful victim activist organizations in the nation. With three million members and more than 600 chapters, MADD provides a wide range of victim assistance, advocacy and prevention activities. The Victim Advocate Training Program is a 40-hour course that teaches volunteers to counsel victims, accompany



them through court proceedings, and speak to the media. The Court Monitoring Program trains volunteers to serve as watchdogs for victims' rights in courts. Court-mandated Victim Impact Panels compel offenders to hear from victims about the devastating impact of drunk driving on their lives. Studies have found these panels to have benefits for both offenders and victims—offenders' attitudes are changed and rates of recidivism are reduced, and victims' traumatic symptoms often are diminished.⁴¹ In the words of one victim impact panelist, "I do not want my daughter, Amy, and what happened to her to be forgotten. I can't have her back, but I do believe that by telling her story, I am making a difference for my three beautiful grandchildren."⁴² MADD also has played a key role in the passage of state and federal bills, including the Age 21 Law (setting the minimum age for drinking at 21). Other efforts, like the Project Red Ribbon "Tie One On for Safety" campaign and Designated Driver programs, have helped raise awareness of the problem and prevent drunk driving injuries through simple, straightforward messages. Victim involvement is at the heart of all of MADD's activities. The majority of local volunteers, two-thirds of board members, and a considerable portion of the employed staff are victims of drunk drivers or family members of those killed or injured.

Parents of Murdered Children (POMC)

Parents of Murdered Children (POMC) is a nationwide network of self-help groups and advocacy and assistance programs which help families deal with the aftermath of homicide. The organization was founded in 1978 by Charlotte and Bob Hullinger in Cincinnati, Ohio, after their daughter, Lisa, was murdered. The loss of a child to violence is often an intensely isolating experience; survivors often find that others are unable to understand how it feels and are



reluctant to talk about it. POMC's goal is to allow family members to share their grief with others who have been through similar experiences, thereby breaking down the isolation that many families face.

POMC has grown from its first self-help group in Cincinnati to a network of more than 100 local chapters serving 38,000 survivors each year. It also has become active in more extensive community involvement projects. Praised by survivors for helping them "see justice," the Truth-in-Sentencing program mobilizes the POMC membership to ensure that the convicted murderers of members' children serve at least their minimum sentences. When an offender comes up for early parole, the network helps victims respond. POMC's annual national conference offers survivors the chance to meet one another, network, and participate in workshops and seminars. National and local newsletters serve as a forum for members to communicate and express themselves. Survivors also help provide a range of other services on behalf of POMC, including court accompaniment, writing anniversary letters of consolation to other survivors, and serving on a speakers' bureau.

P.O.W.E.R. (People Opening the World's Eyes to Reality)

Following the shooting deaths of two New York City high school students in 1992, mobility-impaired victims of gun violence at Goldwater Memorial Hospital created P.O.W.E.R., a group that visits at-risk youth in schools, community organizations, and detention centers to show what can result from a life of drugs and violence. Ranging in age from 19 to 44, most of the group's members are former drug dealers, addicts, or gang members. Their personal stories and physical conditions present a compelling argument for youth to



reassess the direction of their lives. P.O.W.E.R. also has testified at the state and federal level for passage of stricter gun control laws and has participated in demonstrations against street violence. Many of the P.O.W.E.R. members feel that they have been given a second chance at life and that their victimization will have meaning if it can benefit others. Staff at the hospital have found that participation in the group has helped to increase members' self-esteem and has enabled them to come to terms with their disabilities.

Remove Intoxicated Drivers (RID)

In 1977, Karen and Timothy Morris, ages 17 and 19, were killed by a 22-year-old drunk driver. A newspaper article about this tragedy struck a nerve with Doris Aiken, the mother of two children the same ages as the victims. She was particularly concerned that the offender was not only not jailed, but allowed to continue driving. Together with friends, she began investigating how drunk driving cases were handled by the criminal justice system. They were stunned to learn that drunk driving was rampant—killing 25,000 people each year—yet arrests, convictions and suspended licenses were rare.

In 1978, in Schenectady, New York, Aiken formed Remove Intoxicated Drivers (RID). RID currently consists of 151 chapters in 41 states. Its activities include counseling and guidance for victims and family members, legislative advocacy, court monitoring, speakers' bureaus and public education. Based on the work of victims and other volunteers, a string of successful legislative efforts in New York State have reduced plea bargaining by drunk drivers, ensured that drivers lose their license temporarily if they refuse to take an alcohol test, and instituted other strategies to strengthen the state's response. One study by the New York State Police Superintendent estimated



that, over a ten-year period, these measures saved over 6,000 lives. RID helped to pioneer the use of Victim Impact Panels, in which drunk drivers hear directly from victims about how their lives have been affected. Stressing the accountability of government officials to the will of the people, RID provides materials and information for victims and others in the community to help them find their voices and demand stronger action against drunk driving.

Almost entirely a volunteer effort, RID has enjoyed strong participation by victims and their families. In many instances, one victim's story has served as the spark to create new chapters. In 1981, RID-Missouri was founded by Marge Charleville, whose letter to a local newspaper about her daughter's death in 1980 received 128 letters in response and led to funding to establish the chapter.

Victims are empowered and trained to work actively to monitor courts, review pending legislation and appear as spokespersons on national radio and television programs, with RID acting as sponsor and agent. These public activities help to heal the wounds inflicted by drunk drivers. In one survivor's words, "Since the most tragic loss. . . that anyone can endure [one's child], I have been clinging to everyday survival by my work helping other DWI victims, and by giving talks to high school assemblies, . . . state troopers, and in victim witness panels to defendant drunk drivers. It is my reason for living."

The Stephanie Roper Committee and Foundation

Based in Maryland, the Stephanie Roper Committee and Foundation were created in 1982 to improve the criminal justice system's treatment of victims and their families. After the brutal murder of their daughter Stephanie, Roberta and Vince Roper were astounded both



by the way they were left out of the court proceedings and with the outcome of the trial. Stephanie's convicted murderers were eligible for parole in just 12 years. Roberta began speaking out before local groups about the insensitivity of the justice system to victims. Friends and neighbors joined her efforts, sparking a movement that quickly spread throughout the state. Members collect petitions, hold rallies, and support other activities in the fight for victims' rights.

Both the Committee and Foundation are staffed by trained volunteers, half of whom are themselves crime victims. The Committee focuses on legislative reforms to protect victims' rights and increase services in Maryland, and it has been a major force in passing three dozen victims' rights bills since 1983 (e.g., laws ensuring mandatory victim impact statements, restitution and court attendance rights, and a state constitutional amendment for victims' rights). The Committee issues a regular newsletter to inform members of pending legislation and to encourage them to support the bills.

The Foundation provides direct services to crime victims, including support groups, a Court Companion program to help victims and their families during the trial, and a Courtwatch program to monitor the enforcement of victims' rights. Through its newsletter and other channels, the Foundation actively recruits new volunteers to be trained in providing these services.

Teens on Target (TNT)

Following an increase in the number of on-campus shootings, the Oakland Unified School District in California started Teens on Target in 1989 to involve young victims of violence and at-risk youth in violence prevention. An additional chapter was later opened in



Los Angeles. Pointing out that "those who are most at risk have not been invited to be part of the solution," the program's founders have trained 100 students to be violence prevention advocates. They make presentations that explore the causes of youth violence and suggest solutions, based on their first-hand experiences, for schools and school boards, city and state legislators, national conferences, and the media. With a specific aim to get victims involved, the Los Angeles chapter operates in partnership with a local spinal cord injury program and trains youth with firearm-related spinal injuries to become TNT advocates. In addition to providing a voice that other youth will listen to, these advocates find that their actions help their recovery. One advocate who was paralyzed by a gunshot wound said, "Talking to other kids in the program and in classes has helped me get through it." By speaking out, he has received support and encouragement from others that has helped him rebuild his own life.

TNT recently began "Caught in the Crossfire," a peer visitation program for victims of gun violence. TNT advocates visit young victims at Highland Hospital in Oakland. By sharing their own personal experiences and statistical information on gun violence, they attempt to dissuade victims and their friends from seeking revenge. These advocates can give a uniquely convincing argument against continuing the violence because they often speak from the same perspective as the victim.

Youth Empowerment Association

Created by a young adult survivor of sexual assault, the Youth Empowerment Association (YEA) was initiated to improve the treatment of teen survivors of sexual assault by the mental health system and to enhance their recovery through peer counseling and personal



empowerment. Based in New York City, YEA operated from 1992 to 1995, when it closed due to the loss of funding and key staff members. YEA trained teens who had spent time in the inpatient ward recovering from sexual assault and related symptoms (substance abuse, depression) to serve as peer counselors to other recovering youth and to speak about their experiences at conferences and policymaking forums. In addition to creating an opportunity for youth to learn new skills and improve their self-esteem, YEA created a comforting support system for victims in the mental health system, which is sometimes criticized for failing to diagnose sexual abuse among its patients.

To participate in the training, young people had to express an interest in serving as counselors and to have been out of the inpatient ward for at least six months to demonstrate sufficient progress in their own recovery. If substance abuse had been a problem, they also had to have been clean and sober for six months. To prepare participants to counsel other youth in the hospital's inpatient ward, the training program gave basic information on sexual assault, substance abuse, and other mental health consequences of victimization, as well as communication and peer counseling skills.

YEA also prepared young people to speak publicly about their treatment and other experiences before professional conferences, policymaking task forces, and legislative hearings. YEA participants found that, by becoming peer counselors and youth advocates, they advanced their own recovery, increased their feelings of control over their lives and realized they had something of value to contribute. Many first entered the inpatient ward feeling they had somehow failed in life and were incapable of helping themselves or others. By taking on these new responsibilities, participants were able to increase their



feelings of self-worth and set higher goals for their own recovery. Working with others who had shared similar experiences also allowed both counselors and patients to talk about their problems without fear of stigmatization.





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