

third edition

VICTIMOLOGY

William G. Doerner
Steven P. Lab

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Learning Objectives

After reading Chapter 1, you should be able to:

- Explain how early society handled victim problems.
- Understand the meaning of retribution and restitution.
- Discuss the change from a victim justice system to a criminal justice system.
- Outline the early interest in victim typologies.
- Account for the attention paid to victim precipitation.
- Summarize what Wolfgang found out about homicide victims.
- Report on Amir's victim precipitation study.
- Evaluate the reaction to Amir's victim precipitation study.
- Critique the shortcomings that underlie victim precipitation.
- List the areas that fall under "general victimology."
- Provide an overview of the broad topics victimologists study.
- Talk about the victim movement and tell how it increased public interest in crime victims.

Table of Contents

List of Figures *xiii*

List of Tables *xvii*

Chapter 1

The Scope of Victimology **1**

Introduction 1

The Victim Throughout History 1

The Reemergence of the Victim 3

 The Work of Hans von Hentig: *The Criminal and His Victim* 4

 The Work of Benjamin Mendelsohn: Further Reflections 6

 The Work of Stephen Schafer: *The Victim and His Criminal* 8

 Other Scholarly Efforts 9

Empirical Studies of Victim Precipitation 9

 The Work of Marvin E. Wolfgang: *Patterns in Criminal Homicide* 9

 The Work of Menachem Amir: *Patterns in Forcible Rape* 10

 Criticisms and Reactions 11

A New Approach: General Victimology 13

Critical Victimology 16

The Victim Movement 17

 The Women's Movement 17

 Children's Rights 18

 The Growing Crime Problem 18

 Victim Compensation 19

 Legal Reforms 19

 Other Factors 20

Summary and Overview of This Book 21

Key Terms 23

Chapter 2

Gauging the Extent of Criminal Victimization **25**

Introduction 25

The Uniform Crime Reports 26

Statistics from the UCR 27

Victimization Surveys	30
First-Generation Victim Surveys	31
The NORC Survey	31
Some Methodological Considerations	32
Second-Generation Victim Surveys	34
Recall Problems	34
The San Jose-Dayton Surveys	35
Third-Generation Victim Surveys	36
The National Crime Survey	36
The Business Victimization Survey	37
City Surveys	38
Fourth-Generation Victim Surveys	38
Statistics from the NCVS	43
Repeat Victimization	48
Summary	51
Key Terms	51

Chapter 3

The Costs of Being a Victim

53

Introduction	53
The Consequences of Victimization	54
The First Insult: Criminal Victimization	56
The Second Insult: System Participation	60
Prosecutorial-Based Victim-Witness Projects	63
Project Development	65
Project Performance	69
Project Evaluation	70
Beyond the Prosecutor's Office	72
Dissenting Voices	76
Summary	79
Key Terms	79

Chapter 4

Remedying the Plight of Victims

81

Introduction	81
Offender Restitution	82
The Rationale for Restitution	83
Types of Restitution	84
Evaluating the Impact of Restitution	85
Problems and Concerns with Restitution	87
Civil Litigation	89
Private Insurance	93
Victim Compensation	93
Philosophical Bases	95
Compensable Acts	96
Eligibility Restrictions	97
Awards	98

Funding	99
Reporting Crime and Applying for Compensation	100
Does Victim Compensation Work?	101
Macro-Level Effects	102
Micro-Level Effects	103
Problems and Concerns with Compensation	104
Summary	106
Key Terms	106

Chapter 5

Sexual Assault **109**

Introduction	109
Defining Sexual Assault	110
Spousal Rape	111
Date or Acquaintance Rape	112
Measuring the Extent of Rape	113
UCR Information	113
NCVS Information	113
Comparing the UCR with the NCVS Over Time	114
Other Information on Sexual Assault Levels	118
More Recent Efforts	119
The National College Women Sexual Victimization Study	119
The National Violence Against Women Survey	120
Theories of Sexual Assault	121
Intraindividual Explanations	121
Sociocultural Explanations	122
Typological Efforts	123
A Model of Sexual Assault	124
Summary	125
The Aftermath of Rape	126
Crisis Reaction	126
The Crisis Reaction Repair Cycle	127
Impact	127
Recoil	128
Reorganization	129
Legal Reforms	130
Compulsory AIDS Testing	130
Consent and Corroboration	132
Shield Provisions	134
Sex Offender Registration	135
The Impact of Legal Reform	138
Macro-Level Effects	138
Micro-Level Effects	139
Summary	140

Responding to Sexual Assault Victims	140
The Police	141
The Hospital	142
Medical Examination	142
Forensic Examination	144
The Prosecutor	145
Summary	147
Key Terms	147

Chapter 6

Spouse Abuse

149

Introduction	149
A Brief History of Spousal Violence	150
The Extent of Spousal Violence	152
Theories of Spouse Abuse	156
Intraindividual Explanations	156
Sociocultural Explanations (Patriarchy)	158
The Social Learning Approach: Learned Helplessness	159
The Cycle of Violence	159
Police Intervention	161
The Arrest Option	162
Nonarrest Options	164
The Minneapolis Experiment	165
Reaction to the Minneapolis Experiment	167
Agency Directives	167
Legislative Reform	170
Academic Concerns	171
The Minneapolis Experiment Replications	173
Prosecutorial and Judicial Action	175
Coordinating System Approaches	181
More Recent Responses	183
Stalking Laws	183
The Lautenberg Amendment	186
Court-Ordered Mandatory Counseling	187
Executive Clemency	190
National Telephone Hotline	192
Fatality Review Systems	194
Summary	195
Key Terms	196

Chapter 7

Child Maltreatment

199

Introduction	199
The Discovery of Child Maltreatment	199
Understanding the Discovery of Child Maltreatment	201
A Survey of Child Maltreatment Laws	202
Statutory Definitions	203
The Reporter	205

The Report	206
The Central Register	208
Some Trouble Spots	209
The Incidence of Child Maltreatment	210
Some Characteristics of Maltreated Children	213
Theories of Child Maltreatment	214
Intraindividual Explanations	214
Sociocultural Explanations	215
The Social Learning Approach	216
Some Coping Strategies	218
Health Screening	218
Education	220
Parents Anonymous	220
Counseling	222
Sex Offender Laws	222
Law Enforcement	224
Legal Reform	227
Summary	231
Key Terms	231

Chapter 8

Elder Abuse

233

Introduction	233
Defining the Elderly	234
Criminal Victimization of the Elderly	234
Fear of Crime	236
Explaining the Fear-Crime Paradox	237
Measuring Fear	237
Risk	238
Vulnerability	239
Elder Abuse and Neglect	241
The Re-Emergence of Interest in Elder Abuse	241
Demographic Change	241
Vicarious Victimization	242
Political Action	243
Social Consciousness	243
Defining the Problem	244
The Incidence of Elder Maltreatment	246
Some Characteristics of Victims and Offenders	249
Institutional Abuse	251
Theories of Elder Abuse and Neglect	253
Intraindividual Explanations	253
Situational Aspects	254
Symbolic Interactionism	255
Social Exchange	255
Social Attitudes	256

Responding to Elder Abuse and Neglect	257
Mandatory Reporting	257
Social Service Provision	259
Summary	260
Key Terms	261

Chapter 9

Homicide

263

Introduction	263
The Extent of Homicide Victimization	264
Theories of Homicide Victimization	271
Social Interactionism	271
Homicide as a Situated Transaction	272
The Routine Activities/Lifestyle Model	273
Mass Media Influences	275
The “Regional Culture of Violence” Thesis	277
Challenges to the “Regional Culture of Violence” Thesis	278
Cultural Challenges	279
Regional Challenges	279
Medical Resources as an Emerging Theoretical Dimension	280
Conceptual Obstacles	280
The Impact of Medical Resources	281
Empirical Evidence	282
Some Remaining Issues	283
Survivors of Homicide Victimization	285
Death Notification	285
The Bereavement Process	287
Summary	290
Key Terms	291

Chapter 10

Victimization at Work and School

293

Introduction	293
Victimization at Work	294
Defining Workplace Victimization	294
The Extent of Workplace Victimization	295
Explanations and Causes of Workplace Victimization	300
Intervention and Prevention	302
Responses to Workplace Victimization	305
Victimization at School	307
Defining School Victimization	307
The Extent of School Victimization	308
Individual-Level Victimization	308
School-Level Victimization	310
Responses to School Victimization	312
Explanations and Causes of School Victimization	314
Addressing School Victimization	316

Sexual Harassment	318
The Extent of Sexual Harassment	320
Responses to Sexual Harassment	321
Summary	324
Key Terms	325
 <i>Chapter 11</i>	
Victim Rights	327
Introduction	327
Victim Rights Amendment	328
Federal Constitutional Reform	328
State Constitutional Reform	331
Rekindling Federal Constitutional Reform	333
Victim Rights Legislation	336
Federal Legislative Reform	337
State Legislative Reform	342
The Effect of Victim Rights Legislation	346
Victim Impact Statements	346
The Effect of Victim Impact Statements	347
Federal Supreme Court Rulings	348
Informal Victim Participation	350
Background	350
Dispute Resolution Programs	351
Restorative Justice	353
Some Closing Thoughts	355
Summary	357
Key Terms	358
 References	359
 Subject Index	407
 Author Index	415

List of Figures

1.1.	Hans von Hentig's Victim Typology	5
1.2	The Vocabulary of Victimology	7
1.3	Schafer's Victim Precipitation Typology	8
1.4	The Precipitation Grid Outlining the Relative Responsibility of Both Victim and Offender	13
1.5	General Model of the Areas of Research and Application in the Field of Victimology	15
1.6	Selected Portions of the United Nations Declaration Regarding Victims of Crime	20
1.7	Selected Journals Devoted to Victim Issues	21
1.8	Selected Internet Sites Dealing with General Victim Issues	23
2.1	Violent Index Crime Rates, UCR, 1979-1998	28
2.2	Property Index Crime Rates, UCR, 1979-1998	29
2.3	Objectives and Intended Uses for the NCVS	39
2.4	Household Screen Questions from the National Crime Victimization Survey	39
2.5	Individual Screen Questions from the National Crime Victimization Survey	40
2.6	Selected National Crime Victimization Survey Redesign Features	42
2.7	Personal Victimization Rates, NCVS, 1993-1998	46
2.8	Household Victimization Rates, NCVS, 1993-1998	46
2.9	Percent Victimizations Reported to the Police, NCVS, 1998	47
2.10	A Comparison of 1998 UCR and NCVS Crime Rates (per 100,000)	48
2.11	Selected Internet Sites Dealing with Victimization Statistics	51
3.1	List of Costs Associated with Crime	57
3.2	List of Costs Associated with Society's Response to Crime	58
3.3	Time Line from One Criminal Case	61
3.4	Selected Recommendations for Prosecutors	66
3.5	Policies, Protocols, and Procedures for a Comprehensive Law Enforcement Response to Victims of Crime	72
3.6	Selected Recommendations for the Judiciary	74
3.7	Selected Recommendations for Corrections	75
3.8	Victim Advocate: An Emerging Profession?	77
3.9	Selected Internet Sites Dealing with Victim/Witness Services	78
4.1	Competing Rationales for Restitution	83
4.2	Types of Restitution	84
4.3	Selected Recommendations for Restitution Programs	89
4.4	Possible Defendant Resources to Consider When Recovering a Civil Judgment	91
4.5	Selected Recommendations for Civil Litigation	92

4.6	Landmarks in Crime Victim Compensation	94
4.7	Crime Victims Fund Deposits	95
4.8	The Revised New York "Son of Sam" Provisions	101
4.9	Selected Internet Sites Dealing with the Financial Plight of Victims	105
5.1	An Example of a Sexual Battery Statute Containing Provisions Regarding Aggravating Circumstances	111
5.2	NCVS and UCR Rape Rates, 1973-1999	116
5.3	The Lundberg-Love and Geffner Model	125
5.4	Criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder	129
5.5	The "Rape" of Mr. Smith	132
5.6	Polygraph Tests Used to Corroborate Victim Allegations	134
5.7	Excerpts from Ohio's Sexual Predator Law	137
5.8	Ten Stages in a Typical Sexual Battery Investigation	141
5.9	Recommendations from the U.S. Attorney General's Office to Medical Care Providers Concerning Victims of Crime	143
5.10	Pitfalls to Avoid When Managing the Prosecution of Sexual Assault Cases	146
5.11	Selected Internet Sites Dealing with Sexual Assault	146
6.1	The Straus Conflict Tactics Scale Used to Measure Self-Reported Family Violence	152
6.2	Rate of Violence by an Intimate Partner, by Gender, 1993-1998	155
6.3	The Violence Wheel	162
6.4	An Example of Police Policy Guidelines Regarding Domestic Violence	169
6.5	How Florida Uses Marriage Fees to Combat the Problem of Spouse Abuse	172
6.6	Sherman's Recommendations for "Smart Policing"	175
6.7	Petition for an Injunction for Protection against Domestic Violence	178
6.8	An Example of a Prosecutor's Domestic Violence Guidelines Which Contain a "No-Drop" Clause	180
6.9	The Model Antistalking Code	184
6.10	The Castle Doctrine	191
6.11	The National Domestic Violence Hotline Questionnaire for Identifying Abuse	193
6.12	Selected Internet Sites Dealing with Spouse Abuse	195
7.1	Main Types of Child Maltreatment	204
7.2	Other Forms of Child Maltreatment	205
7.3	The Basis for Making a Child Maltreatment Report	206
7.4	Victimization by Maltreatment Type, 1995-1999	211
7.5	Selected Child Maltreatment Statistics, 1999	212
7.6	Who is Committing These Acts?	214
7.7	The Hawai'i Healthy Start Program	219
7.8	The Parents Anonymous Philosophy	221
7.9	Profile of Abusive or Neglectful Parents	226
7.10	Profile of Abused or Neglected Children	227

7.11	U.S. Attorney General's Task Force Recommendations for Prosecutors and Judges in Child Abuse Cases	228
7.12	An Example of a Statute Allowing Videotaping of Testimony in Child Sexual Abuse Cases	229
7.13	Selected Internet Sites Dealing with Child Maltreatment	230
8.1	Victimization by Age Group, 1998	235
8.2	Projected Population Change, 1995-2050	242
8.3	Forms of Elder Abuse and Neglect	245
8.4	Reports of Domestic Elder Abuse, 1986-1996	248
8.5	Mandatory Reporting Provisions for Elder Abuse in Ohio and Florida	252
8.6	Selected Internet Sites Dealing with Elder Abuse	260
9.1	A Profile of Juvenile Violence in America	266
9.2	Objectives for the Proposed Firearm Fatality Reporting System	269
9.3	An Example of a Law Enforcement Agency Policy Regarding Death Notification Procedures	286
9.4	Selected Internet Sites Dealing with Homicide	290
10.1	Suggested Preventive Measures for Reducing Occupational Homicide	303
10.2	OSHA Recommended Protection Measures for Taxi Drivers	304
10.3	Warning Signs of Potential Violence	315
10.4	Examples of Recommended Responses After a Crisis Occurs in a School	318
10.5	The EEOC Definition of Sexual Harassment	320
10.6	Steps for Stopping Sexual Harassment on the Job	322
10.7	Selected Internet Sites Dealing with Victimization and Harassment at Work and School	324
11.1	Proposed Change to the Sixth Amendment of the United States Constitution	329
11.2	States with Victim Rights Constitutional Provisions as of June, 2001	332
11.3	The Wisconsin Victims' Rights Constitutional Amendment	332
11.4	Proposed Victim Rights Amendment to the United States Constitution	334
11.5	Senate Joint Resolution 3, A Proposed Amendment to the Constitution of the United States to Protect the Rights of Crime Victims	335
11.6	The Revised Kyle/Feinstein Victims' Rights Amendment	337
11.7	Federal Regulations Regarding Services to Victims	339
11.8	Federal Crime Victims' Bill of Rights	341
11.9	The Clarification Act of 1997	342
11.10	Selected Victim Rights in Wisconsin	343
11.11	Selected Internet Sites Dealing with Victim Legal Issues	357

List of Tables

2.1	National Index Offenses, UCR, 1998	28
2.2	Distribution of Relationships in Violent Crimes, 1998	30
2.3	Comparison of NORC Victimization Rates with UCR Rates	32
2.4	National Victimization Levels, NCVS, 1998	44
2.5	Personal Victimization Rates by Selected Characteristics, NCVS, 1998	45
3.1	Percent of Reasons for Not Reporting Crime to the Police, NCVS, 1998	54
3.2	Annual Losses Due to Crime During 1987-1990, in Millions, Expressed in 1993 Dollars	59
3.3	Types of Victim Services Prosecutors' Offices are Required to Provide	69
5.1	Selected Characteristics of Rape/Sexual Assault Victimization, NCVS, 2000	115
8.1	National Estimates of Abuse, Neglect, and Self-Neglect of Persons Age 60+	247
8.2	Types of Elder Maltreatment Substantiated by Adult Protective Services Agencies	247
8.3	Characteristics of Elder Abuse Victims (percents)	250
8.4	Characteristics of Elder Abuse Offenders (percents)	250
9.1	Age Distribution of U.S. Murder Victims, 1999	265
9.2	Weapon Use in U.S. Homicides, 1999	267
9.3	1997 Lifetime Murder Victimization Rates by Race and Sex for the United States	268
9.4	Murder Circumstances by Victim-Offender Relationship, 1999	271
10.1	Victimization at Work or On Duty	296
10.2	Occupations of Victims of Nonfatal Workplace Violence, 1992-1996	297
10.3	Workplaces with the Highest Rates of Occupational Homicide	299
10.4	Percent Students Reporting Victimization at School by Selected Characteristics	309
10.5	Criminal Incidents Reported to the Police by Public Schools, 1996-1997	311
10.6	Percentage of Students Avoiding Certain Locations at School	313
10.7	Sexual Harassment Charges, 1995-2000	321

1

The Scope of Victimology

Introduction

Something not very funny happened on the way to a formal system of justice. The victim got left out. As strange as it may sound, the bulk of history has seen crime victims become further removed as an integral part of dealing with criminals. Fortunately, this trend is beginning to reverse itself. Recent years have seen an increased interest in the plight of crime victims and a movement toward reintegrating the victim into the criminal justice system. This chapter will look at the role of the victim throughout history and will trace the elimination of the victim from social processing of criminal acts. We will see how victimology emerged and we will investigate the resurgence of interest in the victim.

The Victim Throughout History

Most people take the existence of the formal criminal justice system for granted. They do not realize that this method of handling deviant activity has not been the norm throughout history. Indeed, the modern version of criminal justice is a relatively new phenomenon. In days gone by, responsibility for dealing with offenders fell to the victim and the victim's kin. There were no "authorities" to turn to for help

in “enforcing the law.” Victims were expected to fend for themselves, and society acceded to this arrangement.

This state of affairs was not outlined in any set of laws or legal code. With rare exceptions, written laws did not exist. Codes of behavior reflected prevailing social norms. Society recognized murder and other serious affronts as *mala in se* (totally unacceptable behavior). However, it was up to victims or their survivors to decide what action to take against the offender. Victims who wished to respond to offenses could not turn to judges for assistance or to jails for punishment. These institutions did not exist yet. Instead, victims had to take matters into their own hands.

This depiction does not imply there were no provisions for victims to follow. Society recognized a basic system of retribution and restitution for offenders. In simplest terms, *retribution* meant the offender would suffer in proportion to the degree of harm caused by his or her actions. Often times, retribution took the form of *restitution*, or making payment in an amount sufficient to render the victim whole again. If the offender was unable to make restitution, his or her kin were forced to assume the liability.

This response system emphasized the principle known as *lex talionis*—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Punishment was commensurate with the harm inflicted upon the victim. Perhaps the most important feature of this system was that victims and their relatives handled the problem and were the beneficiaries of any payments. This arrangement was truly a “victim justice system.”

This basic system of dealing with offensive behavior found its way into early codified laws. The Law of Moses, the Code of Hammurabi (2200 B.C.), and Roman law all entailed strong elements of individual responsibility for harms committed against others. Restitution and retribution were specific ingredients in many of these early codes. Part of the rationale behind this response was to deter such behavior in the future.

The major goal of *deterrence* is to prevent future transgressions. The thinking is that the lack of any enrichment or gain from criminal activity would make these acts unattractive. Retribution and restitution attempt to reestablish the status quo that existed before the initial action of the offender. Thus, removing financial incentives would make it not profitable to commit crimes.

This basic system of dealing with offensive behavior remained intact throughout the Middle Ages. Eventually, though, it fell into disuse. Two factors signaled the end of this victim justice system. The first change was the move by feudal barons to lay a claim to any compensation offenders paid their victims (Schafer, 1968). These rulers saw this money as a way to increase their own riches. The barons accomplished this goal by redefining criminal acts as violations against the