



WHAT WORKS IN PUBLIC SAFETY

An executive visioning event:
Rethinking the “offender” and “victim” overlap

Briefing and background materials for discussion on the overlap*

Widom, Cathy Spatz. 1989. “[The Cycle of Violence](#).” *Science* 244(4901):160-66.

In this important piece that provides early empirical evidence on the cycle of violence, Widom explores the links between child abuse and neglect and later violent criminal behavior. In her study, she followed a cohort of more than 900 people who were victims of child abuse in the 1960s and 1970s and found that “early childhood victimization has demonstrable long-term consequences for delinquency, adult criminality, and violent criminal behavior.” Notably, however, most children who experienced abuse and neglect did not engage in criminal activity as adults. This research laid the foundation for future research on the victim-offender overlap.

Key takeaways include:

- Children who have experienced abuse and neglect are at greater risk of engaging in delinquent, criminal, and/or violent behavior.
- The intergenerational transmission of violence is not inevitable. In comparison to controls, the children who were abused and neglected had more arrests as a juvenile (26 versus 17 percent), more arrests as an adult (29 versus 21 percent), and more arrests for any violent offense (11 versus 8 percent). In other words, 74 percent of abuse and neglect victims did not have juvenile offenses, 71 percent did not have arrests as an adult, and 89 percent did not have an arrest for a violent criminal act.

*Research and articles generously provided by staff at the Columbia University Justice Lab

DeLong, Caitlyn and Jessica Reichert. 2019. [The Victim-offender Overlap: Examining The Relationship Between Victimization And Offending](#). Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority Center For Justice Research And Evaluation.

This article considers the relationship between victimization and offending by outlining leading theoretical explanations for the victim-offender overlap. Additionally, the article includes recommendations for practitioners to address violent crime.

Key takeaways include:

- While crime victims do not always become offenders, most offenders have been victims.
- There are several theoretical frameworks to explain the victim-offender overlap including the intergenerational transmission of violence theory, which posits that violent behaviors are passed down through generations through observation.
- Confirmed risk factors for victimization include: impaired decision making, common characteristics and behaviors between victims and offenders, as well as learned violence from experiences.

Western, Bruce. 2018. [Violent offenders, often victims themselves, need more compassion and less punishment](#). USA Today.

This article, drawing from the 2012 Boston reentry study, explains how people deemed “violent offenders” have often experienced past victimization. It also argues that criminal justice policy should be based on the contextual nature of violence, rather than on stoking the public’s fear of potential victimization.

Key takeaways include:

- Violence is a characteristic of places, not people. Violence may emerge in contexts that experience poverty, disorder, and chaos -- these contexts could include poor neighborhoods, prisons, or jails.
- Victimization must be taken seriously, and responses should directly attend to the needs of people who have been hurt. Such a process prioritizes accountability.
- Justice is found in addressing the circumstances of poverty rather than in enacting punishment on people.

Bersani, Bianca E., John H. Laub, and Bruce Western. 2019. [Thinking About Emerging Adults and Violent Crime](#). Emerging Adult Justice Learning Community.

This brief summarizes research on “violent criminal behavior” over someone’s lifespan, with a focus on “emerging adults” who are between the ages of 18 and 25 years old. It also outlines the consequences of living with violence and provides policy recommendations for responding to violent crime.

Key takeaways include:

- Research: violent offenses are rare events, violent behavior declines with age, desistance from violent crime is the norm, the correlates of violent crime are not distinctive, most perpetrators of violence have a history of violent victimization, violent behavior is spatially concentrated, and violence is a broad heterogeneous category.
- Consequences of living with violence: exposure to violence has wide-ranging potential consequences. It is linked to challenges in school and work, cognitive delays, experiencing poor physical and mental health, future victimization, and future offending.
- Policy recommendations: strengthen social bonds, adopt a victim- and trauma-informed response, and invest in communities.

Western, Bruce et al. 2018. [Reconsidering the Violent Offender](#). The Square One Project

This paper outlines the negative consequences of the “violent offender” label. The section “The Violent Offender Label Undermines Parsimony” strongly considers the victim-offender overlap.

Key takeaways include:

- Violence is contextual. People who have perpetrated violence have often been immersed in violent contexts and thus have been exposed to violence as victims and witnesses.
- Settings of social life often predict violence.
- People who harm others have often been victimized themselves.

Beckley et, al. 2018. [The Developmental Nature of the Victim-Offender Overlap](#). The National Institutes of Health

This research article is designed to determine the developmental nature of the victim-offender overlap.

Key takeaways include:

- The victim-offender overlap is, at least partially, developmental in nature and predictable from personal childhood characteristics and an accumulation of many adverse childhood experiences (Beckley et al).

Western, Bruce. 2016. [The Rehabilitation Paradox](#). The New Yorker

This article considers the human frailty under conditions of poverty that puts people at risk of becoming, simultaneously, the perpetrators and victims of violence. While there is not a significant section dedicated to the victim-offender overlap, the article considers several social determinants of health, experienced by both perpetrators and victims of violence, that contribute to the system of mass incarceration.

Key takeaways include:

- People who go to prison are much more likely to have problems with addiction, mental illness, and physical disability.
- 2/3rds of respondents suffered from chronic conditions which left them extremely vulnerable

Articles on Crime Survivors/Victims

Alliance for Safety and Justice. 2018. [Crime Survivors Speak: The First-Ever National Survey of Victims' on Safety and Justice](#)

This report includes a section entitled, “Who are the crime victims?” which includes a synopsis on victimization nationally, as well as specific details in trends in subsections of the population.

Key takeaways include:

- The strongest predictor of victimization is having been a victim of crime.
- 1 in 4 people have been victims of crime in the last ten years.
- The following populations are more likely to experience crime; people of color, young people, people in low-income communities.

Leigh, Courtney and Elizabeth Pelletier. 2016. [What do victims want from criminal justice reform?](#) The Urban Institute

This article discusses the failures of the criminal justice system for victims of crime based on the findings of the National Survey of Victims’ Views and the Alliance for Safety and Justice. It argues that there is a gap in what crime victims want versus what the justice system provides. Based on the survey results, the authors assert that crime victims prefer a justice system that centers prevention and rehabilitation over a punitive justice system.

Key takeaways include:

- More than half of crime victims (over 2.5 million people), including survivors of violent crime, prefer a system that invested more resources in preventive and rehabilitative programs.
- 6 in 10 victims of crimes want prosecutors to consider their input.
- Victims acknowledge that accountability extends beyond prison in programs such as rehabilitation, mental health treatment, drug treatment, community supervision, and community service.