

Overview of crime victimisation in South Africa

There is no doubt that crime victimisation is an unnerving and often tragic fact of life in South Africa. The 2003 Victims of Crime Survey conducted by the Institute for Security Studies (which focused on respondents aged 16 and over) indicated that 23 per cent of South Africans were victims of crime between September 2002 and August 2003 (Burton et al 2004). The authors reported that this represented a reduction of 8 per cent from the previous survey conducted in 1998. Box 1 below summarises some of the central findings of this survey with regard to the incidence of crime.

Box 1: Selected findings from the 2003 Victims of Crime Survey

- 22,9% of South Africans were victims of crime during the period under review
- Housebreaking was the most common crime, reported by 7,5% of respondents
- 5,6% reported being asked by a government official for a bribe
- 4,7% reported theft of personal property
- 2,5% reported theft out of motor vehicle
- 2,5% reported theft of livestock
- 2,2% reported assault
- 2% reported robbery
- Less than 1% reported that they had been victims of sexual assault or car hijacking or that a member of their family had been murdered

Source: Burton et al 2004.

The Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention recently conducted a national study on the victimisation of children and youth (aged between 12 and 22), relating to the 12-month period preceding the study. The central findings are presented in Box 2.

Box 2: Selected findings of the 2005 National Youth Victimization Study

- 41,5% (4,3 million) were victims of crime and violence

- 26,6% of youth reported experiencing violent crime
- 25,6% of youth reported experiencing property crime
- 46,1% of males and 36,1% of females reported being the victims of crime
- 16,3% (or one in five) have reported being threatened, were scared, or actually hurt at school
- 21,8% reported witnessing violence in the home
- 68,6% reported witnessing violence or injury in their community
- Children between 12-14; and 18-20 were mostly likely to be victimised

Source: Leoschut and Burton 2006.

The statistics above confirm that South Africans do indeed experience high levels of criminal victimisation, and illustrate the exceptionally high levels of victimisation experienced and witnessed by children and youth.

In Britain, it has been noted that notwithstanding significant developments in victim policy and practice in that country, that 'these provisions do nothing to help 96 per cent of victims. These are the people whose offenders are not detected and whose cases are not processed through the criminal justice system' (Victim Support 2002). The British organisation, Victim Support (2002), notes that according to government statistics, half of the victims of crime do not report crimes, with only 3 per cent of crimes ever reaching the criminal justice process.

This reporting pattern was also noted in South Africa, where the first national victimisation survey conducted in 1998 indicated that only 50 per cent of all crimes were reported to the South African Police Service (SAPS) (Progetti 2005). The comparable 2003 national victimisation survey noted increased reporting rates in relation to some crime types, with reporting rates ranging between 29 per cent for robbery to 97 per cent for car theft (Burton et al 2004). The more recent youth victimisation survey noted the concerning trend that only one out of every ten respondents reported assault to the police (Leoschut and Burton 2006).

The needs of crime victims

Describing the needs of crime victims accurately is a tricky task. Crime is a broad and nebulous concept, relating to a wide range of acts, all of which may have different effects on the victim and result in different needs. Zehr (1990) characterises the impact of crime as follows:

Why is crime so devastating, so hard to recover from? The reason is that crime is in essence a violation: a violation of the self, a desecration of who we are, of what we believe in, of our private space. Crime is devastating because it upsets two fundamental assumptions on which we base our lives; our belief that the world is an orderly, meaningful place, and our belief in personal autonomy. Both assumptions are essential for wholeness.

It is also true that victims are unique individuals and may experience the same offence differently, and therefore express different needs in relation to the very same offence (Oettinger 2003). In addition, a number of other factors influence the ways in which people experience victimisation. These include levels of isolation, access to resources, levels of vulnerability and previous experience of crime (Zedner 1997).

Victimisation where there are high levels of poverty warrants specific mention. Zedner (1997:592) notes that isolated people are not only more fearful of crime, but are likely to suffer higher levels of stress when victimised. She also states:

Criminal damage, theft and burglary are all likely to place heavier burdens on those with fewer financial resources, particularly because these are the very groups least likely to be insured against such loss. Generalized feelings of vulnerability amongst groups such as women, ethnic minorities, and the elderly also appear to magnify the impact of crime. Lack of ability to resist or to defend oneself against an attacker may amplify pre-existing feelings of vulnerability.

Overall, then, this suggests that need is not directly determined by the nature of the crime, but relates to a range of factors not least of which is the subjective experience of victimisation by the specific victim involved (Zedner 1997).

Research indicates that the psychological reactions to events that can cause stress and trauma, such as that relating to criminal victimisation, can range from mild to severe. Mild reactions to these events may be evidenced by symptoms that include 'minor sleep disturbances, irritability, worry, interpersonal strain, attention lapses and the exacerbation of prior health problems' (Markesteyn 1992). Markesteyn (1992) states that symptoms associated with severe psychological effects are characteristic of post traumatic stress disorder and include 'persistent heightened arousal, psychic numbing, and recurring thoughts about the stressor'. He notes that repeated victimisation seems to compound the impact of the crime with every subsequent occurrence.

While the devastating effects of crimes related to sexual violence have been the subject of a fair amount of study, the psychological and other effects on victims of non-sexual but otherwise serious criminal offences (such as robbery, murder, and kidnapping)

have received far less attention. Markesteyn (1992:8) argues that there is no qualitative difference between the psychological effects of different kinds of crime on victims, but that difference is to be found in the degree to which victims may feel the effects:

The psychological effects of sexual assault, physical assault, robbery, burglary, and kidnapping vary in intensity, but share many features. Although victims of sexual assault suffer greater distress than victims of robbery and burglary, the nature of their psychological distress is qualitatively similar.

British organisation Victim Support (2002:1) notes:

A fundamental principle is that crime affects the whole person. Health and quality of life can suffer; money is needed to pay for the consequences, both direct and indirect; and support is needed by most people to cope with the often overwhelming emotions that are a natural consequence of crime.

Based on its vast experience in Britain, Victim Support (2002:5) concludes that 'Measures to help victims of crime must be centred on their needs'.

A number of efforts have been made to enumerate and describe the central needs that emerge from crime victimisation. Based on the United Nations Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power (1985), as well as experiences from around the world, the following themes emerge when considering the needs of crime victims.

The need for access to justice and fair treatment

While it has been argued that access to justice and fair treatment is obvious and should be a given (Fattah undated), this issue is regularly noted by victim advocates as a need, due to the fact that victims are often not taken seriously, and have their needs subordinated to the criminal justice process (which prioritises the offender and the administration of justice). This is essentially about the need to be treated with dignity and respect, which also relates to other needs discussed below.

The need for contact with the criminal justice system

This need relates to victims' being recognised as having a legitimate interest in the process and outcome of criminal justice, and to feel that justice will be done (Zehr 1990). This also embodies victims' ability to participate in the justice process, regardless of their circumstances (International Association of Chiefs of Police 1999). While this need is often interpreted as relating to the giving and receiving of information about the criminal justice process, it requires much more and consists of the requirement to be recognised as a legitimate participant in the process.

The need for safety

The need for safety covers a broad range of concerns. It relates, firstly, to the period directly after the crime event and the victim's need to feel safe and protected from further harm. Secondly, it relates to the need for safety within the context of the criminal justice process, where the victim may be acting as a witness. This relates to feeling safe from harassment and intimidation by the perpetrator as well as safety from further

victimisation by the systems and procedures of the criminal justice system itself (International Association of Chiefs of Police 1999). A third dimension of this need relates to the need for a 'restored sense of safety and well-being' (International Association of Chiefs of Police 1999), where the victim needs to be assured that s/he would not be revictimised.

The need for information

The need for range of different information arises out of victimisation, and this is the need most often expressed by victims, irrespective of the nature of the crime (Pretorius and Louw 2005). Victims require information about, among other things, progress relating to their case (i.e. whether the offender has been arrested, whether the offender had been granted bail, etc.), how the criminal justice system works, what will be expected of them by the criminal justice process and how and where they may access assistance (International Association of Chiefs of Police 1999). One of the most urgent, yet often overlooked, information needs articulated by victims is the need to make sense of the crime event and understand the reasons for their victimisation (Zehr 1990).

The need for assistance and services

A wide range of needs relate to assistance and services:

- Victims require practical assistance in the direct aftermath of the crime. Beyond information, this could include medical treatment, financial assistance, transport, and other practical assistance, such as the repair of broken windows or locks after a burglary.
- Victims may require other support (beyond information) to enable them to participate in the justice process, for example, emotional support (International Association of Chiefs of Police 1999).
- Services may be needed to assist victims to recover from the trauma resulting from the crime event (International Association of Chiefs of Police 1999). The services and assistance required at this level may range from limited immediate counselling to longer term in-depth psychological intervention. Such services may relate to, for example, assistance with child care after a rape or shelter away from home after an incident of domestic violence.

The need for continuity

It has been noted that victims need the safety that results from consistency in approaches and methods across the different agencies in the criminal justice process. This also relates to continuity in language that is used, as well as continuity of support through all the phases of the justice process (International Association of Chiefs of Police 1999).

The need to have a voice

This need relates to much more than just participation in the criminal justice process as noted above. Victims have a need to be heard, specifically about the harm that has

been done to them. Zehr (1990:28) states, 'they need opportunities to speak the truth of what happened to them, including their suffering'. In addition, victims also have a need to speak about what is happening with their individual case and want opportunities to influence system-wide policies and practices (International Association of Chiefs of Police 1999).

The need for validation and acknowledgement

Victims often experience unexpected reactions to crime, even in relation to non-violent crimes such as burglary (Pretorius and Louw 2005). The need for acknowledgement relates to victims' need to be assured that their reactions and feelings are normal under the circumstances (Pretorius and Louw 2005). This relates to the victim's need for others to understand what s/he went through and to acknowledge the full complexity of the impact of the crime on him/her (Skelton 2006). Zehr (1990) argues that victims need to be both heard and affirmed.

The need for restitution, redress and apology

Victims wish to be compensated in some way for the harm caused to them, and this relates to both to restitution that may be made by offenders as well as compensation that may be provided by the state. This need relates to payment for the harm or loss suffered, the reimbursement of expenses incurred as a result of victimisation, but also to symbolic acts of restitution and apology (Zehr 1990).