



How Addressing Victimization Can Help Reduce Violence

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Research supports the idea behind the saying, “Hurt people, hurt people.” Although precise percentages are unknown, people who have experienced some form of victimization – which is cruel or unjust treatment by others – are significantly more likely to become offenders. As the adage implies, victimization is a predictor of future violence and other types of offending. The relationship between victimization holds whether the victimization is personally experienced, witnessed, or vicarious – meaning a person hears about someone else’s victimization.

This victim-offender overlap is one of the most consistent and enduring findings in research on crime and criminal behavior. To effectively reduce violence, the victimization of offenders themselves must be addressed. Policymakers, social and human service providers, civic leaders, and educators all play roles in accomplishing this task. Prevention of childhood victimization should be primary, and when victimization does occur, it should be addressed quickly and with resources appropriate for the particular victim’s experience. Support also should be offered to victims over the long term – since the trauma of victimization can persist far beyond the original event.

Current Justice Systems Practices and Impact

Unfortunately, current justice practices, including probation, incarceration, fines and fees, and community service, do not adequately address the victimization histories of offenders. Regardless of how one believes offenders deserve to be treated, most offenders do not end up incarcerated, and most of those who are locked up eventually return to society. To better ensure public safety, those brought into justice system as juveniles or adults should receive the support and resources they need to return to society as law-abiding, productive citizens. To make this possible, offenders should have access to services and programs that address their own histories of victimization. Prioritizing two groups of victim-offenders could lead to measurable violence reduction impact: very young offenders and gang members.

Youth who encounter the juvenile or criminal justice system at 13 or younger are significantly more likely to continue to offend than those who encounter the justice system later in life. Those who enter the justice system at younger ages often have significant histories of personal victimizations and adverse childhood experiences, such as high family conflict and substance abuse. These young offenders also are more likely to become involved in gangs, which increases their likelihood of becoming violent and persistent offenders. Victimization policies and programs should be targeted and tailored for this group.

Relatedly, known gang members should be prioritized for targeted programs and resources. Gang members experience significantly more victimization than their peers and are more likely to carry weapons and commit more crime than other offenders. In many large cities, between 50 to 80 percent of all homicides are committed by gang members. Targeting gang members – and gangs themselves – is critical to overall violence prevention. Addressing the victimization of gang members is part of a formula for success.

At present, labeling an offender as a “youthful offender” or “gang member” all but eliminates the opportunity to utilize knowledge of the victim-offender overlap to prevent reoffending. To be clear, using the past as a way to address the future does not do away with culpability or accountability; rather, it provides an avenue to apply what we know about criminal behavior to justice systems. Smart on crime prevention programs must address offenders’ victimization and policy should mandate that these programs and practices are built on a solid foundation of research evidence.

Ways Forward

Universal application of victimization prevention and intervention policies and programs is needed. The understanding that victimization and associated trauma are part of how individuals act and react should be built into traditional sanctions, such as probation and incarceration. Professionals who interact with offenders as part of justice systems should operate from a trauma-informed approach wherein victimization is a key focus. Some might argue that addressing offenders' experiences of victimization is "soft on crime," but the victimization of offenders must be addressed directly in order to reduce violence in communities.

Research on programs that address victimization are rapidly developing, and cognitive behavioral therapy is one promising approach to affect change. Cognitive behavioral therapy has been shown to reduce violence by helping individuals learn and apply the skills needed to choose non-violent reactions to stress and perceived injustice. This type of therapy has been employed in diverse cultural settings with youth and adults. Policymakers should mandate that young people and gang members who encounter the justice system be given access to cognitive behavioral therapy. Policymakers and other civic leaders should also ensure that as these programs grow, researchers are able to support practitioners in ways that allow further refinement of applications that will increase violence reduction gains.

With all of this in mind, it remains essential that children grow up surrounded by safe families, schools, and communities. Interpersonal violence is the result of many factors, including the interplay of people, environmental factors, and policy. Violence prevention at the individual level should not prevent investments in family, school, and community contexts as part of a comprehensive approach to violence prevention. Prioritizing young offenders and gang members for quality, trauma-informed programming and approaches that directly address victimization will help reduce violence for individuals and for communities.

Read more in Erika Gebo, "An Integrated Public Health and Criminal Justice Approach to Gangs: What Can Research Tell Us?" *Preventive Medicine Reports* 4, (2016): 376-380; Erika Gebo and Christopher J. Sullivan, "A Statewide Comparison of Gang and Non-Gang Youth in Schools," *Youth Violence & Juvenile Justice* 6 (2013):191-208.