



The Role of Emotional Distress in Victim Reports of Crime and Perceptions of Police Response

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As is well known, many crimes are not reported to the police. Why does that happen? Researchers have looked at the kinds of people who are more or less likely to report crimes, and they have also sought to explain different rates of reporting for various kinds of crimes. Now another factor – emotional distress – is getting a closer look. Depending on who is affected and the types of harm caused by different crimes, people can have highly varied emotional responses. The emotions of victims can influence whether they will report crimes and also their perceptions of police responses.

Victims and Crimes

To make sense of variations in crime reports to the police, existing research highlights the impact of victims' individual-level characteristics such as race, sex, and marital status, and also points to the influence of varying degrees of harm caused by different types of crime. Some important findings have emerged from this well-established line of research:

- **Older, white females who are married are the kind of victims most likely to report crimes.** Compared to youth and minorities, older whites are more likely to trust the police and have confidence in their ability to investigate crimes. Lower rates of reporting by youth and minorities happen because these victims have often previously experienced what they perceive to be unfair police enforcement activities, leading them to distrust the police.
- **Police are most likely to be called by victims when serious crimes result in injuries.** When someone is seriously hurt by a perpetrator, he or she usually reports the crime or someone does on their behalf. Such victims need and want medical and psychological help – often more than do victims of minor crimes. In serious crimes, therefore, the police become first responders, present shortly after victims begin to cope with harmful experiences.

The Role of Emotions in Reporting to the Police

Emotions influence the behavior of victims of crime – and also affect the actions of other people around the victims. One behavior that can be affected is whether the victim reports the crime at all. Social psychologists have learned that negative emotions such as fear and anxiety often prompt people to seek help – in ways ranging from talking with loved ones and looking for professional counseling to contacting the police. It is not surprising, therefore, that victims of crime who experience strong emotional reactions – such as anger, depression, fear, and shock – are more likely to report their experience to the police.

Indeed, victims are more likely to contact the police if they experience multiple forms of emotional distress or especially intense responses. That is true regardless of the sex, race, age, or marital status of the crime victim, and regardless of such features of the crime as location, time of day, and the degree of injury inflicted on the victim.

Satisfaction with the Police

If emotional distress makes reports of crimes to the police more likely, does it also influence how victims perceive their treatment by the police? Additional analyses show that emotions do matter – in complex ways.

- **Victims who experience emotional distress are less likely than victims who feel less distress to be satisfied with police actions.** In short, emotionally distressed victims are more likely to reach out to the police for help, but they often feel that the police response falls short of meeting their needs.
- **However, victims who experience emotional distress are more likely than victims in general to find the police response satisfactory if they already have strong confidence in the police.** This finding implies that inspiring general citizen confidence in the police can have a positive effect on the image of the police among people who end up falling victim to emotionally distressing crimes and calling on the police for help.

Take-Away Lessons

Studies by various scholars, including our team as well as other research teams, underline the importance of the emotions surrounding crime episodes and the impact of underlying citizen views about the legitimacy and effectiveness of the police. Citizen views of the criminal justice system are heavily influenced by individuals' prior interactions with police and other professionals and their perceptions of the credibility and fairness of those professionals. When crimes happen, the emotional reactions of victims will influence how likely the victims are to report crimes and how likely they are to feel that the police are helpful. In short, the seriousness of the crime and the social characteristics and emotional reactions of the victim matter, but so do already ingrained citizen attitudes. Citizens who already had confidence in the police are likely to appreciate their responses when they are victimized by crime and call the police.

Given these research findings, police departments and officers can take clear-cut steps to enhance citizen confidence and reassure crime victims.

- **Departments can establish ongoing programs to engage the community.** Citizen review boards boost the trustworthiness of the police by increasing citizen familiarity with police practices and making enforcement activities transparent. In addition, regular dialogues between police and citizens (particularly adolescents) can further understanding of police practices and humanize officers in the eyes of the citizens they are charged to protect.
- **Police training can promote emotionally intelligent responses to crime victims.** When police officers respond to calls by victims who may well be very emotionally distressed, they can improve their interactions with the victims by displaying empathy. Properly trained officers can learn to recognize typical emotional reactions from victims and become more adept at showing they truly care about helping those hurt by crimes recover in mind and body.

Read more in Chad Posick, "**Victimization and Reporting to the Police: The Role of Negative Emotionality.**" *Psychology of Violence* (online-first article, April 2013); and Chad Posick and Christina Policastro, "**Victim Injury, Emotional Distress, and Satisfaction with the Police: Evidence for a Victim-Centered, Emotionally-Based Police Response.**" *Journal of the Institute of Justice & International Studies* 13 (2013).