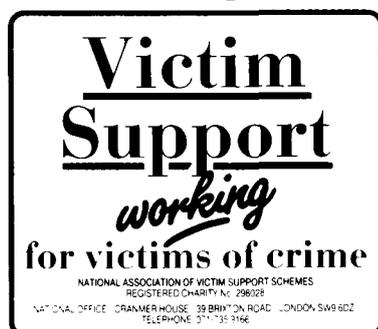


VICTIM SUPPORT

VIOLENCE - The Victim's Viewpoint



"I was coming home one night, after having a drink with a friend. It was not very late - about 11.30 I think - and my next door neighbours were having a party. As I reached my front door, a man ran out of the party and just came at me - I didn't have time to think. He was very drunk and didn't seem to know what he was doing. Perhaps he thought I was someone else. He kept hitting me and kicking me until I must have passed out. The police arrived and I was taken off to hospital. When they let me out a few days later, I was too scared to go home. I stayed with a friend, and even persuaded them to go and pick up my things for me. The police were very cold at first - I think they thought I had provoked the man. I found I couldn't tell my mates about the attack. I feel humiliated because I couldn't defend myself. I also feel bloody angry. I carry a knife now, and I would go for the bloke if I ever saw him."

Mike, aged 24

"I was at home one afternoon because my little boy was ill. I was just putting him to bed when I heard someone downstairs. I looked over the banisters and saw a man going through my things. He was holding a knife. I shouted 'go away' and ran and locked myself into the bedroom with my son. I thought that he might come and kill me. After a while I realised that it had gone quiet, so I made myself go and look - the worst experience of my whole life. He had gone, but the place was in such a mess. I can't sleep now, I keep thinking that the man is downstairs. I think it was my fault because I left the window open. I have panic attacks when I go out, I think I see him coming towards me in the street. My little boy has nightmares and won't leave me to go to school. People keep telling me I was lucky that I wasn't harmed, but I keep thinking about what could have happened."

Saleena, aged 35

Violence, and the threat of violence, can have a devastating effect on the victims. For women, crimes such as rape often produce extreme feelings of guilt and shame. It is often hard to tell families what has happened, and women fear the reactions of their partners.

Men, too, have difficulties in coming to terms with the experience of violence. The dominant male culture, which discourages discussion of emotions, often prevents men from expressing what has happened to them and accepting support from their peers. Men are also often deeply ashamed if they feel that they were not able to defend themselves.

Feelings of shame and guilt, in both men and women, can be compounded if those with whom they come into contact - friends and families or professionals within the criminal justice system - question their role in the incident. A rape victim giving evidence in court may still be accused of leading on her attacker. And young men, who are the most frequent targets for violent attacks, will often be treated as though they somehow provoked the attack, or were involved in a fight.

Violence also affects those who witness it. People who have witnessed an assault on a relative or friend, or even on a stranger, may feel guilt and anger. They may think they could have done more to stop the attack or help the victim. Incidents like armed raids in banks or building societies can have a serious effect on all who work there.

A number of research projects carried out by Victim Support have highlighted both the emotional distress and the range of practical difficulties faced by the victims of violence.

A two year project on the families of murder victims, evaluated by researchers at Liverpool University, identified the additional stress which relatives face when treated with insensitivity by professionals ranging from religious leaders to the media.

A Victim Support project on racial harassment found that victims are often extremely distressed by the accumulative effect of daily low level violence, which is often viewed as minor one-off incidents by those professionals from whom they ask for help.

Appearing in court as a witness can also be an additional trauma to victims of violence. In November 1991, Victim Support published a report on a research project looking at the experiences of

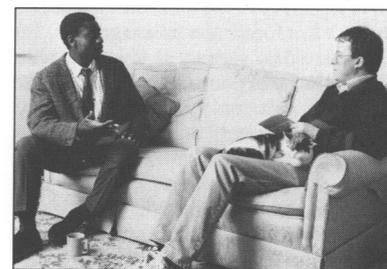
witness in the Crown Court.

In each of seven Crown Court centres, a full-time co-ordinator and volunteers offered support to victims and witnesses. The researchers, from the University of Birmingham, found that witnesses who were given full information about the process, and were offered support by a trained volunteer, were much better able to cope with the experience.

Victim Support has recently been granted Home Office funding to develop the service in every Crown Court over the next three years.

Last year, Victim Support's trained volunteer visitors offered help to nearly 10,000 victims of rape or sexual assault, and a further 85,000 people who had suffered other violence. Victim Support is able to provide emotional support and an opportunity to talk about the incident and to come to terms with the emotions it has produced.

Victim Support also works to ensure that victims are treated with sensitivity within the criminal justice system and are kept informed at every stage of the case.



A trained VS volunteer visits a victim of attack at home

When victims of violence have no access to support, and when the criminal justice system adds insult to injury by neglecting or ignoring their experience, victims of violence may suffer long-lasting feelings of distress, anger and fear.

If victims are offered help and are able to feel that they have been kept in touch with the progress of 'their case', most are able to recover quickly and completely.

Helen Peggs is Press & Publicity Officer for Victim Support