

Victim Support has grown considerably as a national organisation over recent years. Could you perhaps start by taking us back to the origins of Victim Support?

Interview with Helen Reeves

Penny Fraser talks to Helen Reeves, the Director of Victim Support, about the continuing challenge of providing a service for victims of crime.

The early history of the organisation has several roots. The first Victim Support Group was set up in Bristol in 1974 and arose out of a concern with the notion of restorative justice. A

working party was set up to see whether a form of victim-offender reparation could provide a viable alternative to imprisonment. As part of this process it was acknowledged that without knowledge of the victims of crime, mediation could not take place and at the time no agency, apart from the police, knew who the victims were. Out of this came six months funding for a small project working with trained volunteers to find out about victims of crime and what their experiences were.

What emerged loud and clear was that victims had a multitude of unmet needs such that it would have been wrong to consider any other form of work with them until those needs had been met. These needs ranged from not knowing what happened to their complaint, because they were not kept informed by the police, and not knowing whether or when they would be called upon to provide evidence in court, to fear of re-victimisation and of having to give evidence. Over and above all these worries victims were still left to deal themselves with the emotional effects of crime, which might additionally be affected by whether they had lost property, for which they might not have been insured. Looking back on it now, these were obvious, practical issues that had been neglected by all agencies who were dealing with crime.

The imperative then became to provide a service to these victims and this was made possible with support from charitable organisations. What Victim Support were doing then spread beyond Bristol and with this growth came the need for a national body to develop and monitor standards and a national identity. The first Home Office grant in 1980 enabled Victim Support to establish a national body to co-ordinate local Victim Support Schemes. By then Victim Support was perceived as an idea whose time had come and a great deal of publicity was generated.

It can't have been easy to gain acceptance for the service among some criminal justice agencies.

We had to engage in significant negotiations with every single agency. The view of some police was that we might threaten their investigations by

'contaminating' witnesses. Some also worried about Victim Support becoming involved in police monitoring groups that were operating at that time. A common view among police in the early stages was that Victim Support was not providing anything that they did not already do. It was really only in the 1980s, when research indicated a strong measure of public dissatisfaction with the police, particularly from victims of crime, that the police came to recognise the value of the work we were able to do.

Probation services were concerned about polarisation between victims and offenders as a result of our work. The Magistrates' Association put out a circular saying that no magistrate should get involved in Victim Support. The view was then that you were either in the victim's camp or the offender's camp and that this implied prejudice against the other.

In the early 1980s we developed a Witness Service in the Crown Court (and this is a service that we are currently looking to extend into magistrates courts). This met with some resistance from government departments, particularly in relation to the perceived threat to evidence. Our very first experimental services in the courts were paid for by a private trust; we only subsequently received Home Office support. As with all social change, not only did we have to gain recognition of the fact that there was genuine need for the service, but in order to gain official acceptance we had to demonstrate that our way of meeting this need was conducted according to high professional standards and was not overthrowing the whole system.

In 1987 the Home Office finally agreed to provide Victim Support with mainstream funding for the network of local schemes.

We currently employ 900 staff and a major priority for us is to ensure that they are supported through the development of professional standards, training programmes and codes of practice.

So how would a victim of crime be served by these two facets of Victim Support's work - in the community and in the courts?

It is important to distinguish between these areas of work as



Jacky Chapman

two distinct services, although of course they work together. The first thing to happen is that a victim should be referred to us (usually by the police) at a very early stage following the crime; a Victim Support Volunteer would then normally contact the victim by telephone or letter. This process should take no more than two or three days. In addition, through more extensive publicity we are encouraging victims to contact us directly for advice. The support victims receive from the community-based Victim Support Scheme includes advice about the police investigation procedure. For example, a volunteer might well accompany them to an identification parade they may have to attend. In the case of a very serious crime, where the victim is also likely to be the main police witness, Victim Support would give them close support throughout the preparation of the case and the trial. Also, many of our local schemes have links with local community repair projects for fixing damage sustained to the victim's home through burglary.

At the point at which it is confirmed that the case is going to trial, the victim and other witnesses will be informed about the Witness Service and the services it can offer which may include preparation for the court hearing. This may involve showing them over a courtroom, talking about their role as a witness and how they can ask for help during the trial itself - for instance, if they do not understand something that a barrister is saying.

If the witness is a child there are special child witness preparation packs, which take the child through the type of questions that they are to be asked and explains the child's role in court. If the evidence is to be given via a video link, then the child would be shown the room in which that takes place. Of course there must be no mention of the evidence itself; as a safeguard the Witness Service volunteer is not told the details of the crime. Although a volunteer from the community based Victim Support Scheme can accompany a witness to court and wait with them until they are called, they cannot give support and advice as the court-based service does. The two roles are quite separate.

Can I ask you about the part that Victim Support has

played recently as a member of the inter-departmental Working Group on Special Provision for Vulnerable and Intimidated Witnesses to improve their access to justice, which met during 1997 and 1998?

The recommendations that require legislation are now before Parliament and there are many other recommendations that aim to change existing practice.

The group was faced with the very difficult task of defining vulnerability - and cut-off points for vulnerability - and setting out provision to ensure that those in the criminal justice system whose job it is to identify a vulnerable witness receive proper training to do so. We have considered a number of specific vulnerable groups. Firstly, adults with physical disabilities or learning difficulties who might at present be regarded as not capable of giving evidence and might benefit for example from being able to give evidence via video link (as children are now able to do). One of the provisions in the legislation is that there should be people available who can assist witnesses with communication in the court in exactly the same way that witnesses with different languages can be assisted. The idea that someone could actually have a person with them in the witness box helping them to communicate is quite radical! Secondly, there is a group of people for whom witness intimidation is likely to be a problem, for instance serial crimes such as racial harassment or domestic violence, or where the victimisation is known about in the community and the victim may become a target because they are giving evidence.

There is also the group of people whom I think we have a duty to keep reminding people about, who are specifically vulnerable because of the type of crime that they have been subject to. Victims of sexual crime are vulnerable because of the sensitive nature of their evidence and also because of the nature of cross-examination in court by the defendant or the defendant's lawyer. With this group of victims it is not a question of producing legislation that provides for every woman complainant of a sexual offence to give evidence via video link. There has to be discretion and if this discretion lies with the

judiciary then they have got to understand not only why people might make an application to give evidence in this way but what the consequences for the quality of the evidence might be if they are not granted this request.

What is the role for a local Victim Support scheme in the implementation of the proposed measures?

Volunteers could be involved in the early stages of identification of vulnerability and could refer the victim back to ensure that they received the specialist support they needed. Our volunteers could continue to support the vulnerable witness, and the Witness Service could prepare them for court, but Victim Support would also be a link agency for other organisations able to provide specialist support (a disability group for example). Victim Support would provide the advice on the court process and the specialist group would provide expertise on the disability. Victim Support are very happy with the way the policies are developing but the big issue is implementation and changing practice down to every last practitioner.

What part is Victim Support playing in the new partnership arrangements for tackling crime introduced by last year's Crime and Disorder Act?

Every Victim Support Scheme is represented on all the multi-agency partnership groups as we have a lot of knowledge to contribute, for instance, on what remedies victims would like to see; how crimes occur; and the role of different techniques in helping prevent repeat victimisation. One area where we are concentrating on defining our role at the moment is youth justice. Under the new community-based provisions for youth offenders, victims may well be involved and they will come to us for support and advice about their role. We see no difference between the services we provide to victims whose cases go to court and those for whom there will be a community based alternative.

There is such a range of provision that goes under the heading of restorative justice - and no one consistent model - that we feel it is very important for us to

be involved. If victim-offender mediation is done well, with the victim being asked first and not last; being asked sensitively and well in advance, with the right amount of information to enable them to make an informed decision, enabling victims to be involved because they want to make a contribution, then the chances of it being in the victim's interests are high. It must not be forgotten that for victims one of the most important things is whether or not they can take a very bad experience and turn it into something constructive, not just for themselves, but for other people as well.

It can be approached badly, however, when people do not have an appreciation of where the victim is at that point in their recovery or whether or not the case has just been reactivated because of something that has happened and where victims are asked to participate in an insensitive way. A number of restorative justice programmes put a lot into preparation of the offender, but not the victim, and have inadequate follow-up provision. Something I am very worried about is the lack of monitoring of victims who decline to participate because of the effect of this on them. We know that the normal effects of crime on victims are fear, anger and guilt and we need to know whether this is made worse by saying 'no' to a meeting with the offender.

Would you say that we are nearer to achieving a more balanced criminal justice system which properly recognises the needs of victims of crime?

In our Statement of Rights for victims of crime we include one which is very controversial and not understood by a lot of people which is a right for victims not to have to make decisions regarding the offender. We believe that it is a fundamental right for the state to take over the responsibility for dealing with offenders. In this we are endorsing what happened when our present justice system was first set up, which effectively got rid of the imbalance of power where a powerful offender could intimidate a weaker victim into not taking a case against them. I am passionately against the American idea of the victim impact statement, when it is used in an

adversarial context to argue for a heavier penalty. However, what happened when decision-making was taken away from the victim was that it was forgotten that the system still had some responsibility to the victim, which is what we are trying to restore.

If you have a justice system that deals with the offender, and in doing so does more damage to the person who has already been victimised, then the balance is wrong. Equally, if you have a justice system that is so confrontational that anybody who is vulnerable, either mentally or physically or because they are a child, cannot be a complainant, then you have not got a justice system at all. We believe that in some aspects the system itself is wrong: it is not delivering justice, it is not doing what it set out to do, simply because it has lost sight of the fact that the people it needs to make it work - the victims - have not been provided for.

Most of the services which victims need are outside the criminal justice system. Our overall objective is to restore people who have been victims of crime and we believe this should be a fundamental objective of criminal policy in the community. Our objective as far as criminal justice is concerned is to ensure that it does not inflict any further harm on people who have already suffered.

Helen Reeves is Director of Victim Support.

Victim Supportline

Victim Supportline is the new national telephone line for victims of crime, which will complement the local services already provided by Victim Support in the community and the courts.

Victim Supportline is run by trained staff and volunteers who provide on-the-spot information and support and details of the services provided locally by Victim Support.

Victim Supportline will be open from 9 am to 9 pm weekdays and 9 am to 7 pm weekends. Callers are charged at local rates from anywhere in the UK.

Phone: 0845 30 30 900.

Victims of the prison system

Vincenzo Ruggiero explores the power of the prison system to victimise.

Idealistic philosophers posit that punishing offenders should not be intended as a means for their rehabilitation. According to Kant, punishment is not a tool, but a goal in itself. In his rejection of utilitarian conceptions, he argues that people cannot be 'utilised' for the achievement of secondary goals, namely for their resocialisation. People are simply punished because they have committed a crime. Hegel, as it is widely known, exacerbates this stance, by claiming that offenders have a right to be punished, in that they are, with punishment, honoured as rational beings.



David Kidd-Hewitt

The infliction of pain

This type of idealistic philosophy of punishment underlies prison institutions across the world, though few supporters of retribution would be aware of the existence of their illustrious ancestors. Often hidden behind notions of deterrence, rehabilitation, incapacitation and social defence, the idea of inflicting pain on offenders remains the pivotal philosophy of incarceration. Criminological studies focusing on how this pain can be measured and what effects it produces on prisoners are rare. There is only a vague awareness that prisons cause psychophysical damage, that the distortion of time causes stress, tension, nervous and psychosomatic diseases, all deriving from an institutional imposition of time. As Victor Serge (1980: 121) remarked:

The problem of time is crucial. Nothing makes the distinction possible between one hour and the next. Once gone, the hours vanish in the void; the present minute can be dilated to eternity. But time does not exist! Is this a mad way of thinking? Perhaps. I know there is a profound truth in all this. I also know that prisoners, after the first hour of incarceration, are mentally disturbed.

Very few scholars followed up these remarks and tried to establish the nature of the victimisation of prisoners by the prison system. What follows is a brief description of the research conducted by one of these very few scholars.

Carceral suffering

A team led by Dr Daniel Goin (1993) worked for five years in Lyon prison to assess the health conditions of inmates. The notion of health adopted by the researchers was borrowed from the World Health Organisation, and included aspects of both 'physical and moral wellbeing'. Prisoners were visited and screened, tested and interviewed. This painstaking study attempted to define the features of what can be called 'carceral suffering'. Here are some of the findings.

The cell is a space without time, an empty shell. The meaninglessness of time is disorientating: 33% of the

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prisoners were unable to concentrate; 50% after one year in custody could not control their memory adequately; 40% experienced sudden ‘mind voids’. Three quarters experienced dizziness, which was described by some as a menacing emptiness.

This emptiness, Gonin argues, leads prisoners to self-negation, whereby they try to make themselves invisible. The constant observation to which they were subjected was among the reasons given by prisoners for their desire to hide themselves. But hiding oneself may have destructive consequences, as it may lead to self-annihilation; prisoners may therefore drift towards mental and physical diseases.

Bodily functions and senses were observed to undergo a process of atrophy. For example, eye-sight was found to deteriorate. Gonin explains that the visual space of prison is too small: the eyes are forced to effect double effort. Also, there is no reason to look around, in fact it is best not to. The eyes of prisoners become expressionless, empty. In their ‘blind stare’ one could see yet another attempt of prisoners to disappear; to become invisible also means to abolish one’s expressions, in order to hide feelings which could be conveyed in our eyes.

Most prisoners overdevelop their hearing sense. They become hypersensitive. Because they partially give up the capacity to see what surrounds them, prisoners are forced to develop their hearing as the only form of defence from a menacing environment. Those interviewed claimed that they were obsessed by noise; a sudden flutter could frighten them.

The sense of touch, in Gonin’s findings, tended to disappear. Tactility, the author argues, is another diaphragm between the body of the prisoners and the outside. The disgust they feel in touching a threatening environment is identified as a reason for the denial of this sense. Gonin tells the case of a prisoner who was so scared he could lose this sense that he constantly looked for soft things to handle such as clothes, silk, wool. Before losing

it, or because he feared that he was bound to lose it, he tried everything to revive his tactility.

Many prisoners had ulcers, an outcome of nervous distress and fatigue. Symbolically, ulcers could be likened to a process of ‘autodigestion’, self-cannibalism, a solution offered to prisoners to enable them to disappear. The extreme expression of the attempt to escape is associated with self-mutilation and, finally, suicide. Here, prisoners choose to escape definitively from themselves, from their body. The rate of suicide in prison is usually six or seven times higher than in the outside world.

Summary

In conclusion, advocates of retribution might be unaware of the actual effects of prison, though surely they are familiar with the notions from which retribution derives inspiration. Among these is the notion of ‘equivalence’, whereby the damage caused by crime possesses a coefficient that permits its translation into a degree of suffering. Equivalence, in its turn, derives from the fundamental models of purchase, sale and commerce. In this sense, as Nietzsche (1968: 93); suggested, punishment is a vulgar substitute for irascibility. Retribution implies that creditors ‘can cut limbs and bits as appropriate and equivalent with the entity of the debt’. When the idea of equivalence earned definitive currency, precise evaluations were soon provided, legitimately established, as to the exchange value of limbs and parts of the body. ■

Vincenzo Ruggiero is Professor of Sociology in the School of Social Science, Middlesex University.

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Victimisation by the system

Adrian Barton suggests that the consequences of victimisation are not always negative in the long term.

There are a number of assumptions that come to mind on hearing the word ‘victim’. These almost certainly include an understanding of victimisation resulting from the action of others; a stereotypical perception of passivity and weakness¹; a predisposition to focus on the individual nature of victimisation; and the definition of victimisation as an entirely negative experience. These views are often accurate and have been usefully discussed elsewhere². This article takes a somewhat wider approach, focusing on a Neighbourhood Watch project in South Wales, in order to suggest that victimisation can result from inaction and that the long-term consequences of some victimisation can be positive and empowering for communities as well as individuals.

Victimisation through inaction

Research suggests that the initial enthusiasm of Neighbourhood Watch members creates a problem for both police and Neighbourhood Watch schemes³. Police support often rests on the potential for the freeing-up of resources and the off-loading of some of the ‘scarecrow’⁴ functions of police work. However, the popularity of Neighbourhood Watch creates an increased demand for police resources which are often not met.

In instances such as these victimisation for the community becomes multi-faceted. In addition to the obvious victimisation by offenders, communities often exhibit feelings of abandonment

and disillusionment due to the lack of an enthusiastic response by the police. As a consequence, public confidence in the police diminishes and members of Neighbourhood Watch schemes can feel at best patronised by the police or at worst victimised by the system's apparent apathy over their plight. This often leads to the premature end of potentially powerful community groups.

Disillusionment as a catalyst for self-help

But not always. One Neighbourhood Watch group, in an on-going piece of research, has used this type of victimisation as an empowering force. The group in question operates in a former mining community which, like many similar communities, lacks leisure and recreational facilities. Before the events described here, young people congregated in the village square or meandered along the main street, often late into the night. Acts of vandalism and more serious crimes became commonplace, resulting in conflict between the older members of the community and its young people. This escalation in crime led to the creation of a Neighbourhood Watch group and an increase in calls to the police by the residents. Most were dismayed by the police's inaction over what the community saw as serious incidents in need of a serious response.

The Neighbourhood Watch coordinator takes up the story:

We'd had enough.... our old people were afraid to go out, afraid of the kids. The police weren't interested, the kids used to laugh at them when they turned up, which wasn't all that often.

Some of the residents decided to take things a step further and confront the youths head-on; a move described as "getting to the bottom of why they were doing it". This involved a series of encounters which started out as heated confrontations in the street, but which quickly developed into more organised and less hostile meetings. As a result, both factions within the village began to see each other's perspective:

The kids had to listen from one old lady what it was like to miss the bus out to the bingo because you're scared of what kids would say or do to you if you were waiting by the bus stop, or what you'd find when you came back. To be fair to the kids though, I'd never realised just how litter there was to do, I mean, it's not much of a life walking backwards and forwards between here and the railway station is it?

The meetings acted as a catalyst for community empowerment. The young people were encouraged to self-police their 'turf', acting as the eyes and ears of the community, not the police. Perpetrators of crimes were identified to the Neighbourhood Watch coordinators who visited the parents

in an attempt to settle any problems away from the official criminal justice system, with solutions often being based around reparation or mediation³. Over time, a shared sense of ownership of the community resulted in a number of community generated improvements to the village, including the provision of a youth club and the creation of a communal garden on an abandoned plot in the centre of the village. One of the co-ordinators even decided to stand in local elections in an effort to cement the community's progress.

The future: vagaries of time and place or a more planned approach? The example discussed above illustrates that given the confluence of a number of factors, including, paradoxically, victimisation by the system, Neighbourhood Watch schemes can evolve into facilitators of the 'good' community and in some cases turn victimisation into a positive outcome. Here, moving from the negative to the positive happened, not through any official support and guidance but as the result of a combination of personnel and circumstances. The outcome - the re-creation of the much championed 'good' community - is arguably too important to be left to the vagaries of chance and environment and certainly should not be predicated upon victimisation by the system in the first instance.

Several authors⁶ have noted

that Neighbourhood Watch has, at least, the potential to move outside the narrow confines of police control and to become an inter-agency movement designed to increase community responsibility and participation. In order for this to happen communities (as in the case of individuals who become victims) need an appropriate level of support and direction in order to reverse any negative experiences. However, such support must be planned and readily available to all Neighbourhood Watch groups and it clearly cannot originate from a single agency, especially when that agency has little experience in community development.

In this instance the police were lucky that the community responded to perceived victimisation in a positive manner, reducing crime and rejuvenating their community.

How many other communities have reacted negatively in similar situations and continued to be victims of both offenders and a rigid and inflexible system?

Adrian Barton is Lecturer in Criminal Justice and Criminology at the University of Glamorgan.

Notes:

- 1 Although the work of many involved in Rape Crisis Centres, Women's Refuges and abused children have fought long and hard to dispel these stereotypes.
- 2 Mawby and Walklate (1994) *Critical victimology*. London: Sage.
- 3 Gilling, D. (1997) *Crime Prevention: Theory, practice and politics*. London: UCL Press.
- 4 Reiner, R. (1992) *The Politics of the Police*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- 5 See Lucia Zedner in Maguire, M., Morgan, R and Reiner, R., (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- 6 See, principally, Husain's comments in Association of District Councils (1994) *Joining Forces Against Crime*. London: Association of District Councils, the work of Whiskin, N in Crime Concern (1989) *Conference Report*, Swindon: Crime Concern, as well as the Crime and Disorder Act (1998).

