

## 4 WHAT IS VICTIMOLOGY?



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### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 4.1 Describe the characteristics of typical crime victimizations in the United States.
- 4.2 Identify some of the costs associated with victimization.
- 4.3 Evaluate several theories regarding victimization.
- 4.4 Discuss key rights held by victims.

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*One of the most neglected subjects in the study of crime is its victims.*

—The President's Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice (1967)

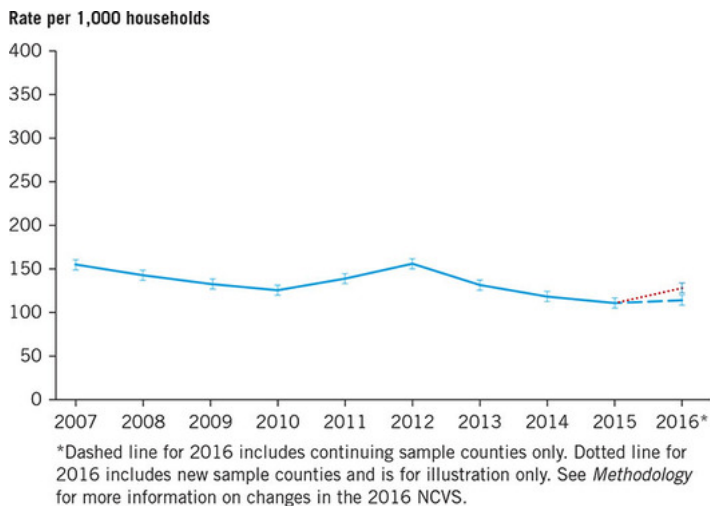
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The term *victimology* is not new. In fact, Benjamin Mendelsohn first used it in 1947 to describe the scientific study of crime victims. Oftentimes considered a subfield of criminology, the two fields do share much in common. Just as criminology is the study of criminals—what they do, why they do it, and how the criminal justice system responds to them—victimology is the study of victims. Victimology, then, includes the study of the etiology (or causes) of victimization, of its consequences, of how the criminal justice system accommodates and assists victims, and of how other elements of society such as the media deal with crime victims. Victimology is a science; victimologists use the scientific method to answer questions about victims. For example, instead of simply wondering or hypothesizing about why younger people are more likely to be victims than older people, victimologists conduct research to attempt to identify the reasons why younger people appear to be more vulnerable.

## NATURE OF VICTIMIZATION

We can learn about the extent to which persons are victimized by examining official data sources such as the Uniform Crime Report (UCR) and surveys such as the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). Recall from [Chapter 2](#) that the UCR is an official data source that shows the amount of crimes known to police each year. According to the UCR, in 2016, the police became aware of 1,248,185 violent crimes and 7,919,035 property crimes. The most common offense was larceny-theft. Aggravated assaults were the most common violent crime, although they were outnumbered by larceny-thefts. Each year, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) publishes *Criminal Victimization in the United States*, which is a report about crime victimization as measured by the NCVS. In [Chapter 2](#), you also learned that the NCVS is a victimization survey in which persons are asked about their victimization experiences in the previous 6 months. From this report, we can see what the most typical victimizations are and who is most likely to be victimized.

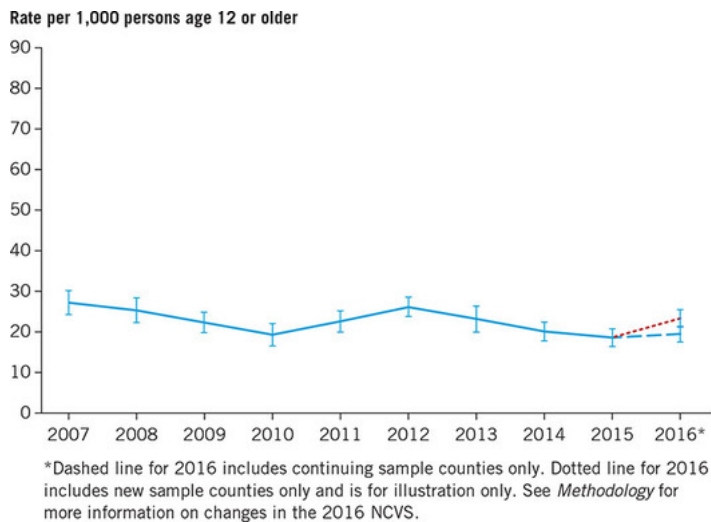
In 2016, a total of 21.6 million victimizations were experienced by the nation's households (Morgan & Kena, 2017). Property crimes were much more likely to be experienced as compared to violent crimes. Although 5.7 million violent crime victimizations were experienced, 15.9 million property crime victimizations occurred. The most common type of property crime experienced was theft, and simple assault was most commonly reported. As can be seen in [Figures 4.1](#) and [4.2](#), the property crime victimization rate and violent victimization rate have been relatively stable since 2007.



### Description

**Figure 4.1** Property Crime Victimization Rate in the United States, 2007–2016

Source: Morgan, R. E., & Kena, G. (2017). *Criminal Victimization, 2016*.



### Description

**Figure 4.2** Violent Crime Victimization Rate in the United States, 2007–2016

Source: Morgan, R. E., & Kena, G. (2017). *Criminal Victimization, 2016*.

## The Typical Victimization and Victim

The typical crime victimization can also be identified from the NCVS. Less than half of all victimizations experienced by individuals in the NCVS are reported to the police. This may be in part related to the fact that most victims of violent crime knew their offender. Most often, victims identified their attacker as a friend or acquaintance. Strangers accounted for about 40% of violent victimizations in the NCVS. Only 16% of violent victimizations were characterized as serious violent offenses with a weapon. This may be one of the reasons why most victimizations do not result in physical injury—about one fourth of violent victimizations result in the victim being injured (Morgan & Kena, 2017). Certain characteristics of victims are also evident. We can tell from the NCVS what gender, race/ethnicity, age group, and households are most likely to be victimized.

### Gender

Historically, the NCVS has shown that for all violent victimizations except for rape and sexual assaults, males are more likely to be victimized than females. In 2014, however, this gender gap in violent victimization was less evident—males and females had similar rates of violent victimization, although females remained at an increased risk of experiencing rape and sexual assault compared to males (Truman, 2015). This gender symmetry in violent victimization persists in the most recent data from the NCVS (Morgan & Kena, 2017). One difference between male and female victims is who offends against them. Females are more likely than males to be victimized by an intimate partner. In 2010, a total of 22% of violent victimization incidents against females were perpetrated by an intimate partner compared to 5% of incidents involving male victims (Truman, 2011).



**Photo 4.1** Strangers only account for about one third of violent victimizations in the NCVS.

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## Race and Ethnicity

The NCVS also indicates that persons of certain races or ethnic groups are at higher risks of experiencing violent victimizations than others.

In past years, persons who are black had higher victimization rates than those who are white or Hispanic. In 2016, however, there were no differences between white and black people in rates of violent victimization (Morgan & Kena, 2017). Black people were more likely to be violently victimized than Asians, Native Hawaiians, or other Pacific Islanders. Those who reported being multiracial had the highest violent victimization rates (Morgan & Kena, 2017).

## Age

Age is also a risk factor for victimization. Persons who are young face the greatest risk of becoming a victim of violent crime. Individuals ages 12 to 34 years have the highest violent victimization rate (Morgan & Kena, 2017), followed by 18- to 24-year-olds. Generally, the risk of violent victimization declines as people age and is particularly low for those 65 years and older (Morgan & Kena, 2017).

## Household Characteristics

Characteristics of the household also play a role in victimization risk. Households in which the total income is low are more likely to experience property victimization than other households. But how low of a total income places a household at risk? Households in the lowest income categories—those earning less than \$7,500 or between \$7,500 and \$14,999 annually—faced the greatest risk of burglary and theft. Households earning less than \$7,500 had a burglary victimization rate that was twice the rate of households whose income was \$75,000 per year or higher. Household income is also related to violent victimization risk. Those households earning less than \$25,000 reported more violent victimization than those earning more than this. The size of the household also matters. The greater the number of people in the household, the greater the property victimization rate. In fact, households with six or more people in them had a property crime victimization rate that was almost 2.5 times higher than single-headed households (Truman, 2011).

### LEARNING CHECK 4.1

Answer the following questions to check your learning thus far. Answers can be found on page 475.

1. **True or False?** The typical victim of violence in the United States is low income.
2. **Fill in the Blank:** The most common type of property victimization is \_\_\_\_\_.
3. **True or False?** Younger people face greater risks of victimization than older people.

## COSTS OF VICTIMIZATION

Victimologists are concerned with not only who becomes a crime victim but also the varied costs associated with being a victim of crime. These costs can be economic, but victimization can also take a toll on a victim's mental health and ability to work.

### Economic Costs

**Economic costs** of victimization include those experienced by the victim and those the public incurs. In this sense, victimization is a public health issue. Economic costs can result from property losses; monies associated with medical care; time lost from work, school, and housework; pain, suffering, and reduced quality of life; and legal fees. In 2008, the total economic loss from crimes was estimated to be \$17,397 billion by the National Crime Victimization Survey (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2009). The NCVS also shows that the median dollar amount of loss attributed to crime when there was a loss was \$200. Although this number may appear to be low, it largely represents the fact that the typical property crime is a simple larceny-theft.

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Economic costs

financial costs associated with victimization.

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### Direct Property Losses

Crime victims often experience tangible losses in terms of having their property damaged or taken. Generally, when determining property losses, the value of property that is damaged or taken and not recovered as well as insurance claims administration costs are considered. According to the NCVS, in 2008, a total of 94% of property crimes resulted in economic losses (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2011). A study conducted in 2010 found that arson victimizations resulted in an estimated \$11,452 per episode (McCollister, French, & Fang, 2010). Data from the UCR show that in 2016, on average motor vehicle theft cost approximately \$7,680 for each incident. Personal crime victimizations typically do not result in as much direct property losses. For example, only 18% of personal crime victimizations resulted in economic loss. Rape and sexual assaults typically result in \$5,556 in costs to the victim. It is very rare for a victim of a violent or property offense to recover some of his or her losses. In only about 3 in 10 violent instances and in 16% of property crime instances do victims recover all or some property (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2011).

### Medical Care

To be sure, many victims would gladly suffer property loss if it meant they did not experience any physical injury. After all, items can be replaced and damage repaired. Physical injury, on the other hand, may lead to victims having to seek medical attention, which for some may be the first step in accumulating costs associated with their victimization. Medical care costs encompass costs of transporting victims to the hospital, care by a doctor, prescription drugs, allied health services, medical devices, coroner costs, insurance claims processing costs, and premature funeral expenses (Miller, Cohen, & Wiersema, 1996).

Results from the NCVS indicate that in 2008, a total of 542,280 violent crime victims received some type of medical care (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2011). Of those victims, about 33% received care at a hospital emergency room or an emergency clinic, and 9% were hospitalized. Receiving medical care often results in victims incurring medical expenses. Almost 8% of victims of violence report having medical expenses as a result of being victimized (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2007). About 65% of injured victims had health insurance or were eligible for public medical services.



**Photo 4.2** Nurse practitioner Heather Rattay stands in the Verna Harrah Clinic at the Rape Treatment Center at the Santa Monica UCLA Medical Center. In the background sits the special exam chair and the video monitor hooked up to the colposcope, which is used to magnify tissue trauma.

Annie Wells/Los Angeles Times/Getty Images

Costs vary across types of victimization. For example, the annual cost of hospitalizations for victims of child abuse is estimated to be \$6.2 billion (Prevent Child Abuse America, 2000). Medical treatment for intimate partner violence is estimated to be \$1.8 billion annually (Wisner, Gilmer, Saltman, & Zink, 1999). Per-criminal victimization medical care costs have also been estimated. Assaults in which there were injuries cost \$1,470 per incident. Drunk driving victims who were injured incurred \$6,400 apiece in medical care costs (Miller et al., 1996).

Gun violence is associated with substantial medical costs for victims. Although most crime victims do not require hospitalization, even if they are treated in the emergency room, a report on gun violence published by the Office for Victims of Crime showed that gunshot victims make up one third of those who require hospitalization (cited in Bonderman, 2001). Persons who are shot and admitted to the hospital are likely to face numerous rehospitalizations and incur medical costs across their lifetime. In 1994, for all victims of firearm injuries, the lifetime medical costs totaled \$1.7 billion (P. J. Cook, Lawrence, Ludwig, & Miller, 1999; cited in Bonderman, 2001). Spinal cord injuries are particularly expensive, with average totals for first-year medical costs alone reaching over \$217,000. The average cost per victim of spinal cord injury related to violence is over \$600,000 (DeVito, 1997; cited in Bonderman, 2001).

### Mental Health Care Costs

When victims seek out mental health care, this also adds to their total losses. It is estimated that from 10% to 20% of total mental health care costs in the United States is related to crime (Miller et al., 1996). Most of this cost is a result of crime victims seeking treatment to deal with the effects of their victimization. Between one quarter and one half of rape and child sexual abuse victims receive mental health care. As a result, sexual victimizations, of both adults and children, result in some of the largest mental health care costs for victims. The average mental health care cost per rape and sexual assault is \$2,200; for child abuse, it is \$5,800. Victims of arson who are injured incur about \$10,000 per victimization in mental health care expenditures. Victimization may also take a toll on other persons. The average murder results in between 1.5 and 2.5 people receiving mental health counseling (Miller et al., 1996).

### Losses in Productivity

Persons who are victimized may experience an inability to work at their place of employment, complete housework, or attend school. Not being able to do these things contributes to the total lost productivity that crime victims experience. In 2008, about 7% of persons who said they had been violently victimized in the NCVS lost some time from work. About the same percentage of victims of property offenses lost time from work. Some victims are more prone to miss work than others. Almost one fourth of motor vehicle theft victims miss at least 1 day of work (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2009). Data from the NCVS show that 18% of rape and sexual assault victims missed more than 10 days from work (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006b), and victims of intimate partner violence lose almost 8 million paid days from work annually (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2003). Employers also bear some costs when their employees are victimized; the victimized employees may be less productive, the employers may incur costs associated with hiring replacements, and employers may experience costs dealing with the emotional responses of their employees. Parents also may incur costs when their children are victimized and they are unable to meet all of their job responsibilities as a result of doing things like taking the child to the doctor or staying home with the child (Miller et al., 1996).

## Pain, Suffering, and Lost Quality of Life

The most difficult cost to quantify is the pain, suffering, and loss of quality of life that crime victims experience. When these elements are added to the costs associated with medical care, lost earnings, and programs associated with victim assistance, the cost to crime victims increases fourfold. In other words, this is the largest cost that crime victims sustain. As mentioned, one study estimated the cost to rape victims in terms of out-of-pocket expenses to be \$5,556 (McCollister et al., 2010). The crime of rape, however, on average, costs \$87,000 when its impact on quality of life is considered (Miller et al., 1996).

Another cost that crime victims may experience is a change in their routines and lifestyle. Many victims report that after being victimized, they changed their behavior. To illustrate, victims of stalking may change their phone number, move, or change their normal routine. Others may stop going out alone or start carrying a weapon when they do so. Although these changes may reduce the risk of being victimized again, for victims to bear the cost of crime seems somewhat unfair.

## System Costs

The victim is not the only entity affected economically as a result of crime. The United States in general spends an incredible amount of money on criminal justice. When including costs for law enforcement, the courts, and corrections, the direct expenditures of the criminal justice system are over \$214 billion annually (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006a). The criminal justice system employs over 2.4 million persons, whose payroll tops \$9 billion. Obviously, crime is big business in the United States!

Insurance companies pay approximately \$45 billion annually due to crime. The federal government also pays \$8 billion annually for restorative and emergency services to crime victims. There are other costs that society must absorb as a result of crime. For example, it costs Americans when individuals who are not insured or who are on public assistance are victimized and receive medical care. The U.S. government covers about one fourth of health insurance payouts to crime victims. Gunshot victims alone cost taxpayers over \$4.5 billion annually (Headden, 1996). These costs are not distributed equally across society. Some communities have been hit particularly hard by violence, gun violence in particular. Some 96% of hospital expenses associated with gun violence at King/Drew Medical Center in Los Angeles are paid for with public funds (Bonderman, 2001).

## Mental Health Consequences and Costs

It was first recognized in the late 1800s that people differentially respond to trauma, including victimization. Some people may cope by internalizing their feelings and emotions, while others may experience externalizing responses. It is likely that the way people deal with victimization is tied to their biological makeup, their interactional style, their coping style and resources, their equilibrium, and the context in which the incident occurs and in which they operate thereafter. Some of the responses can be quite serious and long term, while others may be more transitory.

Three affective responses common among crime victims are depression, reductions in self-esteem, and anxiety. The way in which depression manifests itself varies greatly across individuals. It can include having sleep disturbances, changes in eating habits, feelings of guilt and worthlessness, and irritability. Generally, depressed persons will have a general decline in interest in activities they once enjoyed, a depressed mood, or both. Depression is a common outcome for youth who are victimized by their peers, such as in being bullied (Sweeting, Young, West, & Der, 2006). With the advent of technology and the widespread use of the Internet, recent research has explored online victimization and its effects. Online victimization will often trigger a depressive response in victims (Tynes & Giang, 2009).

## Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

One of the recognized disorders associated with a patterned response to trauma, such as victimization, is **posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**. Commonly associated with individuals returning from war and combat, PTSD is a psychiatric condition that recently has been recognized as a possible consequence of other traumatic events, such as criminal victimization. To be diagnosed with PTSD, a victim must have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event involving actual or threatened death, injury, or sexual violence, or learned about such experiences happening to their family member or friend. The victim must have at least one intrusion symptom (e.g., recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive distressing memories of the event), connected to the traumatic event, but starting afterward. In addition, negative alterations

in cognitions and mood connected to the traumatic event must either begin or worsen after the incident. Finally, the victim must also experience marked changes in arousal and reactivity associated with the traumatic event that begins or worsens after it happened (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). To be diagnosed, the symptoms must be experienced for more than 1 month and must cause significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other functional areas (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). As you might imagine, PTSD can be debilitating and can affect a victim's ability to heal, move on, and thrive after being victimized.

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#### Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

psychiatric anxiety disorder caused by experiencing traumatic events such as war or violence.

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Although it is difficult to know how common PTSD is for all crime victims, some studies suggest that PTSD is a real problem. Estimates of PTSD for persons who have been victimized are around 25%. Lifetime incidence of PTSD for persons who have not experienced a victimization is 9%. Depression also commonly co-occurs in victims who suffer PTSD (Kilpatrick & Acierno, 2003). Research has shown that victims of sexual assault or aggravated assault and persons whose family members were homicide victims were more likely than other crime victims to develop PTSD (Kilpatrick & Tidwell, 1989). In support of this link, the occurrence of PTSD in rape victims has been estimated to be almost one in three (Kilpatrick, Edmunds, & Seymour, 1992).

### Self-Blame, Learned Helplessness, and the Brain

After people are victimized, they may blame themselves for their victimization. One form of this is **characterological self-blame**, which occurs when a person ascribes blame to a nonmodifiable source such as one's character. In this way, characterological self-blame involves believing that victimization is deserved. Another type is **behavioral self-blame**, which occurs when a person ascribes blame to a modifiable source—behavior (Janoff-Bulman, 1979). When a person turns to behavioral self-blame, a future victimization can be avoided, so long as behavior is changed.

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#### Characterological self-blame

person ascribes blame to a nonmodifiable source, such as his or her character.

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#### Behavioral self-blame

when a person believes she or he did something to cause own victimization.

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In addition to self-blame, others may experience **learned helplessness** following a victimization, which is a learned response to victimization. Victims learn that responding is futile, and they become passive and numb (Seligman, 1975). In this way, victims may not activate in the face of danger and, instead, may be at risk of subsequent victimization experiences.

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#### Learned helplessness

idea that victims believe they are unable to change their situation and stop trying to resist.

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Learned helplessness does not by itself explain victimization. Research on animals, however, provides us some guidance as to what effects trauma may have on the brain and behavior. Animal research shows that exposure to inescapable aversive stimuli (such as shocks to rats' tails) is related to behavioral changes such as changes in eating and drinking, changes in sleep patterns, and not escaping future aversive stimuli when possible. These behavioral changes are likely linked to fear, which creates changes in brain chemistry, and researchers have hypothesized these changes are similar to the neurochemical and behavioral changes seen in humans who suffer from major depressive disorders (Hammack, Cooper, & Lezak, 2012). This research finding suggests that it is possible that people who have been exposed to serious trauma and who interpret this trauma as being unavoidable may become depressed and experience behavioral changes that are then linked to future risk of victimization.



## LEARNING CHECK 4.2

Answer the following questions to check your learning thus far. Answers can be found on page 475.

1. **Fill in the Blank:** The victimization costs associated with the criminal justice system and case processing are called \_\_\_\_\_.
2. **True or False?** Mental health is rarely negatively affected by experiencing crime victimization.
3. **True or False?** Learned helplessness is a sufficient explanation for why someone may be victimized the first time.
4. **Fill in the Blank:** If I blame myself for my boyfriend beating me up because I nag him too much, I am using a \_\_\_\_\_ type of self-blame.

## Fear of Crime

Another cost associated with victimization is fear. Fear is an emotional response to a perceived threat (Ferraro & LaGrange, 1987). Persons do not have to be victims of crime to be fearful. In fact, research shows that some groups who are actually less likely to be victimized have higher levels of fear of crime than others. For example, females (Ferraro, 1995, 1996; Haynie, 1998; May, Rader, & Goodrum, 2010; Rountree, 1998) have higher levels of fear of crime than males. For females, this elevated fear of crime has been attributed to their overarching fear of sexual assault. Known as the “shadow hypothesis,” this fear of sexual assault actually serves to increase females’ fears of other types of crimes (Ferraro, 1995, 1996; Warr, 1985). Older persons also display greater fear of crime than younger persons. This finding, however, is likely dependent on question wording. When people are asked about specific worry about specific crime types, younger persons tend to express greater fear levels than older persons (Jackson, 2009).

Being fearful may be good if it leads people to protect themselves while still enjoying their life. Research on fear of crime shows that people, in response to fear, may engage in avoidance behaviors. **Avoidance behaviors** are restrictions that people place on their behavior to protect themselves from harm, such as staying home at night. Others may engage in **defensive or protective behaviors** to guard themselves from victimization, such as purchasing a gun or installing security lights (Ferraro & LaGrange, 1987). Although having some level of fear is likely good, as it serves to properly activate people in the face of danger and to caution people to engage in protective behaviors, exaggerated levels of fear can be problematic. People may effectively sever themselves from the outside world and not engage in activities they find enjoyable—in short, fear may paralyze some people.

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Avoidance

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