



THE CANADIAN RESOURCE CENTRE  
FOR VICTIMS OF CRIME

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CENTRE CANADIEN DE RESSOURCES  
POUR LES VICTIMES DE CRIMES

# VICTIM BLAMING

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*Violent acts are always choices that individuals make. Yet, it is the people who are harmed by violent acts that often receive negative responses from their loved ones, as well as from various social institutions. Why is it that some victims and survivors of violent crime get blamed for what has happened to them through no fault of their own? Crime victims are often scrutinized as to who they were with, what they were wearing, or what they might have done to cause the violence committed against them. The scrutiny should befall violence itself — we must speak out against those who choose to use violence as a means to an end.*

### ***What is Victim Blaming?***

Victim blaming is a devaluing act that occurs when the victim(s) of a crime or an accident is held responsible — in whole or in part — for the crimes that have been committed against them.<sup>1</sup> This blame can appear in the form of negative social responses from legal, medical, and mental health professionals<sup>2</sup>, as well as from the media and immediate family members and other acquaintances.

Some victims of crime receive more sympathy from society than others. Often, the responses toward crime victims are based on the misunderstanding of others. This misunderstanding may lead them to believe that the victim deserved what happened to them, or that they are individuals with low self-esteem who seek out violence. As a result, it can be very difficult for victims to cope when they are blamed for what has happened to them.

### ***Why Do People Blame Victims?***

There are a number of reasons why people choose to blame victims for the crimes that have happened to them. These reasons stem from misconceptions about victims, perpetrators, and the nature of violent acts. Victims are sometimes wrongfully portrayed as passive individuals who seek out and submit to the violence they endure. Offenders are seen as hapless individuals who are compelled to act violently by forces they cannot control. The most popular reasons for blaming victims include belief in a just world, attribution error, and invulnerability theory:

#### **Just World Hypothesis:**

The just world hypothesis is based on an individual's belief that the world is a safe, just place where people get what they deserve. These individuals believe that the social system that affects them is fair, legitimate, and justifiable.<sup>3</sup> Such strong

beliefs in individuals can be challenged when they encounter victims of random misfortune, such as violent crimes. The perception of these individuals is that good things happen to good people, and bad things to bad people.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, when people with these beliefs view victims they believe that their victimization was caused through some fault of their own.<sup>5</sup> In this way, one who believes in a just world maintains their belief because there is not an innocent, suffering victim, but someone who “deserves” their misfortune.<sup>6</sup> Blaming the victim maintains beliefs of personal responsibility and controllability over social outcomes.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, this hypothesis presents the world as a safe and protected place, even when in the face of hardship.<sup>8</sup>

Proponents of the just world hypothesis judge the harshness of events as a function of harm caused. Thus, if a victim is not harmed in a severe manner, then what happened to them can be seen as an accident. However, as the severity of harm increases, believers begin to think that ‘this could happen to me.’ Therefore, a way for these individuals to cope and restore their faith in the world is to blame victims for their misfortunes.<sup>9</sup>

### **Attribution Error:**

According to Kelly and Heider, there are two categories of attribution: internal and external. Individuals make internal attributions when they recognize that a person’s personal characteristics are the cause of their actions or situation. External attributions, however, have individuals identify the environment and circumstances as the cause for a person’s behaviour.<sup>10</sup>

Attribution error occurs when individuals overemphasize personal characteristics and devalue environmental characteristics when judging others, resulting in victim blaming. People who make this error view the individual victim as partially responsible for what happened to them and ignore situational causes. So-called “internal failings” take precedent over situational contributors in judgement of the subject. On the contrary, these people may have the propensity to attribute their own failures to environmental attributes, and their own successes to personal attributes.<sup>11</sup>

### **Invulnerability Theory:**

Literature on Invulnerability Theory claims that those who subscribe to the theory blame victims as a means to protect their own feelings of invulnerability.<sup>12</sup> The Invulnerability Theory is based on subscribers blaming the victim in order to feel safe themselves. Even friends and family members of crime victims may blame

the victim in order to reassure themselves.

A common statement would be:

*“She was raped because she walked home alone in the dark. I would never do that, so I won’t be raped.”<sup>13</sup>*

The theory states that victims are a reminder of our own vulnerability. Individuals do not want to consider the possibility of losing control over their life or body; by deciding that a victim brought on the attack themselves, they create a false sense of security. This reassures people that as long as they do not act as the victim did at the time of their attack, they will be invulnerable.<sup>14</sup>

## ***Violent Crimes in which Victims are Blamed***

### **Violence Against Women**

In cases of intimate partner violence where females are abused by male perpetrators, women are often blamed for the actions of their abusive male partner. Male offenders often use external attributions to justify their abusive behaviour. They may blame their partner or claim that they deserved the abuse because of their offensive personality. Male offenders may also attribute their behaviour to occupational stress or substance abuse, without taking ownership of their actions. These characteristics all work to minimize a perpetrator’s culpability for abusive actions.<sup>15</sup>

Further, it is also common for women to be blamed for being masochistic, withholding, asking for it, or deserving it. Questions, such as “why didn’t she just leave?” are common, and reinforce the notion that a woman likes to be abused and therefore stays in the relationship. These are devaluing actions that remove the responsibility from the offender.<sup>16</sup> Blaming the victim releases the man who commits the violence from the responsibility for what he has done.<sup>17</sup>

### **Sexual Assault**

The most obvious manifestations of victim blaming appear in sexual assault cases. Adult female victims of sexual assault are often blamed for being provocative, seductive, suggestive, teasing, or “asking for it”. Before 1992, when there was a case of sexual harassment or rape before the court, the victim’s dress, lifestyle, and sexual background was likely a more important factor than the incident that had occurred. The role of the victim became the role of the accused. The

introduction of rape shield laws in 1992 in Canada gave victims protection during rape trials. Rape shield laws do not allow the defence to ask victims questions regarding their sexual history, thus diminishing the likelihood of discrediting the victim.

In contrast, male perpetrators in this myth are seen as helpless, sexually-frustrated beings, responding to sexually-provocative women.<sup>18</sup> There have been cases in which not guilty verdicts have been returned on the basis that the female victims somehow precipitated their own rape.<sup>19</sup> These myths are especially prominent in acquaintance rape cases. Acquaintance rape victims are more often blamed than stranger rape victims. This is reflective of the mistaken traditional belief that sexual assault can only involve strangers.

There can also be an attribution error: female reactions to trauma and their behaviour are often pathologized by family members, friends, criminal justice personnel, and professionals alike. There is a myth supported by some that women tend to exaggerate their symptoms.

### **Sex trade workers**

Are some victims' lives worth less? Are some victims seen as expendable? The whore stigma — or the idea that women labelled as whores are somehow disposable or less human — is common: “those whores got what they deserved”. As a society we consistently demean any woman considered to be sexually deviant or promiscuous. Many people deem those who work in the sex trade as “throw-aways”. They may not care when these women suddenly go missing, or are abused, or murdered. The demeaning behaviour towards sex trade workers can have a very negative impact on the parents who have children involved in the sex trade. These parents do not agree with society that their child is a “whore” or that they “got what they deserve” because they obviously do not see them in this manner. Society, however, blames these victims for their victimization. Instead of recognizing sex trade workers as being particularly vulnerable, society blames them for choosing a dangerous lifestyle.

### **Homicide**

Losing a loved one through an act of violence can be devastating for a family. No one can ever be prepared for such a loss, and no amount of counselling, prayer, justice, restitution or compassion can ever bring a loved one back. The survivors' world is abruptly and forever changed. The awareness that your loved one's dreams will never be realized hits. Life can suddenly lose meaning, and many

survivors report that they cannot imagine ever being happy again.

Further, victims of homicide are often undervalued because of the apparent or real blame that is attributed to them.<sup>20</sup> Friends and family may question the victim's lifestyle, wondering how they knew the murderer. They might make comments, such as "he was in the wrong place at the wrong time," when this is simply not true. Questioning the innocence of the victim is very hurtful to surviving family members.

### ***Effects of Victim Blaming***

Victim blaming can have many negative and devastating effects on the innocent victims, who have been deemed at fault even though they bear no responsibility for the crime which has been committed against them.

One effect of victim blaming is the subsequent effect it has on the reporting of further crime. Victims who receive negative responses and blame tend to experience greater distress and are less likely to report future abuse.<sup>21</sup> Victims who have been blamed prefer to avoid secondary victimization in the future, so they do not report further crime.<sup>22</sup>

Victim Blaming, along with effecting a victim's decision to report crime, can also impact on a confidante's willingness to support a victim's decision, a witnesses' willingness to testify, authorities' commitment in pursuing cases and prosecuting offenders, a jury's decision to convict, a prosecutor's decision to recommend incarceration and a judge's decision to impose incarceration.<sup>23</sup>

### ***The Media and Socially Marginalized People***

Why is there outcry over certain missing persons and not others? The criminal justice system's response can be very hurtful to families, such as in the case of Maisy Odjick, 17, and Shannon Alexander, 18, who went missing from their Aboriginal community near Ottawa on Sept. 5, 2008. The Quebec provincial police initially believed the girls ran away. The Aboriginal community asked for help after a group of 500 people finished a journey from Vancouver to Parliament Hill to ask the federal government to launch an inquiry into decades of cases of missing women. This case is just one example of how little-to-no care or attention is paid when an Aboriginal person goes missing.

Why do some crimes evoke a national outpouring of rage, grief and sympathy for the victim and their relatives? What happens when there are no sympathetic human interest stories about the survivors and their pain and suffering?

Victim blaming in the media can have numerous negative effects on crime victims. For one, the media can be callous and insensitive when discussing what happened to the victim. They may paint the victim in a negative light by saying they somehow deserved what happened to them, or perhaps that they were not really the victim but the offender.

Victim blaming effectively states that a victim deserved the crime that they endured. Crime is often about violence, power, and control; it needs to be clear that no one deserves it. Most importantly, the victim blame approach is neither effective in resolving problems of violence, nor in protecting the victim from further victimization, nor in protecting future generations from continuing the cycle of abuse.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, it is important that we shift the focus of our blame from the victim of the crime to the perpetrator, in order to ensure that the offender takes responsibility for the crime that they have committed. One way of assuring that an offender is held accountable for their actions is to have a community response. This can occur through the police, courts, schools, clergy, health care providers, and social service agencies. The justice system and social agencies need to work together in order to promote offender accountability, while at the same time helping victims of violence to recover from what has happened to them.

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