

## Victimization

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As a member of the underclass, having spent more than 30 years in juvenile institutions, adult prisons and impoverished neighbourhoods, I have been both victim and victimizer. I have been officially classified by the criminal (in) justice system as a career criminal. Over the years I have given a great deal of thought to the subject of victimization.

Years ago, I reflected on my criminal behaviour and through this self-analysis, I recognized that I am guilty of harming society. Although I never physically harmed anyone directly, I had to acknowledge that through my thievery and drug dealing I caused much suffering and financial loss in the community. The degree of guilt and shame experienced through this admission was tremendous and I desperately needed to make amends and pay restitution for the harm I caused. I quickly learnt that the criminal justice system is not designed to facilitate restorative justice. There would be no amends made and no restitution paid.

In the eyes of society, I am condemned forever to the underclass, to sub-citizenship. I will carry the stigma of a convicted career criminal for the rest of my life - never to be accepted by society as a person worthy of any meaningful degree of respect or dignity. The weight of shame and guilt is too great a burden to carry with me forever. Slowly, the depth and nature of my punishment became clear to me and I realized that certain elements of my punishment and stigmatization will follow me back into society and remain in place as long as I live. There will be no forgiveness.

I have been victimized by my burglaries, robberies and assaults myself. I never felt anywhere near as traumatized as the victims seen on T.V. I may be callous in this regard but, I wonder if some crime victims do not dramatize their victimization?

When I was victimized, I wanted revenge, but, I had no desire to see the offender incarcerated. I knew first hand that incarceration is out of proportion and would exceed the crime. There is no justice in that. When my apartment was broken into, I wanted the broken door fixed and my property replaced. Sending the person to prison for 10 to 15 years would not help me get the door fixed or replace my property. I know the offender is more likely to come out of prison worse. I have no illusions concerning the prospects of rehabilitation, nor the deterrent effect of imprisonment.

Prisons have the ability to turn out "hardened criminals." A petty thief may come out of prison as a cold hearted killer. Few criminals are

“hardened” when they enter the prison system since the majority of prisoners start out as non-violent offenders. We become inured to the degradation and punishment handed down by the criminal justice system. It is the system itself which hardens a criminal in most cases. The hardened offender becomes increasingly indifferent to the suffering and loss inflicted upon the victim, which enables an offender to commit even more serious and harmful offenses. It is important to understand this apathy because it is the shield that criminals use to avoid facing the pain or loss inflicted on their victims. Where does this inductive attitude come from? It is an intricate part of our socialization? The ability to ignore and be indifferent to the plight of the less fortunate is all too obvious in our society. It is the same shield we all use to avoid facing the pain and loss our actions (or inactions) inflict on others.

For instance, a few years ago it became public knowledge that guards at the maximum security prison in Lucasville, Ohio, were handcuffing prisoners to the cell bars and beating them with steel batons. It was established in a court of law that this is a standard method of controlling prisoners deemed by guards to be “macho.” There was no out-cry from the general public protesting this torture, but the U.S. condemns this behaviour in other countries. The public is indifferent to the suffering brought about by our government and uses the apathetic shield of self-righteousness. What ever happens within these prisons is considered a part of our just desserts. So, the beatings continue and criminals become “hardened.”

As society condemns the criminal, so too does the criminal condemn society to his/her hatred and indifference. The ability to cause harm to society is greatly increased as a result of social apathy. It is a vicious cycle that is spiralling out of control. To slow down or possibly reverse this trend we need to understand the thought processes which enable us to victimize others through our actions or our inactions.

I can clearly remember a point in time when I came to the realization that my punishment was exceeding my crime. I made a conscious effort to sever whatever moral and psychological restraints I had which would hinder me from letting society feel the full weight of my hate and anger. I wanted to share my pain and suffering with society at large. During this process I felt some ties holding me back from the dark abyss of utter lawlessness and extreme violence.

I examined the restraints and discovered these ties which hindered me were the result of the few acts of kindness and love experienced in the

course of my life. It was this emotional bond to humanity that I was trying to disregard and sever to enable me to be completely indifferent to the suffering I intended to inflict on others through violence. Luckily, I was able to break this bond. To do so would be to repay those acts of kindness with hate and violence and I could not bring myself to do that. In this manner I stumbled onto my humanity, unexpectedly.

The punishment should never exceed the offense. The news media and politicians have actually added to the problem with false or misleading rhetoric and have focused public hysteria on 'street crime' and often link it to violent crime. Primarily, street crime is committed by members of the underclass; the poor and minorities. Most of the offenses committed by the underclass are drug related. Roughly two-thirds of those imprisoned are non-violent offenders whose punishment has been escalated far beyond the harm which resulted from the crime. For instance, when a person burglarizes a house, it is considered a violent offense and the offender is given a harsh sentence as if great physical harm resulted from the offense, when in fact, no physical harm took place. Law makers justify these harsh sentences by what might have happened if someone had been at home and as if physical harm had actually occurred. This is the rhetoric used to increase the length of sentences.

Sentencing is out of control and even some of the victims have protested excessively harsh sentences handed down to their victimizers. However, these victims who see the injustice and speak out against exceedingly harsh sentences are ignored by the news media, the legislature and the parole board authority. The government and victims' rights advocates give a great deal of lip service to being sensitive to the victim - as long as the victim is screaming for harsher retribution. The government and victim's rights groups completely ignore the concept of victim/offender reconciliation because it involves forgiveness and this is out of character with the current trend of vindictiveness.

Presently, I have heard of some efforts to establish restitution programs, but there is no mention of reconciliation. We desperately need restorative justice that includes both restitution and reconciliation. I do not pretend to have all the answers. However, I believe a part of the final solution to victimization would be to replace apathy with empathy on a national level. It becomes much harder to victimize someone if we are forced to face the harm we cause. A dialogue between victim and offender is long overdue and a reconciliation program would be a step in the right direction. It is time to try restorative justice.