Mental Health Needs of Crime Victims: Epidemiology and Outcomes

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This paper reviews epidemiological estimates of criminal victimization derived largely from nationally based studies in the United States. Origins of conflicting rates and prevalences are explained in terms of varying methodology. Risk factors for victimization, including age, race, gender, and disability, are also outlined, and derived from both national and geographically limited U.S.-based studies. Finally, mental health outcomes of violence are documented, with conclusions drawing on both national and regionally specific studies. These outcomes focus on posttraumatic stress disorder, but also include depression, substance abuse, and panic.

KEY WORDS: PTSD; assault; victim; mental health.

In the field of public health, epidemiology refers to the study of diseases or health-related problems in the general population. This paper examines the scope and mental health impact of crime from an epidemiological perspective. Specifically, we describe various ways crime is measured, limitations of these measurement methods, and estimates of crime generated by each method. Special emphasis is placed on methods that generate national U.S. crime estimates. However, particularly well-conducted studies that focus on a more limited geographic region in the United States are also covered. In general, the paper focuses on violent crimes (e.g., criminal homicide, alcohol-related vehicular homicide, sexual assault, aggravated assault, and robbery), although property crimes will be discussed when relevant. To the extent possible, the paper examines the epidemiology of crimes occurring across the lifespan, irrespective of whether crimes are perpetrated by strangers, acquaintances, or romantic partners. With respect to mental health consequences, the paper focuses primarily on posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) because it is the most consistently documented consequence. However, other consequences will be addressed, as will the impact of crime on covictims.

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Measures of Criminal Victimization

As noted elsewhere (Acierno, Kilpatrick, & Resnick, 1999; Hanson, Kilpatrick, Falsetti, & Resnick, 1995; Reiss & Roth, 1993; Rosenberg & Fenley, 1991), there are several different ways to measure criminal victimization, and obtaining an accurate measurement of crimes such as sexual assault and rape is particularly challenging (Crowell & Burgess, 1996; Kilpatrick, 1983; Kilpatrick, Resnick, Saunders, & Best, 1998a). Estimates of criminal victimization differ because the sources that produce these estimates use different samples, different definitions of the crimes they are attempting to measure, different time frames of measurement, and different units of analysis in reporting statistics.

Prior to reviewing major data sources, it is useful to consider a few key distinctions. First, there is a difference between crime cases and crime victims. A single crime victim who is victimized more than once generates more than one crime case. Second, there is a difference between the prevalence of persons victimized by crime and the incidence of crime cases. The former refers to the proportion of the population that has been victimized at least once in a specified time period. The lifetime prevalence of criminal victimization is defined as the proportion of the population that has ever been a crime victim. The past year prevalence is the proportion of the population that was victimized during the past year. Incidence of crime estimates are generally based on the number of crime cases occurring in a given period of time and are usually expressed as victimization rates. That is, victimization rates are defined as the number of crime cases occurring in a given period per some specified number of people. Third, there is a difference between crime estimates based on cases reported to law enforcement versus unreported cases.

Data Sources

Measures of criminal victimizations are derived from two basic types of sources: official government sources and studies conducted by private researchers, many of which have been funded by grants from federal agencies. The following list comprises the major U.S. sources cited in this paper: Uniform Crime Reports (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI]); National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS; Bureau of Justice Statistics); National Survivor of Homicide Study (National Institute of Justice); National Women’s Study (NWS; National Institute of Justice); National Survey of Adolescents (NSA; National Institutes of Health); National Comorbidity Survey (National Institutes of Health); and National Violence Against Women (NVAW) Survey (National Institute of Justice/Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).

The two major governmental sources are the FBI Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) and the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). UCR provides data on an annual basis about the number of crimes that are reported to law enforcement in major jurisdictions throughout the United States. Obviously, UCR only records crimes that are reported to law enforcement, and there is some judgment used by local police agencies that participate in UCR as to whether they think an incident was actually a crime or not. Also, the UCR crime classification rules only record the most serious crime involved in a given case (e.g., a case involving rape, robbery, and aggravated assault as a part of the same incident would be classified as a rape). Simple assaults (i.e., physical attacks by persons without weapons or which do not produce physical injuries) are not included in UCR, nor are burglaries committed against organizations. These limitations of UCR are discussed in greater detail by Reiss and Roth (1993). Another limitation in UCR data and other data that rely on local police department recording practices (e.g., needs analyses for local victim service agencies) is inconsistency in violence definition and recording. For example, precise definitions of rape might vary tremendously from one department to the next.

The other major governmental data source NCVS is designed to gather information about unreported as well as reported crimes that did not result in fatal injuries (e.g., criminal homicides are not included). Using victimization survey methodology NCVS interviews all members aged 12 and older of approximately 50,000 households about crimes that each person experienced in the past months since the last time they were interviewed. This bounded interview procedure only counts crimes that are disclosed by NCVS respondents between two interviews, but the victimization data are aggregated over two 6-month periods to produce annual estimates. Types of crimes covered are personal crimes and property crimes. Personal crimes include crimes of violence (i.e., rape/sexual assault, robbery, and assault) and personal theft. Property crimes include household burglary, motor vehicle theft, and theft. NCVS is not without limitations. First, it does not measure crimes that are experienced by children under the age of 12. Second, some experts have argued that the NCVS screening questions are less effective than those used in some other studies in detecting intimate partner violence (Crowell & Burgess, 1996; Hanson et al., 1995;...