


Chapter 43

Police Officers: Invisible Victims in the Line of Duty

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ABSTRACT

Police officers are exposed to many dangers on the job. Despite this, society may not intuitively consider officers to be victims. Research indicates officers experience various types of victimization on the job, and these victimizations can have direct and indirect physical, mental, and economic impacts on the officer. As a result of violent and nonviolent victimizations in the line of duty, there are negative consequences on officers' wellbeing. Despite this victimhood, police stories are not often headlined in the media, placed on political agendas, or discussed in local communities. Due to the lack of inclusion on these platforms, police officers are invisible victims. This chapter discusses how officers can be considered invisible victims and examines factors that address why society and officers themselves may not equate their experiences to victimization.

INTRODUCTION

When thinking about what a victim is, one typically envisions a person who experienced a crime. This is, for the most part, an accurate reflection, as the Bureau of Justice Statistics defines a victim as “the recipient of a criminal act, usually used in relation to personal crimes” (NCVS, 2019). Despite this somewhat broad conceptualization of victims, most people likely do not picture police officers—who experience crime, trauma and violence on the job—when they imagine a typical victim.

Scholars highlight that officers are exposed to violence in their occupational role almost daily (Bishop & Boots, 2014). In fact, The President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing (2015) emphasized the importance of further engaging in initiatives that aim to understand and improve officer well-being. Officers who experience negative mental, physical, and emotional consequences due to on-the-job experiences, including victimization, have limited ability to serve the community, and could compromise the safety of civilians and other officers (President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015).

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This chapter begins by examining the prevalence of police officers' exposure to violent and nonviolent crimes and addressing the direct and indirect impact of these experiences on officers. Next, the author explores why, despite regular victimizing experiences in the line of duty, society and police officers themselves often do not consider these experiences to be victimization. The chapter concludes by outlining the implications of continuing to frame officers as invisible victims by discussing the impact on officers, their conduct, and society's perception of law enforcement.

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

1. Identify barriers that may prevent officers from viewing themselves as victims.
2. Recognize barriers that may prevent society from perceiving officers as victims.
3. Discuss the implications of violent and nonviolent victimization on police officers.

BACKGROUND

The most common definition of a victim is a person who experiences crime. However, victimological scholarship argues that being a victim can expand beyond experiencing a crime and apply to a person who experiences harm (Strobl, 2004; Van Dijk, 2009). Beyond defining what a victim is, norms usually describe the general attributes people think of when they think of a victim or a person who experiences victimization. Some of the most common attributes ascribed to victims by society are that they are weak and cannot defend themselves (Strobl, 2004). The norms that set the guidelines for what a victim is and how they are perceived have several implications for victims. For example, if a person who experiences victimization does not ascribe to the attributes or the perception of what a victim is, they are often not seen as victims, or may have difficulty being perceived as legitimate when they are claiming their victimhood (Christie, 1986; Van Dijk, 2009).

The women's rights movement introduced victims' rights and gave victims attention in the early 1970s. Crime victims, specifically female domestic violence victims, gained rights and visibility through this social movement. Victims across the U.S. gained more visibility within society and the criminal justice system. However, through this movement, victimization and the victim label became associated with vulnerability, thus making victimhood more associated with femininity (Durfee, 2011; Howard, 1984). These stereotypes still exist and impact how individuals and society conceptualize the victim label and perceive individuals exposed to victimization. These stereotypes also contribute to explaining why police officers are invisible victims. More specifically, police officers are victimized individuals, but largely fail to be viewed as legitimate victims since the image of a police officer does not align with the aforementioned idea of who victims are, thus making their experiences and subsequent suffering invisible.

Officer Victimization

To understand why officers are invisible victims, it is essential to first discuss the rates at which officers are victimized. However, before delving into the frequency and prevalence of officers' victimizing experiences, it is essential to examine the accuracy of the statistics measuring police victimization. Like many other crime statistics, these data are not representative of the actual number of victimizations, but

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