

The paper was presented at NSfK's 45th Research Seminar
"Crime and Crime Control in an Integrating Europe"
27-30 August 2003, Helsinki.

Citation for the published paper:

Kerstin Svensson, 2003,
"Who needs victim support?",

Crime and crime control in an integrating Europe : NSfK's 45th research seminar. Helsinki, Finland 2003, p. 307-313.

ISBN: 951-53-2554-4.

Published with permission from: Scandinavian Research Council for
Criminology / Nordiska Samarbetsrådet för Kriminologi (NSfK).

Alternative location for the whole report:

http://www.nsfk.org/downloads/seminarreports/researchsem_no45.pdf

WHO NEEDS VICTIM SUPPORT?

Svensson, Kerstin

In my presentation I will present some outlines of an ongoing research project on Victim support in Sweden. The main ideas in my presentation could be transferred to the ideas of victim support even in other countries.

My research concerns the ideas that Victim Support is based on, how the volunteers are organised and how the support is carried out. In this project, the idea of need is central. Since Victim Support is a rather new phenomenon there is a lot of talk about the importance of the organisation and of the work done. This makes the stories about need central. To be in need or to manage is a question open for negotiation. The concept of need is depending on the interpretation of the one who defines it. When a person is a victim of crime, her needs' can be defined from many different perspectives. In the same way the societal needs of an organisation for Victim Support can be described in different ways.

I will present to you how these needs occur in stories about victim support and then discuss how it could be a practise so loved by everyone and what consequences it may have. First, I have to tell you about my study and something about Victim Support and the role of the organisation in the Swedish welfare state. Then I will present some interpretations of stories told by persons involved and finally conclude with a description of who it is that benefits from this practise and answer my question – who needs victim support.

Empirical base

My presentation is based on this research project that is financed by The National Crime Victim Compensation and Support Authority in Sweden. The material is collected and consists of: A survey based on interviews by phone to all victim support organisations in Sweden about how the work is organised. 105 organisations participated. Interviews about how the support to victims is carried out. 28 persons were interviewed: thirteen volunteers, four employed, six supported victims and five partners (from the social service, the police and the women's support service). Further there is a vignette study where 33 volunteers judges 32 cases.

My work in this project is ongoing, for the moment I am working with the material and unfortunately I haven't yet had the time to analyse these vignettes, so my presentation will be based on the survey and the interviews.

In these interviews persons have told their stories about victim support, what they do and what they think about it. Charles Tilly (1999) has stated that stories reveals relations and if we listen to stories told about a practise, we can find out how the relations are formed in this practise. Therefore, the interviews are based on stories about what they do and how they do when they practise victim support. Before I go into these stories, I will give you a picture of how the work is organised, nationally and locally.

Victim Support in Sweden

Victim Support in Sweden started in two cities in the mid 80's and is now organised throughout the country. The support is given through Non Governmental Organisations who are connected in a national organisation, which gives guidelines for practice and education of volunteers.

In Sweden, with a history of a strong welfare state, this arrangement with a wide spread voluntary organisation taking care of questions connected to the Criminal Justice System, is a new way of organising social work. Last year, the Social Service Act was changed and there was added a section that says that the Social Services should care for the victims of crime, especially for women and children. Though, in practice, it is still the NGO's, that are doing it.

There are a bit more than 100 victim support organisations. It is not easy to tell an exact number, because there are a lot of changes in these organisations. Some small local organisations go together and form bigger units, some large organisations divide themselves into smaller and in some places in the countryside the local organisation has no activity, at least not any activity aimed at victims of crime.

As a whole about 8 000 persons and companies are members in local victim support organisations. A bit more than 1 000 persons are engaged as volunteers. In each local organisation there can be between 3 and 25 volunteers, most often about 10. Half of the organisations have an employed coordinator; the others coordinate their work through either an unpaid coordinator or through continuous meetings in the group of volunteers. The employee is sometimes skilled social worker, sometimes administrator, and there are also a lot of other competencies represented among the employees. The volunteers is most often retired, it is only six organisations that do not have any person over 65 in their group of volunteers.

The volunteers have their background in a wide variety of professions; there are psychologists, skilled social workers, lawyers, teachers and headmasters, clergymen, doctors, nurses, and policemen. All of them are professions that have met victims in their work. But there is also people who work, or have worked, in almost every other area: construction workers, farmers, industrial workers, hairdressers, accountants, clerks, chauffeurs, housewives, designers, air hostess', students, unemployed and so on. Even if there is a wide variety, there is a core of profession from social work and health care. After that persons with professional experience from the justice system and from schools also are very frequent as volunteers in victim support. These volunteers share the same interest in helping victims. No matter what they have had as a profession, the ideals for the supporting work are transferred from the social work.

The contact between victim and supporter

The most common way to deal with a victim in victim support starts with a note from the police. When Victim Support has got the name of a victim, they contact them to see if they need help. The volunteer phones and presents her or himself by first name and that she phones from Victim Support. Then they tell the person that she had heard about the crime from the police and that she can offer help. After this first contact by phone, three forms of contact can occur.

1. The once-only contact

In this first and often only contact, the volunteer presents herself and tells what the Victim Support can offer. They support through listening, but they can also advise the victims where to turn in a lot of questions. They know how the justice system works and can give information about it, they can give advice concerning compensation and other legal questions and they can recommend the victims to contact the right organisation or authority in a lot of other questions.

In this first contact they inform the victim about this, and they talk with the victim about what happened and how he feels about it. Most commonly, the victim that has been phoned decline help and says that he can manage. Then the volunteer tells him that he may phone back if he wants to talk and that he then shall ask for the person he now is talking to. The first conversation, or the once-only contact, mainly has the character of *information*.

2. The repeated contact

Some of the victims phone back and some want some specific help. There are also volunteers that ask, in the first conversation, if they may phone back. They do it because they think that the victims' problem might be bigger than the person himself considers it at the moment. This repeated contact most often concern practical matters. A victim can ask about the criminal justice system, or need help to fill in an application form for compensation, or just wants to talk to someone. This repeated contact usually happens two to four times and is

finished when the case has been in court. This repeated contact has the character of *counselling*.

3. The continuous contact

In many local victim support organisations volunteers have continuous contact with some victims. In my survey I was told about many contacts that lasted for several years, without new incidents. It can be cases where the offender is not found, or other reasons that there won't be any trial. It can also be cases where the victim is very worried. When the volunteers talk about the continuous contact, they describe it in terms of the need of the victims. But it also happens that this long lasting relationship is described as need of the volunteers. The continuous contact is described as a *relationship*.

The persons that turn into victims in need of the continuous contact are most often the ones who fit the description of the "The ideal victim" that the Nils Christie (1986) has described. By an ideal victim Christie means a person (or category of individuals) who, when hit by crime, are most readily given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim. The status of an "ideal victim" is determined by means of at least five attributes:

- * The victim is weak. Sick, old or very young people are particularly well suited as ideal victims.
- * The victim was carrying out a respectable project, as caring for her sister.
- * She was where she could not possibly be blamed for being, as in the street during daytime.
- * The offender was big and bad.
- * The offender was unknown and in no personal relationship to her. (Christie 1986, p 19)

A strong person will not be a victim in need of a continuous contact, neither will the person who were part of the crime and in the wrong place when it was committed.

Another way to regard this could be through the concept of "sympathy". Clark (1987) has discussed how victims are understood by the two concepts "sympathy margins" and "sympathy etiquette". A sympathy margin is the amount of leeway an individual has for which he or she can be granted sympathy and not blamed. Ideal victims have broad sympathy margins, but in order to gain respect they also have to consider the sympathy etiquette that says that you may not claim too much sympathy. Neither can you claim too much sympathy and the sympathy has to be claimed under appropriate circumstances. And finally, when you get sympathy, you are supposed to regard it as a gift and reciprocate to others.

An ideal victim with broad sympathy margins

I will present an example from one of the victims I talked to. It is a man in his late 20's. He is an immigrant, living by himself and had recently got a good job. He has no criminal record and no "social record". His first victimisation was when he was assaulted by unknown men, because of unknown reasons. He had a lot of medical care after the assault, and when he was just recovering, he became victimised a second time.

He was on his way home after work an early Friday night and stopped by his brother's shop. The brother was sitting eating in the room behind the shop, so he said that he could take care of business so that the brother would get a break. Then the shop was robbed by unknown and armed men and he was shot.

When I met him one and a half year after this second victimisation, he was still in medical care. He had spent a long period in hospital and he had long lasting physical wounds. He was also still in a state of shock. He was not angry; he was merely confused and sad. He did not believe in other people and he did not expect help. Therefore he was very grateful to all people that had shown him sympathy, his newly found friends from the work place he had not really had the time to get acquainted to, his family and his contact in victim support.

The story of this man shows us the picture of the ideal victim. He is weak in society because of his status as immigrant and because of the fact that he has not yet found his place in the labour force. He is respectable because of taking care of his brother's shop, so that the brother would get a break. He could not possibly be blamed for being in the shop on the time of the robbery. The offenders were big and bad because they were armed and further, they were unknown to him.

This victim's sympathy margins are broad and he regards the sympathy etiquette. He has no record of criminality or social problems. He is a good worker. He is a good brother. He does not claim or expect sympathy and when he gets sympathy, he is grateful. This victim is really a person in need of support; he is an ideal victim with broad margins of sympathy. No one can say that he does not need or deserve help and support. But all victims are not so well fitting into the picture of appropriate needs.

Prioritized categories

In Sweden the national organisation for victim support this year talks about certain categories that should be given special attention. These categories are women, young persons, disabled, immigrants and homosexuals. That means that the category that they should not pay so much attention to is a Swedish, middle aged, heterosexual man who has no handicap, not physically, not culturally and not socially. This man is the normal man in society, and he can not be regarded as a victim in need.

In this idea of the ideal victim and the need of the victims the ideas of traditional social work is transferred. Traditionally social work has aimed towards individuals and groups that are socially excluded in one way or another. It is the poor, drinkers and drug misusers, maltreated children, criminals and so on. When the Victim Support strives to be an organisation in the field of social work, they have to create the victim as a person in need. This need is constructed as need from an underprivileged group, a weak category.

Persons that do not fit in the picture of an ideal victim because they have a strong position in the community, when they are victimised, the victim support acts differently. One volunteer told me that a well known, influential politician in the city had been a victim of burglary. When the message came from the police, the volunteer was quite sure that this was not a person in need of help, but anyway, she phoned him, informed him about victim support and asked if she could be of any help. Of course he said that he could manage by himself, but he also said that he was very happy to hear that there is help to get for the ones who need it. This was the main thing for the volunteer. Since she knew that he did not match the distinguishing feature for a needy victim, the phone-call was made just to point out that the organisation did a good job and to show this man with influence that they did a good work. He was not seen as a needy victim – his sympathy margins are broad, it is true, but he could not possibly be seen as an ideal victim. He has a powerful position in society and his social status is perhaps even higher than the victim supporters, therefore he could not be ascribed to the category of weak, underprivileged. And when the victim is not weak, it is harder to regard the offender as big and strong. Finally, this man is a representative for the category that victim support should not pay so much attention: he is a man, he is Swedish, he is middle-aged, he has no disability and he is heterosexual.

What a victim may need

The victim shouldn't just be ideal; it is also supposed to have acceptable needs. As a victim worthy of support you have to express the right problem and you have to be interested in the right solution.

The accepted need of a victim is primarily to talk or to ask for help with arrangement in the criminal process. The need of revenge is not an accepted need; ideas about revenge are rewritten as a result of the violation connected to the crime. The victimisation is described as occurring in relation to the offender, but in order to fit into the help given, the victim has to fit into the ideas of the victim that exists within the victim support.

Winkel and Vrij (1998) have stated that the most appropriate need of a victim to regard is his or her wellbeing prior to the victimisation. They describe a model where the police could assess the prior well-being by the simple question: How are you generally doing in life? If the police officer could ask the victim to grade his or her general well-being on a ten-point scale it would be possible to judge if help is needed. Winkel and Vrij says that persons that grade their general well-being as 8 to 10 on such a scale probably can manage by them self. On the other hand, people that grade their general well-being as 0 to 3 might have to severe problems for the victim support to deal with, they need professional care. Therefore, it is persons that put their well-being as 4-7 that should be referred to victim support.

This simple selection instrument could be helpful for the police in their judgement on who they are going to refer where. But in the stories told in my interviews, it is clear that victimisation is made not only by the crime. In the stories about the needs of the victim, it is very common that they describe an unexpected obstacle in the welfare state. The victims need support by the Victim support because the authorities they turned to did not act as the victim expected.

In the stories told, my informants often describe unexpected obstacles in the welfare state as the main problem. They describe their need of help in terms of malfunctioning authorities. Often they start by describing the crime, then they say "... but that wasn't the worst, the worst was when I contacted ...". And then they tell stories about the way the police acted, how the hospital received them, how they where receive by the insurance company, if they where respected by the court or by any other organisation where they tried to get help and thought that they could get help. When they do not get the expected help, they are taken by surprise and the disappointment that follows this surprise is often told as the worst victimisation. They did believe in the welfare state, they thought that there would be help if they needed, and now they do not get that help. That is often regarded as a bigger problem than the crime it self, because they were aware of the possibility of being a victim of crime. In that way, the expectations affect the experience of being a victim in need of help.

The expectations of the welfare state are not unanimous to the reality of Sweden today. The withdrawal of the welfare state leads to surprises among the citizens. When the expectations are based on a form of welfare system that does not exist any more, the individual is not received as expected. The withdrawal of the welfare state is the base for the organisation of victim support. The volunteers have created their task in this niche that revealed when the welfare state was rearranged. In that way, the changes in the welfare state are the prerequisite for the victim support organisation (cf. Tilly 1999).

A victim career

It is possible to talk about a victim career. You have the first victimisation when the crime is committed, the second when you meet the justice system and seek help in the welfare state. As a third step, when you get in contact with the victim support, you have to fit in their picture of a needy victim. The person that matches this picture belongs, as I told earlier, primarily the weak category, perhaps they are slightly marginalised too. They have a few real friends, they have a loose connection in the community, weak knowledge of their rights and they do not know how to navigate in the organisational landscape. But, they do not beg for help and they do not claim sympathy. They accept the possibility to pronounce the right need and they are grateful for the help given, they consider the help as a gift.

Some of the volunteers even describe the situation when the grateful victim, maybe the old, kind, lonely women, comes to victim support with a cake as a way to say thank you for your gift, your help. This is how many of the volunteers describe the reward in their task. This is one way of understanding the relationship between the supporter and the victim, but there are a wide variety of ideas on how to arrange practical victim support. All of the ideas derive from social work, but even social work is a multi-faceted practise.

Depending on the main ideas of the local victim support and of the specific volunteer, the relationship between the helper and the helped turns out differently. We can regard social

work as built on four forms of relationship, each one of them with different foci, based on different ideas and with different roles for both the helper and the helped (Svensson 2002).

Form	Focus	Idea	The role of the helper	The role of the person in need
Self help group	the problem	to be there	participant	participant
Treatment	the method	to be useful	expert	applicant
Philanthropy	the helper	to be good	giver	receiver
Bureaucracy	the organisation	to be right	employee	citizen

In victim support in Sweden there are some attempts to develop self-help groups and to establish victim treatment, but mainly the practise is described as based on philanthropic or bureaucratic ideas. Stories about the organisation and the work done are often based on the bureaucratic form, while stories of the actual work carry the form of philanthropy. In this relationship, the helper and the helped form an unequal unity. This inequality is imported with the model from social work and by transferring it to victim support it becomes part in conserving inequality (Tilly 1999). As Goffman (1959), among others, has pointed out, when persons act in their roles, they develop their identities and their self-esteem. Here, the volunteer can develop his or her picture of being a strong and good person by giving help to the needy victim. The victim, on the other hand, can develop a picture of him- or herself as an inferior person in need of help and in need of being taken care of.

This way, the volunteer's need of doing well and being good becomes a forth step in a victim career. Kennedy (2002) has discussed the victim career in comparison to the ideas of a criminal career and labelling process and concludes that the mechanisms are the same. In both cases the social reaction to the status influences the development of how one understand ones identity.

This victim career only concerns a small part of all victims, though. As I told earlier, only a few persons go in to continuous contact in victim support. Most Victim support organisations are aware of the fact that it is not only a good thing to connect closely to victims. They strive for people to get appropriate help in other organisations, and then as persons, not as victims. That means that there are a lot of volunteers that act in the niche the welfare state left in order to recreate the function of the same welfare state, the same function that has made it possible for them selves to get a role as a good and helping person. Nevertheless, there are always individuals among the volunteers that ties the victims close so that the volunteer has someone to care for. Because the volunteer needs victim support. The volunteer is a person in need of being needed, which is why he or she got engaged in the first place.

Conclusion – who needs victim support?

In the meeting between the helper and the helped two persons interact in a niche created where the welfare state left space. Victim support developed in an arena where the welfare state used to act. Therefore the need of victim support has many sources. If we look at it from the individual perspective, both victims and volunteers need victim support. If we look at it from a structural perspective, both the social welfare system and the criminal justice system need victim support.

Victims of crime that are in a weak position in society have broad sympathy margins and fit the description of an ideal victim can get help and they need the help. Volunteers that are healthy and strong persons in need of a task and feed-back through doing something for others get a task in victim support. The criminal justice system, that need victims that can tell their stories in the courts and give their witness need supporters to encourage victims to believe in justice and to dare to tell their stories. The social service need the victim support organisation to handle of this new category, "victims", that they are legally responsible for,

but do not have any resource or knowledge to care for. The conclusion of this is that victim support is needed by all the welfare system.

In that way, you can say that everyone, both in an individual perspective and in a structural perspective benefit from this organisation. But is there really a win-win-situation? Can everyone win? Isn't it necessary to have a loser when there is a winner?

We can turn the picture and look at it from the other side: As long as there are weak persons in society there is a niche for helpers. As long as there are strong healthy persons that feel that they can not contribute enough to society, there is persons who can act as helpers. When the welfare state withdraws, there is room for voluntary organisations complementing the governmental organisation. And when the volunteers create their organisation and fulfil their task they get a role themselves, they give a role to the weak person and they legitimises the withdrawal of the Welfare State

Depending on what perspective we put on this, we answer the question differently. It is a question of how we regard the idea of the relations between individuals and between individuals and society.

References:

- Christie, N (1986) The Ideal Victim, in Fattah, Ezzat A. (ed) *From crime policy to victim policy : Reorienting the Justice System*, pp. 17-30
- Clark, C (1987) Sympathy Biography and Sympathy Margin, in *American Journal of Sociology*, 93 (2), pp. 290-321
- Goffman, E (1959) *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Doubleday
- Kennedy, J.S (2002) Victims of crime and labelling theory: a parallel process?, in *Deviant Behavior: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 23, pp 235-265.
- Svensson, K (2002) Brottsoffer och stödpersoner. En kartläggning av Brottsofferjourerna i Sverige 2002. Meddelanden från Socialhögskolan. Lund: Lunds universitet.
- [Victims of crime and volunteers. A Survey on the Swedish Victim Support Organisation 2002.]
- Charles Tilly (1999) *Durable inequality*. Berkeley, Calif. ; London : University of California Press
- Winkel, F.W. and Vrij, A. (1998) Who is in need of victim support?: The issue of accountable, empirically validated selection and victim referral, in *Expert Evidence* 6, pp. 23-41.