

Never the same again

The consequences of crime for victims

Summary

Almost 5.2 million people were victims of crime in the Netherlands in 2008. Most of them were victims of theft or vandalism, though violent crime also occurred regularly. These figures have proved fairly stable over time. This means that almost 30% of the Dutch population are victims of crime each year. Fortunately, the majority of reported crimes involve almost no physical injury or material damage and the offences are more of an ‘unwelcome nuisance’ for those affected. Nonetheless, for some victims the consequences of crime are serious.

The Dutch Ministry of Justice wanted to gain a clearer picture of the consequences of crime on victims and their families in order to be able to provide the right help and support. At the request of the Ministry of Justice’s Research and Documentation Centre (WODC), the Netherlands Institute for Social Research/SCP accordingly carried out a study of these consequences, based on the following research questions:

- 1 What consequences do victims and their families suffer as a result of crime?
- 2 How long do those consequences last?
- 3 How many victims suffer serious consequences?

We focused in our study on ‘ordinary’ citizens who have become victims of crime. In this study, ‘victims’ are individual citizens who are affected by crimes committed by other citizens. The offences are mainly crimes of violence (such as physical abuse, threats, rape, murder, etc.), theft (burglary, pick-pocketing, robbery, car theft, etc.), vandalism to private property and traffic offences. The consequences for the families of victims receive only limited attention in this study, because a separate long-term study of this is currently under way.

We looked at the consequences of crime from three perspectives in this study. Those consequences can be broadly divided into four categories, namely physical, financial, psychological/emotional and social/behavioural consequences, and can occur in the short, medium and long term.

First, we compiled an overview of the scientific literature from recent decades on the consequences of crime. These sources were drawn mainly from the disciplines of psychology, medicine and sociology. A total of 203 relevant publications were found. A limited content analysis was performed on these sources, and this revealed that a good deal of the research has been carried out into the consequences of crimes of

violence, and less into the consequences of other offences, and also that the emphasis in these studies is on the psychological consequences for victims.

Secondly, we used Dutch victim surveys carried out in the period 1997-2004 by Statistics Netherlands (CBS). The emphasis in our analyses - which covered more than 35,000 offences - was on the emotional problems experienced by victims in the short and medium term. We related these problems to characteristics of the offence (such as physical injury and financial loss) and of the victim (e.g. gender, age and education level). The resultant data enabled us to estimate the number of victims experiencing severe emotional problems.

Finally, we conducted 17 interviews with victims; the interviewees were selected by and approached via the Dutch victim support association *Slachtofferhulp Nederland*. We spoke to ten victims of physical abuse and threats and seven victims of burglary. The offences had taken place between 18 months and five years previously. These interviews led to an inventory of the consequences in the short, medium and longer term, and provided an insight into the way in which people come to terms with being victims of crime and how it influences their daily lives.

All this led us to the following conclusions.

Offences which are serious in legal terms do not always have serious consequences, and offences which are not serious in legal terms sometimes do have serious consequences

One of the key findings is that offences which are serious from a judicial perspective (in terms of the penalty they carry) do not always have serious consequences for the victim, while victims of crimes that are not serious from a legal perspective do sometimes experience serious consequences. The surveys showed that victims experience serious emotional problems following an average of 9% of all offences. Those consequences can range from frequently thinking about or constantly brooding over the event to being completely obsessed by it. Emotional problems of this kind occur most frequently among victims of violence, but are also relatively common in victims of burglary and car theft. In percentage terms this group of victims is not enormous, but we are still talking about more than 500,000 offences each year in which victims experience serious emotional problems, and 154,200 of these experience very serious emotional problems. It emerged from the surveys and interviews that even victims who suffer little or no physical injury can still sometimes suffer serious consequences. This is the case for victims of physical abuse, for example, but also for victims of burglary. This conclusion did not emerge from our literature review, probably because most of the studies reviewed were focused on judicially serious offences (usually involving violence). Only limited research has been carried out into the consequences for victims of crimes against property and less serious crimes of violence. The conclusion from our study is that, while the offence is perhaps less serious for these victims in terms of the physical injury or financial loss suffered,

the nature of the consequences is comparable and victims of these crimes can also experience serious problems.

Physical injury and financial loss increase the risk of emotional problems, but victims of offences not involving injury and loss can also experience emotional problems

Where crimes result in physical injury or financial loss, there is a greater chance that the victims will also experience emotional problems. This finding is supported by all three sources used in this study. However, the survey data reveal that some victims experience serious problems even where there is no physical injury or financial loss. The characteristics of the victims themselves are important here. Although we used fairly broad indicators in our study, we found that people who are more physically and socially vulnerable more often experience emotional problems. Analyses performed in a bid to explain the probability of emotional problems based on characteristics of the offence and of the victim proved to have little explanatory power. It is therefore important to emphasise that the predictive value of obvious characteristics of offences such as physical injury and financial loss is low. These characteristics are accordingly of limited value for use as 'screening tools'.

Crimes in the 'personal sphere' have more serious consequences

We found several indications in this study that crimes which take place within the victim's personal sphere have a greater impact. Offences perpetrated by people known to the victim (such as stalking and domestic violence) often lead to serious psychological problems. Our analyses of the survey data showed that the consequences are often more pronounced if the victim knows the perpetrator by name or by sight. Offences carried out at locations which are frequented by the victims (in their own neighbourhood), which consequently figure in their daily routine, also have a more marked impact. Burglary in particular is regarded by occupants as a serious infringement of their personal lives; the emotional consequences are fairly severe, including for children living at home. This perception was confirmed in several interviews. Victims of violence who frequently have to pass the place where the offence was committed are also constantly confronted with the offence. It can be deduced from these findings that the emotional consequences for the victim are often greater where the offence is committed in their personal space or infringes their physical integrity.

The consequences for most victims are limited and of short duration; a small group experience lasting serious consequences

Physical injury as a result of a crime is rare, and where it does occur the injury suffered is generally relatively slight. Financial loss as a direct result of the offence is more common, but that too is often limited and is generally reimbursed by insurance. The majority of victims accordingly do not suffer (lasting) physical injury or (major) financial consequences. The emotional problems are generally also limited. Despite this, most offences do appear to leave lasting consequences in one way or

another. Most of the victims we spoke to reported that their lives were no longer quite the same as before the offence. They have become more alert to potential incidents, less trusting of strangers and more aware of their own vulnerability. They have changed their routines and avoid what they perceive to be potentially unsafe or threatening situations. These are not major or serious behavioural changes, but these people never feel quite the same again.

In addition there is a small group of victims – the precise number is not known – who suffer physical complaints and financial consequences in the longer term. Physical complaints such as difficulty sleeping, concentration problems and the exacerbation of existing physical problems, disappear in most victims within a few weeks or a few months. For some victims, however, these complaints may last for years, often accompanied by psychological problems. Financial consequences in the longer term often ensue from other consequences; a drop in income due to loss of employment, for example, is often a result of psychological or physical complaints. Psychological consequences are most visible immediately after the offence. Feelings such as disbelief, anxiety, shock and anger are all usually involved. For most people these emotions recede again fairly quickly (within a few weeks) and after around six months virtually all victims have regained their equilibrium. Victims whose emotions remain seriously disturbed after several months are often suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder or long-term emotional problems. It is also apparent – especially from the interviews with victims – that psychological consequences can lead on to other consequences; for example, increased distrust can influence relationships with friends and acquaintances. At the same time, support from the social network is of great importance in coming to terms with the event. We also see that the way in which people come to terms with being victims of criminal offences corresponds closely with the way they come to terms with other radical life events.

Children also often experience consequences from offences

The fact that children suffer the consequences of violence within the family (even where they are not the direct victims) is supported in many studies. Children who grow up in a family where the parents have a violent relationship are at greater risk of themselves becoming involved in a violent partner relationship, or of experiencing alcohol or drug problems or depression.

Our interviews revealed that children can also be affected by the consequences of offences experienced by their parents in other ways. For example, the infringement of privacy that ensues from burglary also undermines children's feelings of safety. Children may for example be afraid to go to their room alone, or worry when the family returns home following a holiday.

Families of victims of fatal violence often suffer serious consequences

This study only looked at the consequences for families of victims in the literature review, because a long-term study is currently under way on the consequences of murder and manslaughter for victims' families. Many studies focus on the mourning process and conclude that the families of victims of fatal violence go through the same stages as families of other victims. The psychological problems suffered by families of victims of fatal violence do however appear to be more serious. Parents of children who have lost their lives through violent crime are for example more frequently affected by severe psychological problems (such as post-traumatic stress disorder) than parents who have lost a child through an accident or suicide.