

## SME RESEARCH BRIEF

### Research Review – The Victim Offender Overlap

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*What are the implications for police response when we acknowledge the Victim Offender Overlap?*

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The law enforcement community and much of society often differentiate between the offender population and the victim population. Most criminological research also segregates victims from offenders, treating the two populations as entirely separate, without considering the frequency with which these two categories intersect. While often the subject of research surrounding mental health and addictions, many Canadian inmates can also be understood as being both victims and offenders, and this has implications for how we deal with people who have committed crimes.

#### *About the Research*

To answer the research question, I reviewed dozens of studies conducted in many different countries. I am also involved in primary research where we have interviewed and surveyed 271 incarcerated men and women in Canada to determine how the victim offender overlap impacts the incarcerated population.

#### *What Does the Evidence Say?*

The victim offender overlap is when an offender is also victimized, or a victim also offends. The unfortunate consequence when someone offends is that they are often deemed as the offender rather than an individual who has had both experiences and is in need of support. These experiences tend to lead individuals down a path where they offend more and become regular customers of the justice system, never having the trauma of their victimization addressed.

The evidence of my primary research shows that 80% of males, and over 80% of females, are victimized prior to their first detected offence. The victim offender overlap occurs in 96% of incarcerated persons, at some time in their life.

#### *Additional Factors*

Incarcerated people have high rates of trauma (Wolff, Shi 2012), and trauma needs to form part of our understanding of why victims become offenders and vice versa. Trauma can have an effect on the developing brain where “states become traits” (Perry et al 1995); for example, the state of emotional trauma by witnessing violence or being a direct victim of violence as a child may result in violence as a trait throughout the life course of the individual.

### *Implications for Practice*

One major implication of the existing research on victim offender overlap is that it reinforces the importance of trauma-informed police responses and trauma-informed systems, for both victims and offenders. While trauma-informed systems are not a new concept, these have not yet been implemented as broadly as needed. The findings of my research have potential outcomes that could enhance and support society moving forward. With 96% of the entire sample experiencing some form of violent victimization, the intimation that there is trauma associated with that victimization can be made.

Additional relevant training and being able to respond in a trauma-informed way may also afford the police additional opportunities to develop or improve upon procedurally just practices. If the police better understand trauma, and as a result understand the potential impacts of their actions, then they may act with compassion toward both victims and offenders, recognizing the overlap. Research shows that when an individual is treated in a procedurally just way, even upon arrest, they are less likely to reoffend.

The importance of police response has been demonstrated in existing research, which shows that many offenders have never reported their victimizations to the police as they do not see the police as a legitimate power holder. This gap results in a cycle of offending and victimization that becomes harder to break over time. If the police have a better understanding of the needs of the community and can respond effectively to the individuals in that community, people will offend less, and the environment will be safer for all.

### *Key References*

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