

Victim Impact Class

The Victim impact class is an educational program designed to teach offenders about the human consequences of crime. Offenders are taught how crime affects the victim and the victim's family, friends, and community, and how it also affects them and their own families, friends, and communities. Specific modules address property crimes, sexual assault, domestic violence, child abuse and neglect, elder abuse and neglect, drunk driving, drug-related crimes, gang violence, and homicide. Victim impact classes have been adapted for both adult and juvenile offenders in diversion, probation, prison, pre-release, detention, and parole supervised settings.

A key element of the classes is the direct involvement of victims and victim service providers. They tell their personal stories of being victimized or of helping victims to reconstruct their lives after a traumatic crime. Parents of incarcerated youth and community representatives, such as insurance adjusters, may also speak to the class. Offenders are encouraged to enter into a dialogue with the guest speakers.

Some programs integrate victim impact panels, composed of three to four victims of the particular type of crime being examined, into the curriculum. When the panel format is used, the class participants may ask questions at the end of the presentation, but usually do not engage in discussion with the victim presenters.

This program was originally developed in 1986 by the California Youth Authority (CYA) and called the Impact of Crime on Victims Program. CYA offers this program to offenders incarcerated in CYA facilities throughout California.

Goals

The goals of victim impact classes include:

- Teach offenders about the short-and long-term trauma of victimization.
- Increase offenders' awareness of the negative impact of their crime on their victims and others.
- Encourage offenders to accept responsibility for their past criminal actions.
- Provide victims and victim service providers with a forum to educate offenders about the consequences of their criminal behaviors, with the hope that it will help to prevent future offending.
- Build linkages between criminal and juvenile justice agencies and victims and victim service organizations.

Implementation

The victim impact class program can be adapted to incorporate between eight and 40 hours of classroom activities. Strong support and involvement from crime victims, victim service providers, and community members are essential to program planning, development, and implementation. Once a program is established, judges and criminal and juvenile justice agencies can refer or order offenders to participate.

Like any other program that brings offenders together with victims, it is essential that both participating offenders and victim speakers be carefully screened to ensure that they are appropriate candidates for this intervention. Every precaution should be taken to avoid any retraumatization of the victims involved. They should be thoroughly prepared before coming to the class and debriefed afterward.

Many programs provide an opportunity for offenders, after completing the course material, to conduct fund-raising activities or a community service project to benefit victims. For example, program participants at one CYA facility worked to raise funds for victims throughout the year, collecting more than \$10,000 that was donated to a local child abuse council, battered women's shelter, and Parents of Murdered Children chapter.

Lessons Learned

A small study conducted in 1994 by the Washington Department of Corrections found that adult offenders under correctional supervision who participated in victim awareness classes were more likely to fulfill their restitution obligations to victims than non-participants (Stutz, 1994). Pre- and post-tests administered to offenders participating in the program indicated that most had increased sensitivity to and understanding of the negative impact of crime on victims (CYA, 1992).

In general, victims and victim service providers who participate as speakers in victim impact classes express high levels of satisfaction and believe that their involvement may help prevent offenders from continuing their criminal or delinquent activities in the future. One research study conducted to examine the effects on victims of speaking to convicted drunk drivers (Mercer, 1995) found that 82 percent of victims who told their stories to offenders said that it aided them in their recovery.

For More Information

A series of training-for-trainers seminars on the victim impact class program is being offered by Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) and CYA, with support from the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC). For more information about the seminars or about curriculum materials, including student resource manuals and instructors guides, contact Regina Sobieski, MADD, at 1-800- 438-6233, ext. 261 or the OVC Response Center at 800-851-3420.

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