

# Biases may stoke victim blaming, or reduce it, no matter what the crime

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

General biases may be at work when people blame or criticize victims of crimes, including rape and robbery victims, according to criminologists. These biases may lead them to criticize, or avoid the criticism of victims of rape and other crimes, they added.

In two studies on the role biases play in victim blaming, about 80 percent of participants assigned some direct blame to [victims](#) of robbery, while about 43 percent of the participants leveled some direct blame at [rape victims](#), said Richard Felson, professor of criminology and sociology, Penn State. In direct blame, the word, "blame," is used when describing a victim's role in the crime, whereas indirect blame involves statements, such as the victim "should not have gotten in that situation."

"This research calls into question the idea that rape victims are more likely to be blamed unfairly than other victims," said Felson. "People sometimes assign blame to victims of any crime, but they still assign most of the blame to offenders, as they obviously should. However, when they think victims have behaved recklessly they may assign them some of the blame."

The percentage of participants who assigned indirect blame to rape victims—about 80 percent—was about the same as the percentage of participants who assigned indirect blame to robbery victims.

The researchers, who reported their findings in the current issue of the *Psychology of Violence*, said that sympathy for the victim and anger at the offender lessens blaming, while hindsight encourages it. These general biases, rather than biases against women, may change the level of blame for victims.

Male participants were more likely to directly assign blame to rape victims, but were also more likely to assign direct blame to robbery victims.

"This suggests that male participants have a more punitive response to victims of all crimes, not just rape victims," said Felson, who worked with Christopher Palmore, a former doctoral student in criminology, Penn State, and currently visiting assistant professor of criminal justice,

University of Louisiana at Lafayette. He added that there was no gender difference in assigning indirect blame.

Assigning blame, directly or indirectly, does not suggest that people deserve to be victimized, according to Felson. Nor does assigning some blame to victims imply less blame for offenders. However, some people think in these ways, he added.

He added that there are actions that people can take to lessen the likelihood that they will become victimized. Crime prevention programs are focused on potential victims because it is easier to convince law-abiding citizens to take actions that might lower their likelihood of experiencing a crime, compared to trying to convince criminals not to engage in crime, Felson said.

"The idea that victims have an impact and that they can take steps to decrease their risk is well-accepted—and it's the basis for most crime prevention," he said. "You lock your doors, you generally take precautions in life."

In the first study, the researchers recruited 235 undergraduate students in a criminal justice course and 113 students in an introductory course in criminology. Approximately 58 percent of the participants were female. The researchers randomly assigned participants one of three vignettes that describe situations that either ended in a robbery or a rape. After the volunteers read the vignette they were asked to take a survey that assessed their attitudes on direct and indirect blame.

In the second study, the researchers recruited 239 undergraduate students in an introductory course in criminology who were not involved in the first study. Each participant was randomly assigned two of four possible vignettes. The vignettes used different names and pronouns to test the effect of gender on victim blaming. This study found that

participants assigned as much blame to male rape victims as they assigned to female rape victims. They also assigned as much blame to victims of homicide as they did to victims of rape.

The researchers acknowledge that other populations may respond differently than college students. However, prior research on blaming [rape](#) victims is usually based on college students.

Felson said that future research should look at how these findings relate to [crime](#) prevention programs and victim outreach.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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