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Correlation Between Victim-Blaming Attitudes and Victim Gender in Non-Sexual Crime  
Scenarios

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An Honors College Project Presented to  
the Faculty of the Undergraduate  
College of Health and Behavioral Studies  
James Madison University

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by Caroline Whitlow  
Bachelor of Social Work, May 2020

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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Social Work, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

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### Abstract

Sex crime victims often experience victim-blaming from third parties. Literature does not discuss whether this pattern comes from gender bias or stigma surrounding certain types of crime. This mixed methods study assesses correlation between gender of non-sexual crime victims and third-party blame assignment. Quantitative research found higher levels of blame towards male victims, with a *t*-statistic of 5.865. Qualitative research found gendered perceptions of responsibility that invoke female victims' sex and instruct women to adjust lifestyle choices. Social work practitioners can use this data to improve practice with crime victims and encourage dialogues surrounding victim-blaming in education and practice.

**Keywords:** Victim-blaming, gender, sexual violence, theft, simple assault, robbery

### **Introduction**

“To blame victims for crime is like analyzing the cause of World War II and asking, ‘What was Pearl Harbor doing in the Pacific, anyway?’” reads a testimony from the President’s Task Force on Victims of Crime (Herrington et al., 1982, p. 2). In 1982, under President Ronald Reagan, this task force report brought the treatment of crime victims by judicial systems into public conversation. Still, despite expressions of distress with the practice and efforts to reform victims’ experiences within the justice system, the issues of those harmed by crime did not see significant gains in research (Hook & Seymour, 2004). For the purposes of this study, victim-blaming refers simply to acts or sentiments “involving judgments that the victim(s) deserve what they get,” (Sheikh & McNamara, 2014, p. 242).

In the era of the Me Too and Time’s Up movements, citizens have begun having more stark conversations about power, gender roles, and the marginalization of those who experience violence. Survivors of sexual, gender-based, and intimate partner violence (IPV) often express distress and frustration over victim-blaming attitudes surrounding their encounters with violence. In fact, the expectation of victim-blaming by both peers and those in power, such as law enforcement officials or supervisors, often acts as a barrier to reporting crime.

The sources of victim-blaming attitudes discussed above are diverse and vary from incident to incident. Individuals who endure sexual assault sometimes receive blame for the crime(s) based upon situational and inherent variables that may include appearance, behavior, personality, consumption of alcohol or drugs, and relation to the perpetrator (Rye, Greatrix & Enright, 2006). Most frequently, these individuals identify as women and girls (Stromwall,

Alfredsson & Landstrom, 2013). However, little research exists to explain whether the presence of victim-blaming correlates with the gender of individuals who most frequently experience and report sex crimes or the nature and societal perception of the crimes themselves.

### **Purpose of Study**

The present study analyzes the correlation between victim gender and assigned victim culpability in various non-sexual crime scenarios. A review of criminal justice research literature reveals that various extralegal factors including situational and demographic variables can impact how third parties attribute responsibility for a crime. However, studies that focus narrowly on the practice of victim-blaming remain rare for crimes besides sexual violence and intimate partner violence (Dukes & Gaither, 2017). Because women and girls typically report these crimes at higher levels than men and boys, it is unclear whether victim-blaming attitudes stem from gender bias or stigma against those who experience certain types of crime. This study aims to address that gap by focusing on gender as a factor to victim-blaming in non-sexual crimes.

### **Relevance to Population**

Undergraduate students serve as the sample population not only due to convenience, but because of the prevalence of sexual violence and intimate partner violence on college campuses that often make victim-blaming and sexist attitudes more apparent and concerning. These attitudes require the attention of researchers, as they often prevent victim-survivors from reporting experiences of violence due to fear of public shaming, blaming and marginalization following an incident (Angelone, Mitchell, & Smith, 2018).

Further, this sample population matters because it can inform university efforts to create educational programming that reduces victim-blaming attitudes regarding all crime scenarios later in life (Eigenberg & Policastro, 2016). This research can also inform ongoing legislative and agency policy efforts to supplement victim support and survivor-focused institutional responses, which frequently catalyze on the grounds of public and private universities (Eigenberg & Policastro 2016).

### **Note on Terminology**

For the purposes of this research, the words “woman”/ “female” and “man” / “male” are used interchangeably to reference cisgender individuals. However, due to historical marginalization of transgender, nonbinary, and intersex people, the literature contains significant gaps regarding experiences with crime, reporting, and victim blame among these populations. Future studies should aim for inclusivity of all gender identities.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Situational Variables and Victim Blame**

Various studies in the fields of sociology, criminal justice, and communications reveal how situational aspects of a crime correlate with perceptions of blame. The majority of these studies focus on sexual violence and intimate partner violence. Most often, victims of sexual assault who knew their perpetrator receive more blame than individuals victimized by strangers. Specifically, men generally assign more blame to the victim of acquaintance rape than women do, especially men who express traditional gender ideology and traditional views of heterosexual intimacy (Angelone, Mitchell, & Smith, 2018).

To compound these views on date and acquaintance rape, victim blame increases with situational variables impacting “foreseeability” of the crime, understood as the victim’s control over their circumstances. Factors that increase perceived foreseeability, and therefore victim-blaming, include alcohol consumption and previous relationship to the perpetrator (Rye, Greatrix, & Enright, 2006, p. 639). Considering more than half of sexual assaults in America are perpetrated by a current or former intimate partner (Black et al., 2011), the majority come with perceptions of “foreseeability” that increase victim blame. These incidents often receive treatment as “cautionary tales,” a more subtle form of victim-blaming that frames experiences of violence as warnings to other women regarding who they should associate with or how they should behave (Gjika, 2019, p. 10).

Similarly, victims of other forms of intimate partner violence experienced higher rates of blame based on situational variables. Research has revealed increased victim-blaming when the woman stayed in a physically abusive relationship, thus leading to a further incident of violence. This also ties into the concept of “foreseeability” as an explanation for victim-blaming attitudes. Perceived culpability of the victim for relationship violence also increased when women experienced IPV as punishment for flirtatious behavior (Eigenberg & Policastro, 2016).

### **Demographic Variables and Victim Blame**

Demographic factors of both victims and observers also seem to influence rates of victim blame. Male observers, for example, typically assign more blame to female victims of acquaintance rape than other women do. This becomes especially apparent when men hold traditional views on gender ideology and heterosexual intimacy (Angelone, Mitchell, & Smith, 2018). Similarly, men who subscribe to ideas of “benevolent sexism,” or the practice of behaving



in a protective and paternalistic way towards women, assign higher levels of blame to female date rape victims (Yamawaki, Darby, & Queiroz, 2007, p. 43). Overall, victims of stranger rape experience lower levels of blame than victims of date and acquaintance rape. However, when the perpetrator of a stranger rape is male, female victims experience significantly less blame for stranger rape than male victims do (Rye, Greatrix, & Enright, 2006).

These demographic disparities also influence how the media portrays crime victims, which can engender public compassion or resentment of certain individuals. For example, newspapers typically share more personal information and close-up photographs of victims who identify as male and/or White versus female and/or Black. When this occurs, individuals tend to empathize more with suspects and victims about whom they can access more positive information: most frequently, those who belong to more dominant social group(s) (Anastasio & Costa, 2004).

While greater access to information about a victim typically reduces victim-blaming when said information is positive, the opposite can occur when media sources present the public with information that supports negative racial stereotypes, defined as “gross overgeneralizations” of an outgroup (Allport, 1954, p. 34). Media emphasis on perceived negative traits of a victim’s community can greatly increase perceptions of self-responsibility for their victimization, even in cases as serious as murder. This trend is especially common in cases of police violence against racial and ethnic minorities (Dukes & Gaither, 2017). Scholars of critical race theory have analyzed similarities between victim blame in the aftermath of rape and the aftermath of police violence against Black men, noting the influence of social media discourse on altering a victim’s

public presentation to create an attitude of deserved punishment rather than unjust victimization (Moody-Ramirez & Cole, 2018).

Just as situational and demographic variables contribute to victim-blaming, they contribute to the presence and frequency of crime in particular environments. As mentioned above, college and university settings reveal the prevalence and concerning nature of victim-blaming attitudes due to high levels of sexual violence and intimate partner violence within the young adult age group (Black et al., 2017). Victim advocates on James Madison University's campus cite numbers as high as 1 in 5 women and 1 in 16 men that experience sexual and/or relational violence while attending college (J. Hieber, personal communication, 2020). Both the commonality of these incidents and resulting student activism impact perceptions of crime and crime victims among undergraduates. Environments that bring sexual violence into the public eye, such as campuses, must therefore address the victim-blaming attitudes that shift attention away from perpetrators and institutional accountability and onto the victims working through aftermath of crime.

### **Methodology**

The principal investigator sought to explore the relationship between victim-blaming attitudes and gender in non-sexually related crime scenarios. Mixed methods research was utilized to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the results (Creswell, 2014).

### **Participants**

Participants for this study included 185 undergraduate students attending James Madison University, with class ranks ranging from first-year student to senior. The principal investigator

recruited participants using a convenience sample of students in eight different General Education sections within disciplines of Communications, Psychology, Sociology, and Geographic Sciences. As JMU requires all students to obtain General Education credits, participants represented a diverse section of the student body.

### **Instrument**

The principal investigator created an online Qualtrics survey with six scenarios adapted from past JMU campus crime alerts, or “Madison Alerts.” Each scenario was followed by two questions, one for quantitative analysis and one for qualitative. Participants assigned culpability to the victim of each scenario using a ten-point scale answering the question, “How much responsibility would you assign to [name] for this situation?” An answer of 1 signified that the victim was not at all or hardly responsible, while 10 signified a fully responsible victim.

The qualitative question asked participants to describe what the victim could have done in order to avoid or improve the experience of crime. Analysis of Question 1 data examines the correlation between the assumed gender of the alleged victims’ names and assigned numerical culpability for each scenario. Responses to Question 2 were analyzed for patterns and variation between suggestions for males versus females.

### **Quantitative Analysis**

The first point of analysis focuses on numerical data addressing perceived victim culpability. The study uses an independent sample *t*-test. Mean comparison through the *t*-test addresses the following question of interest: In non-sexual crime scenarios, do victims receive greater attributions of blame based on their perceived gender? The *t*-test compares averages of responsibility assigned to male versus female victims on a ten-point scale.

### **Qualitative Analysis**

Secondary research utilizes qualitative data and content analysis. For each scenario, participants were asked how victims potentially could have evaded or improved the scenario for themselves. Responses were analyzed using content analysis to identify major recurring themes. When coding data from survey responses, the researcher referred to Creswell's sequence for data analysis in qualitative research (Creswell, 2014). This assessment grants insight into the reason for variance in third-party victim-blaming attitudes. This information also informs discussion of the study's results and practice implications with regards to implicit biases and preconceptions.

### **Institutional Review Board**

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at James Madison University reviewed and approved this research as expedited review. The researcher received approval via designated review on August 12, 2019. This study's identification number is #19-0972.

### **Risks and Benefits**

Because all participants remained anonymous with no identifying information collected, the study involved minimal risk beyond that of daily life. In some cases, participants with personal histories of violence or victimization may have experienced slight discomfort or triggering memories. To address this potential risk, the researcher added resources for student victims of crime including the JMU Counseling Center, Survivor Advocates, and Public Safety to the consent form seen by all participants. The benefits of the research outweigh the risk by contributing to a small but growing body of literature on victim-blaming and the impact of demographic variables on crime victims and offenders. This research may be used to inform direct services to crime victims and social work education.

## Results

### Quantitative Analysis

<b>Hypothesis</b>	Participants will assign higher rates of self-responsibility to victimized women than to victimized men.
<b>Null Hypothesis (H0)</b>	Participants will assign equal rates of self-responsibility to both victimized men and victimized women.

<b>Sample Size (n)</b>	185
<b>Mean (Female):</b>	2.807
<b>Standard Deviation (Female):</b>	2.046
<b>Mean (Male):</b>	4.216
<b>Standard Deviation (Male):</b>	2.534
<b>Standard Error:</b>	0.239
<b>T-Statistic:</b>	5.865

Survey results did not support the researcher's hypothesis nor the null hypothesis. The results show a higher level of victim-blaming attitudes towards males than females following incidents of non-sexual crime, with a mean of 2.807 for women and 4.216 for men. Standard deviations for each group show a similar spread of data for each gender with higher rates of blame for men. This is in contrast to the hypothesis that participants would assign higher rates of blame to women, and to the null hypothesis that gender would not influence victim-blaming attitudes. The *t*-statistic of 5.865, with a standard error of 0.239, illustrates the significance of this variation.

### Qualitative Analysis

The content analysis of qualitative data revealed two major themes:

1. Invocation of gender for female victims only, and
2. Expectation of stronger proactiveness for women and stronger reactivity for men.

#### **Key Theme: Invocation of Gender**

When providing suggestions for scenarios involving women, participants sometimes cited the victim's gender as a reason for the victim to act more cautiously or make different decisions. Zero participants invoked the men's gender when making suggestions. Invocation of gender for presumably female victims can be illustrated by the following survey responses:

*"Mary would benefit by jogging in the daylight so that creeps are not looking for women to grab." (R72)*

*"That's just the world we live in... girls should never travel alone or in desolate areas." (R73)*

#### **Key Theme: Proactiveness vs. Reactiveness**

In general, participants made suggestions for female victims based on proactiveness, while male victims were expected to behave reactively once approached by perpetrators. This theme became especially apparent within the four scenarios involving victims who walked or ran alone at night. While participants commonly instructed female victims to walk or run in the daytime, avoid dark paths, and carry weapons-- all decisions to be made before being approached by a perpetrator-- suggestions for males included in-the-moment responses like calling the police, fighting back, and refusing to enter the perpetrators' vehicle. This ties into the concept of foreseeability, suggesting women should expect their victimization and take control

preemptively (Rye, Greatrix, & Enright, 2006). Examples of expected proactiveness from female victims can be illustrated by the following responses:

*“Mary could have chosen to jog in a busier place, or at an earlier time. She also could have gone jogging with a friend.” (R84)*

*“Past 10:00, I don’t go in dark places to get back to my dorm. If I have to, I will FaceTime my roommate. So part of it is herself for putting herself in that scary setting.” (R174)*

*“Lucy could have been walking with someone or in a more obvious area with more lights, and then this would have been less likely to happen.” (R85)*

*“STOP WALKING BY YOURSELF.” (R161)*

*“Mary could have gone jogging earlier, or brought pepper spray with her.” (R188)*

The following suggestions, based on reactivity to the situation versus proactiveness to avoid it, were made for male victims walking alone at night:

*“It is nice that Harrison was willing to help, but he should have waited for trained authorities to arrive and handle the situation properly.” (R86)*

*“Harrison could have called the police first and then attempted to divert the attention away from the attackers while remaining a safe distance to protect himself.” (R183)*

### **Discussion**

Demographic characteristics of the sample population may have influenced results. Most notably, the research may have been impacted by lack of diversity among participants. James Madison University maintained a largely homogenous population with 88% White students during the Fall 2019 semester, when the survey was administered (JMU, 2019).

The other 22% of the student body has the label of “Minority” on official university websites, making the specific demographic breakdown of students unclear (JMU, 2019). Conducting this research on a campus with more racial diversity would have yielded a more representative population sample, especially considering the demonstrated impact of race-related factors on victim-blaming (Dukes & Gaither, 2017).

Another potential discrepancy arose due to the challenge of finding participants for this study. Due to its optional nature, not all students reached through General Education courses completed the questionnaire. The researcher completed data analysis with 185 usable responses rather than the goal of 300. This led to a higher standard error. Further research should aim for greater validity by ensuring a larger and more representative population sample than the one procured for this study.

Results of the study indicate an opposite pattern to the investigator’s hypothesis. The researcher predicted that women would experience higher levels of quantitative victim blame than men. This hypothesis was formed in light of literature that points strongly to high levels of victim blame assigned to sex crime victims, who most often identify as women. However, the study found that men experience significantly more blame for experiences of non-sexual crime on a ten-point scale.

Social workers may find themselves assisting and collaborating with crime victims in a variety of roles. Directly, social workers may serve as facilitators for survivor support groups, victim advocates, case managers in domestic violence shelters, or community organizers focused on criminal justice reform (Turley, n.d.). Further, social workers often work with communities at a greater risk of exposure to crime such as neighborhoods that experience poverty, income



inequality, and segregation (HUD, 2016). Knowledge of issues facing crime victims and related harm reduction techniques is therefore necessary to professional ethics. Reducing the prevalence of victim-blaming is one way to mitigate the secondary victimization often endured by individuals exposed to crime.

Male victims of petty crime including residence robbery, simple assault, and assault and robbery received significantly higher proportions of blame. Social work practitioners should keep this in mind when working with men who have experienced both violent and nonviolent crime. By questioning inherent biases and cultural assumptions rooted in toxic masculinity, social workers can provide more compassionate care to men working through crime-related trauma, property loss, or other associated challenges.

A significant body of literature shows that Black men are particularly susceptible to victim-blaming attitudes. And yet, Black men who defend themselves from crime have a higher likelihood of becoming criminalized themselves (Moody-Ramirez & Cole, 2018). Former NFL athlete Terry Crews spoke publicly about this paradox after coming forward about an assault at the hands of Hollywood agent Adam Venit. Crews (2017) stated, “240 lbs. Black Man stomps out Hollywood Honcho’ would [have] be[en] the headline the next day.” When working with men, particularly Black men, who have become victimized, recognition of paradoxical expectations placed upon male victims is mandatory to practice with cultural competence.

Despite numerically greater levels of victim-blaming for men, female victims often came under scrutiny for lifestyle decisions such as working out at night, walking home alone, and taking certain paths. This creates an expectation for women to choose between their daily needs and their personal safety, thus limiting equal opportunity. Social workers who encounter female

crime victims should take care to avoid advancing this double standard, as it acts as a threat to the core value of self-determination.

Dialogue that aims both to address and dismantle victim-blaming attitudes maintains a larger presence on college campuses than in other environments, in part because of the high frequency of sexual assault and rape among the 18-22 age group. This includes all 529 undergraduate college campuses where Council on Social Work Education-accredited BSW programs are present (CSWE, n.d.). Political and cultural forces have emphasized these dialogues from a multitude of perspectives. Popular media such as the documentary *The Hunting Ground* and since discredited *Rolling Stone* article involving an alleged rape at the University of Virginia hurdled responses to campus crime into mainstream conversation and resulted in political action such as the Obama administration's "Dear Colleague" letter and launching of the "It's on Us" bystander intervention campaign (Coussens, 2015).

Student, parent, and faculty advocacy groups have since focused on improving campus protections for survivors of violent crime as well as addressing a perceived lack of "due process" for students accused of sexual misconduct (DeVos, 2018). Advocacy surrounding the latter heavily informed new Title IX guidelines under current education secretary Betsy DeVos, which many proponents of survivor-focused policies view as rooted in misogynistic rape myths (Berenson, 2017). Despite arguments for increasing protections of the accused, victim-blaming remains a common barrier for the many young adults assaulted while pursuing undergraduate degrees (Rozee & Koss, 2001).

A qualitative study completed in 2014 found reasons for and reactions to victim-blaming from the perspective of undergraduate women assaulted by male perpetrators. Participants cited

the following as reasons that they or others placed blame on themselves following a violent crime: feeling as if they had ‘led on’ the perpetrator by flirting, ‘putting themselves’ in the situation by consuming alcohol at parties, and not being able to ‘control themselves.’ For these women, victim-blaming had concrete repercussions. Some struggled to label their experience of crime and chose not to report incidents due to fear or lived experiences of blame (Ruane, 2014, pp. 17-19). A literature review completed the same year found similarities between victim-blaming from others and self-blame following an experience of sexual violence. Blame from others and from oneself often “blurred the lines between blame and derogation,” leading to internalized shame about one’s character (Sheikh & McNamara, 2014, p. 242).

Demonstrations to combat victim-blaming attitudes have emerged as a response to the practice. At Old Dominion University, for example, a service-learning course hosted events for “Denim Day,” a day on which women wear jeans to protest a court decision that a victim was partly responsible for an assault due to her tight-fitting pants (Coussens, 2015). On JMU’s campus, the Office of Residence Life hosts an annual display of clothing worn by victims at the time of their assault to demonstrate that wearing revealing clothing has little correlation to experiencing violence (JMU Events, 2019).

These demonstrations reveal a heightened societal understanding of what constitutes victim-blaming and willingness to denounce the blame of sexual violence survivors. Still, a larger conversation about victim-blaming beyond sex and gender-based crimes does not seem apparent on university campuses. Social work educators and practitioners on college campuses, such as survivor advocates, counselors, and resource center workers, should work to embed curriculum that encourages critical thinking about victimization, blame, and gender norms.

Faculty should also consider continuing research that builds on professional understandings of crime-related blame, shame, and associated trauma.

### **Conclusion**

When faced with written accounts of non-sexual crime scenarios including residence robbery, assault and robbery, and simple assault, undergraduate students assigned significantly greater personal responsibility to male victims. This suggests a stronger presence of victim-blaming attitudes towards male victims. Qualitatively, however, participants listed different suggestions for female and male victims. While males were instructed to take proper action once faced by perpetrators, females were instructed to alter their daily routines so as to avoid an incident altogether. Additionally, the female victims' gender was invoked as a reason to alter their behavior, whereas this never happened in the cases where men experienced crime.

Although exploratory, this study presents important considerations for social work practitioners and educators who address crime victimization within their work. First, social workers must examine inherent gender biases in their interactions with victim-survivors of all types of crimes. This study suggests that workers may specifically find themselves placing higher levels of blame onto male clients, and/or suggesting that female clients bear some responsibility for their victimization due to unrelated lifestyle choices. Developing greater self-awareness of these perceptions is necessary to advance the core values of social justice and self-determination.

Further, social workers involved in social work education, particularly with undergraduates, should encourage critical thinking that reduces victim-blaming attitudes and proven gender discrepancies. This is especially important on college campuses due to recent

culture shifts that have encouraged greater discussion of sex crimes and gender inequality.

Inclusion of victim-blaming in coursework that addresses crime and associated trauma is needed to dismantle stigma placed on victims by individuals and systems. This inclusion will result in a generation of more competent social workers.

**CAROLINE WHITLOW**, the principal investigator, is a senior Honors College student from Virginia Beach, VA and co-founder of Students Against Sexual Violence at James Madison University. She will graduate with her Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) from JMU in May 2020, and plans to earn her Master of Social Work (MSW) from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in May 2021. Her professional interests include gender equality, environmental sustainability, and refugee resettlement.

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