Research Article

Police Officers' Empathy Toward Victims: A Question of Innocence

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Abstract: Extensive scholarship has previously explored how police officers perceive crime victims. For example, scholars argue that victims' behavior, relationship with the offender, and level of intoxication impact how officers perceive victims. Although this research explores several aspects of officers' perception of victims, few studies have specifically explored in-depth police officers' empathy toward victims. This article explores how officers perceive empathy and for what types of victims officers describe having the most and least empathy. Specifically, this article examines what types of crimes, characteristics of the victim, and contextual factors officers describe as impacting their level of empathy toward victims. Qualitative analysis was conducted on 25 interviews with police officers working in the greater Washington, DC area. Findings suggest that officers perceive innocence as something that informs their empathy toward victims. Officers used the examples of children and "criminals" to explain that victims who are perceived as more innocent receive more empathy than victims who are perceived as less innocent.

Keywords: police officers; empathy; victims; innocence; children; criminals; Washington, DC

Introduction

Studies show that empathy is one of the desired traits among agencies when hiring new police, and many agencies provide training for their officers on empathy.[1] Despite empathy being perceived as a desirable trait, some researchers argue that officers may be reluctant to show emotions and may suppress emotions such as empathy.[2] For example, some officers may fear that showing such emotions counters being viewed as an "adequate" or "dependable" police officer by other officers.[3] Officers' emotions are not just a consideration for officers but also are highly relevant to the general public regarding the ongoing debate on procedural justice in the criminal justice system. Scholars argue that emotions can inform the way police officers behave and therefore can impact interactions with victims.[4] More specifically, perceptions about the victim can inform the occupational decisions officers make.[5]

For example, perceptions can lead to officers being more emotionally invested in some cases, which can potentially mean that they work differently in these cases.[6] This has potential to impact case outcomes. Ultimately this means that procedural justice is not actualized—something scholars and activists have long argued. Empirical evidence has shown that officers have biases and practice differential treatment toward persons they encounter.[7] Thus, it is important to understand more about the factors that inform officers' attitudes and behaviors toward victims, as it provides insight into the role of emotions on officers' occupational responsibilities and the realization of procedural justice in policing.

In addition to implications for procedural justice, studying officer empathy is important relative to victims' experiences of the criminal justice system. If officers have hidden biases and prejudices toward victims, these can influence officer treatment of victims and victim perceptions of the interaction.[8] Research highlights that officers who show empathy and compassion toward victims may be more likely to earn victim cooperation, as well as cultivate a good impression, which can lead to greater likelihood of reporting future crimes.[9] Thus, understanding factors that influence interactions between officers and victims elucidates how to improve officer–victim encounters.

Existing scholarship on officers' perceptions of victims focuses on specific types of victims and victimization, usually asking officers about predetermined categories of victimizations, such as sexual assault and intimate partner violence.[10] These studies have not explored officers' empathy levels in-depth. Current scholarly work omits officers' own perspectives on for which types of victimization they have more or less empathy. Accordingly, less is known about what type of victims and victimizations officers would freely mention or describe. This article aims to bridge this gap by asking officers open-ended questions about empathy, with no preset victimization typology, thereby making an empirical contribution by expanding the knowledge of officers' perceptions on a wider range of victimizations relative to previous literature.

Furthermore, by letting officers freely describe for which victims they have less and more empathy, knowledge can be generated regarding potential biases officers may have. These findings can be used to develop tools and educational materials to train officers about hidden biases so that officers can make specific efforts to avoid differential treatment.

Police Officers and Victims

Literature that examines officer and victim interactions and officer perceptions of victims is centered around intimate partner violence and sexual victimization, yet there are some studies that focus on other types of victimizations, such as stalking and murder.[11] This work highlights biases that officers have. For example, studies have demonstrated officers' biases toward rape victims, as exemplified by rape myths that are grounded in victim blaming.[12] Despite this valuable knowledge, less is known about the perceptions officers have of victims who experienced other types of victimizations and what factors influence officers' perceptions of these victims.

There are several characteristics of victims that impact how officers perceive them, such as behavior, circumstances related to the victimization, and the victim and offender relationship.[13] For example, one study found that the prior relationship between victims and offenders in stalking cases impacted to what extent officers endorsed the behavior as a case of stalking. Officers were more likely to strongly endorse stranger stalking scenarios as stalking behavior compared to cases in which the offender and victim had prior relationships.[14] Another study found that in sexual assault cases, the victim's level of intoxication impacted how they were perceived by officers. More specifically, higher levels of intoxication led to officers having more negative perceptions of the victims.[15] Another study on officers' perception of sex workers who were victims of sexual assault found that sex workers are blamed for their victimization compared to other rape victims, and the consequences for the sex workers are perceived as less severe than other rape victims.[16] These studies highlight that there are factors that are not related to specific types of victimizations which can influence how victims are perceived by officers. By further expanding the knowledge of factors that impact officers' perceptions of victims, independent of the type of victimization, one can understand more about biases in lesser-studied types of victimization.

Empathy

Scholars have underscored the importance of empathy in a criminological and sociological context—not only in relation to deviant behavior, but also more recently in relation to criminal justice professions.[17] More specifically, scholars argue that empathy can directly or indirectly be linked to how individuals are perceived and treated by criminal justice professionals, as well as to case outcomes.[18] According to the American Psychological Association (APA) dictionary of psychology, empathy is defined as "understanding a person from his or her frame of reference rather than one's own, or vicariously experiencing that person's feelings, perceptions, and thoughts."[19] Often being confused with sympathy, empathy refers to understanding another person's experiences and feelings, while sympathy refers to understanding another person's experiences by seeing oneself in the other individual's position.[20] Although these differences exist, empathy and sympathy are intertwined and are often likened to notions such as morality.[21] Moreover, scholars argue that there is a benefit of exploring officers' empathy because empathy connotes more objectivity compared to sympathy among officers when conducting their job.[22] Some officers may therefore be reluctant to engage in emotions of sympathy toward the individuals they meet because it can mean that they are less objective and become too emotionally engaged. Thus, by talking about empathy, officers may be more likely to share their perceptions than if asked about sympathy.

Scholarship from the last few decades has emphasized the importance of studying empathy in relation to criminal justice professionals, such as police officers. Scholars argue that reactions to

lawbreaking can be influenced by notions such as empathy, and that in the context of policing, empathy could potentially make officers more understanding and successful in their policing.[23] The existing research that explores empathy and policing emphasize that empathy is important for police officers and is a skill that is often sought after among police recruits, as well as something on which agencies train their officers.[24] There are many things that impact officers' empathy. For example, scholars have found that officers with more years of service show more empathy toward victims of domestic violence compared to officers with fewer years of service.[25] Scholars also argue that officers can express empathy toward victims in many different ways, manifest both verbally and non-verbally, which highlights the dynamic nature of empathy and how it is perceived and expressed by officers.[26]

Most of the literature that examines officers' empathy focuses on suspects and offenders.[27] However, there are some studies that investigate officers' empathy for the victims of crime. The majority of these studies focus on sexual victimization, child victimization, and domestic violence, but some studies examine other victimizations such as homicide.[28] Scholars highlight that it is important to further examine officers' empathy toward victims because it can be seen as a predictor of attitudes and perceptions of victims.[29] For example, scholars have found that for rape victims, empathy toward victims is negatively related to perceptions of victims' culpability.[30] Thus, it is important to further explore officers' empathy toward victims because it can inform a deeper understanding of potential biases, differential treatment, victim experiences, and case outcomes.

Methods

To explore police officers' empathy toward victims, the current study employed a qualitative approach consisting of semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were used because of their ability to elucidate different dimensions of meaning for attributions and emotions.[31]

This article is a part of a broader study on Swedish and American officers' perceptions of policing and victimizations.[32] The current article specifically focuses on American officers' empathy for victims. During the interviews, the officers were asked a wide range of questions related to their occupational experiences, perceptions about their occupational role, occupational knowledge, and about victimization of persons encountered on the job. This study focused on questions related to which types of victims officers have the most and the least empathy toward. Thus, the interviews included questions asking respondents to describe the victims they have more empathy for and less empathy for, as well as other questions related to their perceptions of victims and victimization. Due to the subjectivity and ambiguity of notions such as empathy, it can be difficult to understand and measure levels of empathy. For example, individuals can define empathy differently or may use the terms empathy and sympathy interchangeably. Despite these challenges, scholars in psychology and related fields have in recent years expanded the theoretical and methodological discourses examining various aspects of empathy.[33] Due to the ambiguous nature of a topic such as empathy, this study employs a qualitative approach to investigate the nuances of contexts that officers describe when asked about empathy.

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board, and participants were asked for verbal consent and permission to record prior to the interview. The interviews were conducted in English and transcribed verbatim. Interviews lasted 20 minutes to 1 hour and were conducted in private spaces at the police stations where the officers worked. To further safeguard officers' privacy, the lead author deidentified all transcripts and notes.

During the interviews, the interviewer (lead author) was aware of the possible interviewer effect and possible reluctance of officers to provide certain answers to avoid criticism.[34] Police officers in the United States have been under heavy scrutiny for the last two decades due to the increased attention on officers' conduct, specifically in citizen encounters. This could lead to officers being more likely to provide socially acceptable answers when asked about their perceptions and interactions with the public. This is a limitation that can impact responses the officers give, especially when asked about victims, and is present in a wide range of qualitative studies based on self-reporting. Secondly, the increased public focus on police can also mean that officers are less likely to welcome the research into their department or agree to be interviewed. During interviews, the interviewer was open about having had prior research experience with police officers in Sweden, also sharing that her father was a police officer. These are all factors that could potentially have made officers more willing to be interviewed and to provide more honest answers.

Sample

During the summer of 2018, the lead author interviewed 25 police officers who were active-duty officers working in the greater Washington, DC area. This geographic region was chosen due to feasibility, and the officers who participated worked at two different agencies. Despite this study only representing a limited number of the officers and agencies, and only in an urban environment that renders limited generalizability, the findings from this study can still provide valuable information about officers' empathy toward victims by focusing on the meanings officers ascribe to varying victims/victimization when discussing empathy.

The officers were recruited by using a mix of purposeful sampling and snowball sampling methods. Agencies were approached because they were in the desired geographical area feasible for the study, and officers had to be active-duty officers to qualify for participating in the study, which aligns with the general principles of purposeful sampling.[35] Requests were sent to several agencies in the greater Washington, DC area; two agencies responded back and noted that they had officers who were potentially interested in participating. After establishing contact with these officers, who acted as gatekeepers, participating officers were asked to send a request to their colleagues about participating, which aligns with snowball sampling recruitment.[36]

Of the 25 officers who were interviewed in this study, 17 were men and 8 were women. Their years of experience ranged from 2 to 14, with a mean of 12.22 years, and their age ranged from 27 to 50, with a mean age of 38.64 years. When recording their race and ethnicity, all officers were asked, "What race and/or ethnicity do you identify with?"; the officers were free to choose any label with which they identified. As a result, 21 officers responded by identifying as "White" or "Caucasian," 2 officers identified as "Black" or "African American," 1 as "Hispanic," and 1 as "Asian American." As can be noted, the sample consists of predominately White or Caucasian officers representing 84% of the sample, and the officers that did not identify as White or Caucasian only reflect 16% of the sample. Thus, the limited racial and ethnic representation in the sample has to be taken into consideration when contextualizing the findings from this study. Furthermore, 16 of the officers reported that they were working as investigators, and 9 were working as patrol officers.

According to FBI data, in 2019, 87.2% of officers were male and 12.8% were female; thus, the sample included a large number of female officers compared to the actual gender distribution among officers.[37] Additionally, according to an independent review of officers' demographics by *The New York Times*, 72% of officers are White, with Black and Hispanic officers being in the clear minority, which is something reflected in racial demographics of this sample.[38]

Analytical Strategy

For this study, descriptive line-by-line coding was utilized to complete an inductive analysis of the officers' statements.[39] The codes were based on the terminology used by officers when describing victims and victimization, and reflected the types of victimizations they described, the characteristics of victims, and the context of the victimization used in the examples provided by officers.

The codes were entered into a comprehensive codebook, overarching categories were then created, and the categories were then organized into different themes.[40] The transcripts were coded twice—the first time right after the interviews were transcribed and the second time at four to five months after transcription. Two separate coding processes were completed to ensure reliability of the codes and that there were no discrepancies in how codes were applied.

Results

The discussion will first focus on how officers perceived their empathy in an occupational context. The article will then describe how officers viewed innocence as the major factor informing their empathy level toward victims, often using children and "criminals" in their examples of the type of victims for whom they have higher and lower empathy levels—representing a dichotomy of innocence.

Empathy and Police Work

When talking about empathy on a general level, most of the officers acknowledged that they felt empathy toward victims. For example, one officer noted, "You felt a lot of empathy" (female patrol officer, 36 years old, 14 years of experience). Beyond acknowledging the fact that empathy is present in their work, one officer expanded further and noted that having empathy meant that they sometimes get emotionally invested in certain cases. A male investigator noted, "I definitely get emotionally caught up in my cases as it were, on an individual level … with them, sure" (38 years old, 16 years of experience). A male officer explained that empathy is something that he uses when he interacts with victims, and that helps him navigate his behavior during the interaction.

> You have to use empathy in all aspects, because they just went through something … in certain situations, you could kind of use humor to break down the situation and break the ice a little … in the more serious ones, then you have to be very professional (male patrol officer, 23 years old, 2 years of experience).

Thus, empathy was not only something that the officers felt, but also informed how officers managed their interactions with victims. Although nearly all of the officers acknowledged feeling empathy, noting varying levels of empathy for victims, there were a few officers that emphasized that they did not act differently based on levels of empathy. A female investigator explained: "I may feel less empathy for certain persons, but I don't work any differently. I try to help them in

the way that I can and the way that I'm obliged to do" (31 years old, 5 years of experience). Such responses from officers could stem from internal or inter-personal pressures around certain emotions and the implications these may have for professional ideals to which officers are subjected. Following decades of critical assessment regarding police officers' practice of procedural justice, officers may be less likely to assert that their levels of empathy are something that impact interactions with victims and their engagement in certain cases. All of the officers did describe types of victims or victimizations that they either had lower empathy or higher empathy for, despite some officers asserting that their empathy levels did not impact the work they did. When talking about what types of victims they had more or less empathy for, it became evident that there were certain factors that impacted their perceptions more than others.

Innocence

The central theme of innocence emerged in the officers' description of who they have more and less empathy for. Ninety percent of the officers explained that innocence was one of the major contributing factors impacting their empathy toward victims. It became evident that the more innocent the officers deemed the victim, the more empathy the officers had for them. Officers also described having less empathy for victims that they deemed as being less innocent. One officer noted that he felt the most empathy for "someone who's one hundred percent innocent" (male investigator, 38 years old, 6 years of experience). This suggests that there is an ultimate level of innocence that victims can obtain in the officer's eyes, and if the victim obtains this level of innocence, the officer will have more empathy for them.

The concept of innocence seemed to be rooted in officers' subjective assessment of the victim. To further explain how they thought about innocence, an officer explained:

> The victims that I feel the most empathy for are the ones who are ... really trying, they're really good people. They're really innocent. They're trying to do the right thing. They're trying to live their life the correct way. And they do everything right. Then they're still taken advantage of by someone. So, the more innocent and the more, I guess, defenseless you are, the more that I feel sorry for you compared to people who put themselves in a situation (male patrol officer, 34 years old, 3 years of experience).

This officer explained that innocence was associated with people living their life in a certain way and making certain choices that were deemed "correct" by the officers. This would mean that he felt sorrier for them if they were victimized, which was something other officers echoed. Additionally, he noted that the victims who were considered more defenseless than others gained more empathy from him. Thus, innocence was a term used by officers to describe several attributes of the victim and victimization, including choices victims made beforehand and the ability of those choices to impact occurrence of the victimization. These factors are consistent with previous findings suggesting that police officers take victims' capability to impact their victimization into consideration when assessing their culpability in their victimizations.[41]

The statement by the officer also highlights a prevalent theme among the officers when they discussed innocence, which could be argued to reflect a subjectively perceived scale of innocence by which the victim would receive more or less empathy from the officers. The officers described innocence by noting that living life in an approved way and being defenseless would mean more empathy compared to an individual who made choices that increased risk for victimization. Another male officer described the victims for whom he had less empathy as those who increased their own risk for victimization: "If I'm going to be honest, it's the victims that kind of make a lot

of bad choices that get themselves into that position" (male investigator, 47 years old, 24 years of experience). Thus, certain behaviors and characteristics were described in relation to the type of victim that officers had more and less empathy for.

The Dichotomy of Innocence: "Criminals" and Children

A dichotomy emerged from the examples used by the officers to illustrate the victims that gain more or less empathy. Specifically, most of the officers used the examples of "criminals" and children as the types of victims for whom they have less and more empathy, respectively. One officer's statement exemplified the polarized nature of the two categories of victim and how they evoked different levels of empathy.

> It's natural that we feel less sorry for the gangbanger who got shot in the drug deal, or the guy who crashed his car running from the police, or whatever. We feel less sorry for those than the person who was trying to do the right thing and is obeying the law … So the person who's trying to do the right thing and is defenseless because he's trying to do the right thing—that's the person I feel most sorry for—as opposed to the person who's out here living the life the wrong way …. I feel less sorry for that guy than I do for the for the kid who gets kidnapped and sold into human trafficking, or whatever. I mean, you know, those are to me the ones that make the job. Those are the ones you want to protect, that make the job worth doing (male patrol officer, 34 years old, 3 years of experience).

This officer notes that he feels more passionate about protecting individuals who he perceives as making positive decisions in their lives. He uses the example of a child or an individual who does the "right thing" and is defenseless. Repeatedly, officers explained those for whom they felt empathy as the most vulnerable individual in society: a child. The criminal and the child reflected, to many officers, the opposite ends of a subjective scale of innocence, with the criminal being depicted as the least innocent and receiving less empathy by officers and the child being considered the most innocent receiving more empathy from officers.

Out of the 25 officers that were interviewed for this study, 14 officers specifically stated that individuals that they deemed as "criminals" were the type of victims that they had less empathy for. The officers used several examples of criminal activity to exemplify the criminals whom they deemed as meriting less empathy. The most common types of criminals mentioned were gang members, drug dealers, and persons committing violent crimes. One officer explained:

> The ones who chose the path that brought them to gangs … the gang gets shot by another rival gang member … drug dealers, like I said, they're still victims, but they knew what they were doing, and they chose the career they had to, even though they've been locked up 20 times … they still keep doing the same stuff (male investigator, 38 years old, 16 years of experience).

This officer explained that the individuals who chose a specific path in life that led them to gang activity—meaning that they become involved in repeated criminal activity—receive less empathy. He also emphasized that, despite receiving less empathy for them, he still considered them victims. Thus, the officer does not necessarily question the legitimacy in them claiming the victim label. But rather, the victim label can exist independently of the level of empathy these persons receive from officers.

The officer further explained the conceptualization of a "criminal" by bringing light to temporality of the crime, giving several examples of types of criminals for whom he had less empathy. Almost all of the officers who described the criminals as receiving less empathy highlighted that they felt

less empathy both for individuals who had committed criminal acts in the past and also for individuals who had been victimized while committing a crime. For example, two officers stated:

> Usually, victims who are doing something that they should not have been doing anyway. For example, maybe a drug crime that went bad, something like that. You're still going to be there if somebody was shot or stabbed or hurt or assaulted, and you are the first responder to try and help them (male patrol officer, 40 years old, 10 years of experience).

> It would be somebody that's committing a crime, but then a crime gets committed on them. I feel less sympathy for them because they were committing a crime when something happened to them, and they're still a victim … they were trying to make somebody else a victim, and they ended up themselves being the victim. So, I think I feel a little bit less empathy for somebody that was out to make someone else a victim but became the victim themselves (male investigator, 34 years old, 2 years of experience).

These officers both mention individuals who commit crimes that could have caused harm to someone else but also criminal activity such as a drug crime that could cause less harm to a specific victim. One officer explained:

> The drug deal and get shot—who could care less about that? Why? Because they're criminals to criminal and criminal. Sorry. They probably shot somebody too. They just got shot. I don't feel empathy for them. I had this guy, he got beat up, broken jaw …. he molested this girl, and the uncle beat him up ... And I was like, I don't feel bad for him. Like, yeah, he's a victim. But he molested the guy's niece. So, I don't feel bad for him at all. The police still wrote a report that he got beat up. But he was my suspect, and I was like, "You deserve it" (male investigator, 50 years old, 24 years of experience).

This officer gave a real-life example of how, in his eyes, a victim who had committed a criminal act in the past deserved the victimization he experienced because of his prior criminal activity. This officer believed that the victimization was due to the victim's previous behavior. When describing why they had less empathy for criminals, approximately half of the officers noted that it was because they thought that these victims brought the victimization on themselves by making choices that exposed them to a crime in the first place. Two officers stated, "I would have less empathy for a person that was trying to engage the violence … probably have less empathy because he or she pretty much brought it upon themselves" (male patrol officer, 41 years old, 11 years of experience), and "those that know what they're getting into something … like robbing a store, they know that act is going to get them in trouble" (male patrol officer, 46 years old, 19 years of experience). Thus, partaking in criminal activity means, according to the officers, that there is a certain risk to be victimized, and with this risk comes culpability. Because of the culpability these victims have in their own victimization, the officers argue that there is less empathy deserved.

Again, a few officers emphasized that despite feeling less empathy for individuals who partook in criminal activity prior to or during their victimization, officers do not help these victims less or provide them with different services than other victims. One officer explained: "We're still going to respond when you call 911. We're still going to be there to help you out. But those victims— you feel a little less empathy for" (male investigator, 38 years old, 16 years of experience). Another officer explained: "You're going to provide the help for them in the exact same manner as anybody else. But, you know, in the back of your mind, we're like, you shouldn't be doing it anyway" (male patrol officer, 40 years old, 10 years of experience). Hence, the officers imply that the lower empathy level they have for these types of victims does not mean that the officers do not investigate the crimes less, nor do they find the victims less credible than others. Rather, the

officers convey that the actions of these individuals primarily impact officers' empathy and perceptions of the role these persons have in their own victimization.

After describing the type of victims for whom they have less empathy, officers moved on to describing the type of victims for whom they have the most empathy. Nineteen of the 25 officers described children as either the only type of victim for whom they have the most empathy or as one of the types of victims for whom they have the most empathy, while some also mentioned elderly individuals. For example two officers stated, "small, tiny and defenseless kids" (male investigator, 38 years old, 16 years of experience) and "oh, the children … the children of sexual assault, no doubt about it … yeah, that's one hundred percent" (male investigator, 50 years old, 24 years of experience), highlighting that children were the only type of victims for whom they had high levels of empathy. While two other officers explained: "I think I feel empathy for juveniles, younger children, and the elderly … I think those are the ones that I feel the most sympathy for" (male investigator, 34 years old, 2 years of experience) and "I think almost all officers … we hate it when elderly and children get victimized" (male investigator, 33 years old, 8 years of experience). However, despite mentioning other types of victims, such as elderly victims, a majority of officers who mentioned child victims only noted children as the victims for whom they had the most empathy.

Almost all of the officers noted that innocence was the major factor in why children received more empathy. When asked what type of victim he had the most empathy for, one officer responded quickly and assertively by saying, "children because of their innocence" (male patrol officer, 40 years old, 10 years of experience). Another officer explained the key role innocence played: "Usually, something along the lines of like, just their innocence. Not that other victims are not innocent, but you feel affinity toward especially younger individuals" (male patrol officer, 40 years old, 10 years of experience). Thus, as with the "criminals" for whom officers described having less empathy, innocence was essential when discussing having the most empathy for child victims.

Another notion that was discussed in relation to child victims' innocence was the lack of culpability they had in their victimizations. As opposed to "criminals," officers described that children are not capable of making choices that increase their risk of victimization. Thus, they were considered less culpable in their victimizations.

> Because they're innocent. They didn't do anything wrong, and people take advantage of them. And that's, that's the worst. And those offenders are the worst (male investigator, 50 years old, 24 years of experience).

> I would say the true victims, they're young. So, it's not like there's anything in their past. Not looking down a certain path or anything like that … there's no possible way that they are of aware of crime, especially a sex crime or abuse (male investigator, 38 years old, 6 years of experience).

Besides the different levels of innocence the children and "criminals" were perceived to have, officers described having more personal motivations or emotional connections working with child victims. Several officers explained that helping children was one of the things that motivated them and brought them meaning. One officer said:

> The victims that I feel most empathy for—those who are the most vulnerable in my mind. That's one of the reasons that I'm drawn to here, because I work with children. It's very fulfilling to help. Like I'm a piece of that … helped deliver justice to the victims and their families and help them to get in a more positive place.

> But the victims who are non-verbal … the more vulnerable the victim, the more you want to fight for them (female investigator, 31 years old, 5 years of experience).

Another officer described that his personal experience of being a dad made him more emotionally invested in cases where children were involved, because he could associate those kids with his own. He also stated that his role as a dad made him question the individuals who offend against children, because he could never see how one could hurt a child.

> I think like just having kids, the sexual assault kids, especially in minors, definitely hits home to me, just because I have two daughters. And I couldn't imagine ever my daughters going through this and stuff like that … So special place in my heart is trying to do what I can to make sure justice gets sorted for these kids, because they can't fight compared to adults … And some of these cases, you get very attached to the kids and make sure that you follow them through the career, make sure you're getting the help they need, especially with the therapists next door and stuff like that. You call and check in with them—as much as I can (male investigator, 38 years old, 16 years of experience).

As opposed to describing how working with child victims motivates them and brings meaning to their job, a female investigator described that she purposefully did not work on any case with children because of the impact it would have on her.

> I won't investigate anything with kids. It like, honestly, I couldn't. I've seen horrible things. I've seen people do horrible things to people. I can't … I don't even know that I could be professional about it, because so you got to know your strengths and your weaknesses, and that's definitely a weakness of mine. Kids are just—there's absolutely nothing that they can do or not do or whatever, they're just put in a situation. They can't save themselves (female investigator, 39 years old, 8 years of experience).

The impact children have on the officers was discussed by a few other officers. For example, another officer said:

> All of my cases deal with children … I've been in this unit for going on three years now. And I think after being in this unit, it would be very hard to go into any other unit because—not to take away from the other crimes—it would just really be hard to find a sense of purpose. Going from what I deal with now to going for somebody who left their car unlocked and their purse on the front seat—I don't have much empathy for that. I mean, it's a crime, you're a victim, but you're completely capable, you know, opposite ends of the spectrum (female investigator, 39 years old, 11 years of experience).

This officer noted that her experience working with children could make it hard for her if she got transferred somewhere else or if she started working on different cases. More specifically, she noted that her levels of empathy were impacted. Because she had worked with so many children, she noted that she had less empathy for other types of victimization that did not involve children, which could create a problem if she were to work on cases with no child victims. She notes that these types of victims were on the opposite ends of the spectrum than children because children are not capable of impacting their victimization.

Altogether, children were perceived as being the most innocent types of victims, and innocence was discussed in their lack of ability to defend themselves and the lack of actions made to expose themselves to victimizations. Children, as the category of victims, signified the most innocence, and thus were the victims who received the most empathy, as contrasted to the "criminals" who received the least empathy.

Discussion

This article has examined how officers perceive empathy, and which types of victims officers described having more and less empathy for. The findings in this study suggest that most officers acknowledge that empathy is an emotion that they experience in an occupational context, and that they have varying levels of empathy toward different types of victims. However, several officers highlighted that empathy was not something that impacted their work. These findings add to existing scholarship addressing officers' acknowledgment and display of emotions by demonstrating that emotions are a part of their occupational experience, despite some officers potentially being reluctant to display these emotions.[42] While the officers in this study note that their empathy does not influence their conduct, which could be true, it is important to caution that these answers could be influenced by the fact that officers want to appear less partial toward certain victims in the practice of procedural justice.

Additionally, officers in this study note that victims' perceived innocence is one of the central factors which informs the levels of empathy officers have for victims. More specifically, the findings suggested that there is a dichotomy of innocence which refers to two categories of victims symbolizing the most innocent victims and the least innocent victims. Depending on the level of innocence of the victims, the officers explained that they receive less or more empathy from the officers. When giving examples of the types of victims for whom they have the most empathy, the majority of the officers described children, because of their high level of innocence. Conversely, officers described "criminals" as the type of victims for whom they have less empathy due to their low level of innocence. These results support some of the previous empirical findings from studies examining police officers' perceptions of victims. For example, findings from a study examining Swedish officers' perceptions of victim culpability highlight the importance of the choice victims make and the ability they have to influence their situation as factors that highly influence officers' perception of the victims.[43] Furthermore, the same study indicates that children and elderly who are victimized are often perceived differently than victims who have a criminal past, which is substantiated in this study.

This study makes a contribution to the current empirical research by specifically linking officers' level of empathy to certain types of victims and factors that inform the level of empathy, whereas previous studies have focused on officers' general perceptions of victim culpability and victim blaming.[44] In line with previous scholarship, this article contributes to the literature which has traditionally focused on specific types of victimizations, such as intimate partner violence and sexual victimization, by not focusing on a predetermined type of victimization, but rather letting the officers freely describe victim or victimization typologies and characteristics they perceive to inform their empathy levels.[45]

The implications of the findings derived from these articles are that officers themselves acknowledge having varying levels of empathy for victims, meaning that they perceive certain victims differently than others. The findings show that officers exhibit negative perceptions about victims with a criminal past because they are not perceived as innocent in their victimization. One implication of this is that it is important to recognize and further investigate the biases victims with a criminal past are subjected to by police officers. It is also important to determine if these victims are subjected to differential treatment due to these biases.

The practical recommendation based on the findings of this article is for agencies to increase the discussion of emotion in an occupational context and further educate officers on emotional management as well as acknowledgment of personal feelings that could lead to biases toward certain individuals. By doing this, more hidden biases could be identified, and officers could develop skills and tools on how to manage emotions such as empathy, while also minimizing their personal biases and differential treatment toward certain individuals.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size and limited geographical representation pose challenges to the generalizability of findings. Despite this, the study's findings contribute to current scholarship by providing additional knowledge on how some officers describe empathy in relation to victims. It is recommended that future research explore a larger number of police agencies and geographical areas to learn more about whether cultural and geographical factors can impact levels of empathy among officers.

Second, this study used qualitative methodology—more specifically, semi-structured interviews—which provide great depth in understanding meanings and nuances in perceptions. However, due to the data being based on self-reported perceptions, a limitation of the study is that the answers officers gave could be filtered or presented to adhere to what is considered a socially acceptable answer. This limitation is a challenge for many studies that rely on self-reports and is something this study aimed to minimize by letting the officers stop the interviews if they were not comfortable providing an answer to certain questions. However, none of the officers stopped an interview or chose to not answer a specific question.

A third limitation is that the study cannot attest to actual differential treatment of certain victims due to varying levels of empathy; thus, future scholarship should examine if there is a link between varying levels of empathy and differential treatment of victims. This could provide more generalizable knowledge of officers' empathy levels toward victims and the implications for victims and case outcomes.

Due to the empirical support of the study on Swedish officers, it is recommended that future studies conduct comparative studies between police agencies in different parts of the world to examine cultural differences and similarities in officers' empathy levels toward victims.[46]

Acknowledgments

None.

Disclosures

None.

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