

## **Fostering empathy after community violence to promote coping**

This study explores the role of empathy for victims and offenders after a violent event, such as a school shooting. Empathy is the ability to experience or comprehend the emotions of another person. In this study, over 900 college students read about a school shooting that recently took place. Students were then assigned to six groups that described the shooter and victim in different ways (no information given, positive information given, or traumatic history information given). Afterward, students answered a series of questions about what type of punishment they would like to give the perpetrator and how likely they would be to reach out and help the victim or the community.

Results showed that when participants read information about an offender's background (either positive or negative), they were more likely to recommend lenient punishments. On the other hand, reading increased background information about the victim made respondents more likely to engage in positive community responses (that is, offer more helping behavior and charitable donations). Additionally, if respondents were able to make sense of why the crime occurred, they felt less anger toward the perpetrator.

Although more research is needed on the impact of fostering empathy after violence, promoting empathy for victims and offenders may be a way to reduce anger and promote coping in a community. Our study provides initial evidence that fostering empathy for an offender may promote healing for the victim. This is consistent with principles of restorative justice and may be useful for attorneys and social workers. Additionally, these findings indicate that media news stories that paint a detailed, accurate picture of the victim and perpetrator may help the public understand why a violent event occurred, which may promote positive adjustment and coping.

### **Publication**

[Developing an Understanding of Victims and Violent Offenders: The Impact of Fostering Empathy.](#)

Peterson JK, Silver RC

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