

Families of victims of violent assault have double the risk of anxiety—new study

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Every year, about a million people in [England and Wales are victims](#) of violent crime.

In addition to the harm suffered in the [assault](#) itself, they may also experience mental and [physical health](#) effects that last far longer. They often need the support of health and victim services, and they might have contact with the police or criminal justice.

The effects of [violence](#) can also ripple through whole families. [Our new study](#) reveals that many people in England are closely related to a victim of serious assault and that these people are twice as likely as the rest of the population to experience fear, anxiety and depression.

We worked with data from the UK government's key source of official statistics on [mental health](#): a national survey of [over 7,000 adults](#). The questionnaire asked whether people were closely related to someone who had experienced a serious assault, alongside questions about their lives and assessments of their mental health.

The analyses showed that as many as one adult in 20 was closely related (as the parent, child or sibling) to a serious assault victim in England.

These people were more likely than the rest of the population to be younger, to live in [social housing](#) and come from most deprived neighborhoods. They were more likely to experience other types of adversity in their lives too, such as financial stress and homelessness.

Family members also experienced worse mental health than people not related to a victim. They were more likely to feel fear in their neighborhood, to have depression or an anxiety disorder, to screen positive for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and to report self harm, feeling suicidal or a suicide attempt.

People related to a victim of assault were also more likely to have been a victim of violence themselves. Our analyses found that it was their own experiences of violence and adversity that accounted for family

members' higher rates of PTSD, self harm and feeling suicidal. However, even when controlling for this, family members remained more anxious and more than twice as likely to be fearful in their neighborhoods than the rest of the population.

Assault victims and their families often share the same risks for violence, such as living in a high [crime](#) area. Violence often occurs within households, and it is possible that the victim and their family had been assaulted by the same person, or that one had harmed the other.

A source of support

Family members of serious assault victims experience the effects of violence in different ways. They may physically intervene in an assault to protect the victim, or witness an attack taking place. They may see the distress that an assault causes their loved one or feel guilty that they could not protect them.

It is also likely that families will acquire new caring and support roles, taking on additional responsibilities in the household or having to work more hours because they have lost an income.

Alongside a network of friends, colleagues and neighbors, relatives are [critical sources of help](#), [emotional support](#), and even [advocacy](#) for victims and survivors of violence.

However, there is little recognition of the burden of these roles and experiences on families. Nor are there enough resources allocated by the government to support families in these roles, including the negative effects of caregiving on [mental and physical health](#) they may experience.

The cost of violence

The UK Home Office puts the economic and social [costs of crime](#) in England and Wales at around £50 billion a year. This includes costs for crime prevention measures and the criminal justice system, as well as the costs associated with damage and injury to direct victims.

Violent crime makes up three quarters of this estimate, despite making up only a third of the number of crimes. The estimate does not, however, consider the costs associated with the distress and harm to victims' families, for example relating to their needs for support.

Government recognition of the impact of violence on victims' families when it sets budgets would go some way to ensuring that sufficient resources are allocated to support services for victims and their families.

The effect of violent crime on families must be considered in the context of already reduced funding and resources for service providers. Between 2020 and 2021, [more than a quarter](#) of specialist domestic violence and abuse organizations in England and Wales were forced to cease offering services due to a lack of funding.

The new [Victims and Prisoners Act 2024](#) takes important steps towards this by recognizing people who have "seen, heard, or otherwise directly experienced" the effects of a crime. However, it is important to remember that families are affected in many other ways, for long after the crime itself. Governments must ensure that support services for families are adequately resourced to deal with the harms they experience, and [support](#) them with the vital care they provide.

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