

## Book Review

# Childhood victimization: Violence, crime and abuse in the lives of young people

David Finkelhor

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Over the past two decades, there has been a tremendous movement in the juvenile justice system. Juvenile offenders and the offenses that they are committing have undergone a vast amount of research, policy experimentation, community attention, theory, development, and not to mention, a lot of taxpayers' dollars committed to the area. David Finkelhor's contribution to the vast umbrella that encompasses juvenile justice analyzes this area of justice from a differing focal point in his work: *Childhood Victimization: Violence, Crime and Abuse in the Lives of Young People*. In the decades preceding this work by Finkelhor, the community's attention had been primarily focused on children as offenders. In this writing, Finkelhor has brought a light to children as victims of crime rather than primarily the perpetrators of the criminal epidemic.

*Childhood Victimization* is concentrated on refocusing the reader's attention away from the thought of juveniles as offenders and reminding the reader that children are victims of crime that deserve as much, if not more, attention from research and policymakers as juvenile offenders incur. Throughout the text, Finkelhor re-conceptualizes the domain of child welfare concern through the efforts of integrating each of the complex and conventional views of victimization of children. Finkelhor proposes that the history of research on childhood victimization has been primarily focused on the impact of specific crimes against children (that is, sexual abuse, bullying, kidnapping and domestic abuse). The author refers to this practice of specified focus as a 'fragmented' view. This view relays the message that in order to comprehend the true scope and seriousness of childhood victimizations, we must create an integrated approach that allows research, enactment of policies and a reaction style that is holistic in practice in order to better understand and react to these crimes against children. The book does not approach the issues of a fragmented system through a historical order. Rather, Finkelhor presents and discusses a variety of facets of the childhood victimization to which the author argues that each deserve to be integrated into a holistic approach to better serve the children of our communities who are experiencing victimizations. Each chapter lays out what is currently known about each topic of concern from a variety of competing theoretical views and statistical collection databases and then concludes with a proposal of how to take the information we have to create a less-fragmented system. Finkelhor campaigns for the holistic model throughout the text and uses each argument to further integrate the importance of this new regimented model on the outcomes of crimes



against children. This presentation style allows the reader to experience the analysis of each topic from a variety of viewpoints and arguments. The conclusion to each chapter presents the reader the opportunity to view the population of children victims as a community that can be helped and remove the conception that the epidemic of crimes against children is too big to tackle. It reminds the reader that through certain interventions, our criminal justice and child welfare systems can create better outcomes for the victims of crime.

After a brief preface that introduces Finkelhor's purpose for creating the book and outlining what the reader will find in each chapter, Chapter 1 begins with the author making a strong argument for children being the most victimized population. The chapter examines child victims from the scope of national reporting data in comparison to other victimization groups along with analyzing the development of societal recognition of child maltreatment in the last few decades. Throughout the chapter, Finkelhor reiterates the dangerous epidemic of serious underreporting of child maltreatment and follows up with presenting the recent focus on children as offenders rather than victims. At the conclusion of the chapter, Finkelhor presents his proposal for the need of a holistic approach to childhood victimization in professional study and child welfare services. The author wraps up the chapter by introducing his coined term of *developmental victimology*, which Finkelhor wishes to implement as a dynamic approach from which to study and understand the effects and needs of childhood victims.

Chapter 2 is devoted to outlining Finkelhor's approach to his solution to the problem of fragmentation within the system. This chapter functions basically as a 'how to' guide for the building and implementation of a more comprehensive view. This 'how to' format is structured in such a way to sketch the outlines of the author's new sect of *developmental victimology*. The author purports that this practice should serve the purpose of being able to address and conceptualize childhood victims in the same manner that juvenile delinquency has been conceptualized in order to bring about similar social interest and a call for action. Finkelhor outlines his approach in three basic focal areas that deserve attention in order for this defragmentation to occur: (i) define and categorize child and juvenile victims, (ii) what is known about the causes of childhood victims and (iii) how victimization changes across the developmental span of childhood.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to exposing the reader to various theoretical approaches created to understand childhood victimizations and why they occur. The author begins the chapter by calling the reader's attention to the fact that there is a limited amount research about exactly which children are at risk to crime and questions what exactly can we do to diminish those risks. Finkelhor includes this chapter because it works well to add another arm of reasons why a comprehensive approach model is the better solution to our problem of crimes against children. He uses this chapter to summarize the previous academic findings about the risk of childhood victimizations and argues that an organization of the information in a comprehensive practice will help focus the right people's attention on what we can do to improve or solve the problem. The most compelling piece of this chapter is toward the conclusion in which Finkelhor proposes a strategy to improve Rational Choice Theory to make it a more holistic view that is conducive to childhood victimizations. He offers an addition to the crime triangle called: Target Congruence that he argues would better supplement the youth demographic into the already successful theory.

Chapter 4 provides the research on the effects of victimization on children who experience crime at this particular stage in human development. Finkelhor expands what is

known about the effects of crime on children by arguing that a holistic field must incorporate attention to the differing childhood developmental stages to better understand this particularly unique field of victimology. He argues that the complexities of childhood must be taken into account to save ourselves from overlooking important differences that can easily be mistakenly grouped together into the underdeveloped term of 'childhood'. This chapter is about the halfway marker to the conclusion of the entire reading. It provides the very important purpose of reminding the reader again that each of these discussions, as statistical and cold as they may be, are about mere children. It re-ignites the reader's interest that may have been lost by targeting the realness of the situation and providing the realization that crimes against children can have a detrimental effect at any stage of the developmental process; although each effect is unique to the child and his or her developmental stage.

Chapter 5 uses an intriguing opening sequence to transition into the chapter's focal concern of a scientific difference between the violence that adults experience and the violence that children experience. Finkelhor contends that most previous studies wrongly disregard child peer violence as equal to adult peer violence in terms of seriousness, injury and harmful psychological effects. The central argument to this chapter is that naïve ideas about childhood victimizations can impede the understandings and the advocates of various solutions. The most interesting revelation that this chapter provides is that the demographics of childhood is difficult to assess because the age group's developmental characteristics are so unique. As a culture we too often brush off child peer violence as 'kids just being kids'.

In the reiteration of the failings of the criminal justice system to provide child victims with the adequate justice and responsiveness that this highly underserved demographic deserves, can the purpose of Chapter 6 be found. In this chapter, Finkelhor considers a variety of domains of victimization for both processes of police reporting and mental health resources that the author proceeds to analyze with respect to the utility for an integrated approach for child victims. The author chose to highlight the two differential topics of reporting and seeking professional help because the author feels that often times, in the criminal justice system, one factor will also predict another. Finkelhor discusses which factors of a child's characteristics, environment and so on will enable or hinder the likelihood that a child will be adequately treated. The chapter concludes with a proposed model for the purpose of analyzing these two topics into a more integrated approach which could cause immediate policy applications for childhood victims.

In a turn from more disparaging statistics, figures, trends and findings, Chapter 7 takes the focus to the other side of the coin that reveals the recent decline of various types of crimes against children since the 1990s up until the publication of the book. This chapter picks apart and analyzes this downward trend in an attempt at understanding: why it's occurring and if the statistics are reflective of fact. Finkelhor lists several types of crimes against children and notes the various year markings of when the decline for each type of crime began. He also includes graphics from the National Crime Victimization Survey data noting the trends in a manner that is easily readable to the audience. Finkelhor pushes the reader's thinking toward viewing the matter of a decline in victimization rates in the holistic and comprehensive manner the entire writing thus far has been campaigning for by laying out the benefits of the approach of *developmental victimology*.

Chapter 8 begins by comparing the two separate systems of juvenile offenders and juvenile victims. Finkelhor compares the cohesiveness and inclusiveness of each system and argues that the victim justice system is lagging behind its opposite. He argues that the



juvenile victim system needs to have as much, if not more, attention and development as the juvenile offender system has in order to create better protections and outcomes for children who are victims of crime. This chapter returns the reader back to the focal arguments found in Chapter 1 of the juvenile victim system as a fragmented system made of separate parts which lack a holistic practice and operation within our criminal justice system. Using this concept as a reference point, Finkelhor moves to center the chapter on the description of the structure and various fragmented elements of the system for child victims by exploring the flow of a juvenile case in our current legal system.

The final chapter concludes on a more positive note by acknowledging the successful components of the childhood victims system. Finkelhor acknowledges the accomplishments of the child victims system. The previous chapters in the text have predominantly focused on the shortcomings and the negative effects on children our current system has. The author notes that although our system may be flawed, it provides more attentive services to the children in the United States than almost any other country in the world. Despite these comparative successes, Finkelhor turns the attention to a list of various problems that still exist within the Child Protective Services system. He uses this opening of the chapter to transition into the primary focus of this final concluding chapter – a focus on reform proposals.

Generally, *Childhood Victimization* is a book whose target audience mainly belongs to victimology researchers and criminal justice policymakers. The writing is chock full of critiques, previous research and practical proposals that could only be useful to professionals in the victimology or legal setting. The casual reader would find the book easy to read because of the clear writing format but almost impossible to enact any changes within his/her community. *Childhood Victimization* offers proposals and critiques that are very large in scale and broad in spectrum, which inhibits the common reader from doing more than just merely being informed on the issues.

Nonetheless, Finkelhor's writing provides a unique insight into the under-researched and under-practiced field of childhood victims. He takes on this unique demographic and proposes changes within the system that are plausible, modest and feasible for our policy-makers and those professionals who can initiate real change. In our society where the injustices of crimes against children are happening far too often, this book provides a thought-provoking argument that needs to be seriously considered by those with the power to do so in order to protect our unique demographic of virtually helpless youth.

Marina Kelaidis

Department of Criminal Justice, Weber State University, Ogden, Utah, USA.