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journals.sagepub.com/home/irv**Maarten Jacob Johannes Kunst¹** 

Abstract

The victim–offender overlap is one of the most robust findings in criminology and victimology. However, the literature on this overlap suffers from several limitations. First, its conceptualisation of the victim–offender overlap is rather narrow. Second, it lacks a theoretical framework that explains the overlap between victimisation and offending. Third, it has neglected its relevance for criminal justice responses to crime. In this paper, I argue that adopting a trauma-informed lens can help us to overcome these limitations in the context of violent crime. Such a lens is based on two premises: (1) that violent victimisation and offending may both originate in and result from trauma and (2) that criminal justice responses to violent crime will be less harmful and result in better outcomes if they account for trauma. I show that this lens can help to broaden the conceptualisation of the victim–offender overlap and to improve criminological and victimological theory and criminal justice policy and practice.

Keywords

victims, offenders, victim–offender overlap, trauma, trauma-informed, criminal justice

Introduction¹

Criminologists and victimologists consider the victim–offender overlap as a ‘basic fact of crime’ (e.g. Berg and Schreck, 2022). Text- and handbooks typically define this overlap as the co-occurrence of the victim and the offender status (e.g. Daigle and Muftić, 2016). To put it more simply, it is about victims who are offenders and offenders who are victims. One of the first scholars to find support for the victim–offender overlap was the American criminologist and victimologist Marvin Wolfgang. In 1958, he published his study entitled ‘Patterns in criminal homicide’, for which he

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had analysed nearly 600 murder cases from the city of Philadelphia. He found that the majority of the murdered victims had criminal records themselves (Wolfgang, 1958).

Since Wolfgang's study, support for the victim–offender overlap has been provided for diverse populations, across a wide range of crimes and using varying methods (Berg and Mulford, 2020; Jennings et al., 2012). However, most studies claiming to provide evidence for the victim–offender overlap have revealed ‘sequences’ of victimisation and offending and vice versa, rather than a victim–offender ‘overlap’. Many of these studies have, for instance, shown that childhood victimisation is associated with offending in adolescence and early adulthood (Malvaso et al., 2018). It therefore seems more appropriate to speak of a ‘victim–offender *sequence*’ than of a ‘victim–offender *overlap*’. After all, the term ‘overlap’ assumes that victimisation and offending co-occur at the same time.² Indeed, one might argue that using the term ‘victim–offender overlap’ enforces stigmatisation of victims and offenders. For reasons of clarity, I will nevertheless continue using the term ‘victim–offender overlap’.

According to many criminologists, a major problem of the victim–offender overlap is that it is unknown what this overlap means for criminological theory and policy and practice (e.g. Berg and Mulford, 2020; Berg and Schreck, 2022). In this paper, I argue that adopting a trauma-informed lens may help us to make more sense and more use of the victim–offender overlap in the context of violent crime. According to this lens, it is of utmost importance for the criminal justice system to take into account the possibility of the presence of trauma when dealing with victims and offenders (McLachlan, 2024b; Ponc et al., 2016). Trauma is typically seen as a psychological consequence of victimisation of life-threatening or otherwise deeply disturbing events, but it may also provoke individuals to behave in ways that precipitate new victimisation or to commit violence, and it may follow from causing harm to someone else (McLachlan, 2024b; Pink and Gray, 2022; Willmot, 2022). In other words, it may be both an antecedent and a consequence of violent crime. Tailoring the criminal justice system's response to victims' and offenders' trauma will not only help them to recover from these trauma, but may also decrease the risk of future victimisation and offending (Kunst, 2025). In view of the high prevalence rates of trauma among victims and offenders, particularly those involved in violent crime, and the inability of the criminal justice system to prevent the (re)occurrence of this and other types of crime, adopting a trauma-informed lens will be a fruitful avenue for improving our dealing with both victims and offenders (cf. Branson et al., 2017).

I start my argumentation with a criminal case which occurred in my own country – the Netherlands – several years ago. The case illustrates the multifaceted and complex nature of the victim–offender overlap and will help the reader to better understand my position. The case is followed by a critical reflection of what Mark Berg and Christopher Schreck – two leading victim–offender overlap scholars – have written about the implications of this overlap for theory, policy and practice a couple of years ago (Berg and Schreck, 2022). Based on this reflection, I identify three challenges that criminology and victimology face in making more sense and use of the victim–offender overlap. After I have done this, I explain what the term ‘trauma-informed’ means and illustrate how adopting a trauma-informed lens can help us to overcome these challenges. I conclude with some critical remarks and recommendations for future research.

A case illustration of the victim–offender overlap

In 2017, a man and his wife were violently robbed of a Rolex watch in the Dutch city of Arnhem (De Rechtspraak, 2020). The couple had put the watch for sale on the website ‘marktplaats.nl’ – a

Dutch online market platform. They had made an appointment with a guy who said he was willing to pay the requested price of 30.000 euros. However, when this guy turned up at their house, it became clear he did not want to pay anything at all: he threatened them with a gun and requested them to hand over the watch. After firing several warning shots, they did as requested and then fled onto the street through their backyard. There they stepped into a caddie from a food delivery service which had been left by its driver; the man crept behind the wheel and his wife took the passenger's seat. After this things went terribly wrong: while trying to flee with the caddie, the couple again encountered the robber. Upon noticing that the couple were in the caddie, the robber shot at the driver and was then hit by the caddie. He died from the wounds that he had received in the collision. The man who had wanted to sell his watch and who had driven the caddie was arrested and had to stay in custody during the police investigation. The Dutch prosecution office decided to prosecute him for manslaughter. During the court hearing, it became clear that the robber was a homeless drug addict and a repeat offender of various crimes, whose youth was characterised by a history of violence. According to his daughter, he had improved his life and had not deserved to die. She called the watch seller 'a monster' for killing her father. In response the watch seller stated that he had developed a posttraumatic stress disorder from the fact that he had killed someone else, that his arrest and custody had felt humiliating and that he was extremely moved by the story of the robber's daughter.

Eventually, after criminal proceedings that in total took more than 3 years, the court accepted the watch seller's self-defence claim and acquitted him from further prosecution. The basis for the court's decision was reports by two expert witnesses, which stated that he had acted under extreme anxiety, panic, and distress. As a result, he had engaged in a series of automatic flight- and fight responses over which he had had no control.

The case is a typical example of violent victim–offender overlap: the man who had wanted to sell his watch first was a victim of robbery and then became an offender for manslaughter, while the robber first acted as a violent offender and then became a victim of violence himself. It makes three things clear: (1) that violent acts committed during adulthood may originate in a history of violent childhood or in current emotional states that were triggered by other violent acts, (2) that the offenders of violent acts – just like their victims – may become traumatised from the consequences of these acts and (3) that these consequences may worsen due to how they are treated during criminal proceedings. Below, I will refer to these observations when I discuss the challenges we need to address if we want to make more sense and use of the victim–offender overlap. But first I will briefly summarise what Berg and Schreck wrote about the meaning of this overlap for theory, policy and practice.

Berg and Schreck on the victim–offender overlap's implications for theory, policy and practice

In 2022, Berg and Schreck published an article entitled 'The meaning of the victim–offender overlap for criminological theory and crime prevention policy' in the *Annual Review of Criminology* (Berg and Schreck, 2022). As I mentioned in the introduction, both are prominent scholars of the victim–offender overlap. In this article, they write that 'criminologists have not granted sufficient attention to the implications of the (victim–offender) overlap for the explanation and control of crime' (Berg and Schreck, 2022: 278). As they search for theories that might serve as inspiration for developing a victim–offender overlap theory and inventing new policies and practices in the

paragraphs following this statement, it seems they consider a lack of theory as the main challenge to be resolved if we are to make more sense and use of the victim–offender overlap.

In their search for theories that might be used as a starting point, Berg and Schreck make a distinction between ‘positivist’ theories and theories belonging to what they call the ‘modern choice perspective’ (Berg and Schreck, 2022). As an example of positivist theories, they discuss Wolfgang and Ferracuti’s *Subculture of Violence Theory* (Wolfgang and Ferracuti, 1967). According to this theory, the victim–offender overlap is due to cultural norms about violent behaviour in particular subgroups of society: for members of these subgroups such behaviour is status-enhancing for the offender and requires retaliation by the victim. Berg and Schreck argue that this theory cannot account for the victim–offender overlap, since this overlap also occurs in social environments where violence is not the norm. Moreover, it fails to acknowledge that the offender’s motivation to commit a crime may also be due to ‘some objective external reality’, such as victim behaviour that does not involve a violation of cultural norms (Berg and Schreck, 2022: 287).

Berg and Schreck believe that theories belonging to the modern choice perspective, such as routine activities and lifestyle theories, control theories, and social interactionist theories, are better equipped to account for the victim–offender overlap (Berg and Schreck, 2022). These theories assign independent value to the victim’s behaviour prior to the crime, that is, irrespective of whether the offender sees it as a violation of shared cultural norms. For this same reason they think that these theories provide a better starting point for the development of prevention strategies which aim to reduce the risk of both offending and victimisation; consistent with these theories, teaching potential offenders to better weigh the pros and cons of criminal behaviour has been proven to be an effective crime prevention strategy. Based on this finding, Berg and Schreck speculate that teaching potential victims precautionary behaviours which make committing crimes less attractive to potential offenders will result in lower crime rates too, particularly if they are taught these behaviours at an early age (Berg and Schreck, 2022).

I share Berg and Schreck’s opinion that we do not know how to use the victim–offender overlap for crime policy and practice. As I indicated in the introduction, adopting a trauma-informed lens may help to solve this problem. Before I can explain the added value of this approach, it is first necessary to understand the challenges we face in making more sense and use of the victim–offender overlap. In my opinion, a lack of theory is not the only challenge we need to address, while theories belong to the modern choice perspective do not entail a sufficient starting point for theory development.

Challenges in making more sense and use of the victim–offender overlap

Challenge 1: The scope of the concept

The first challenge relates to the scope of the concept. In most studies, the victim–offender overlap involves two different acts or sets of acts committed by at least two different parties. These acts or sets of acts may, but do not need to be associated with each other, as long as they both entail an *objective* breach of criminal law. This conceptualisation of the victim–offender overlap neglects that victimisation is a *subjective* appraisal of individual experiences rather than the outcome of fulfilment of legal criteria (e.g. Wemmers, 2017). As a result, it incorrectly excludes situations in which offending overlaps with subjective experiences of victimisation which do not

qualify for acts of victimisation in a legal sense. The case with which I started this paper provides two important examples: the posttraumatic stress disorder which the watch seller developed as a consequence of the robber's death and the watch seller's humiliating treatment during the criminal proceedings.

Challenge 2: A lack of theory

The second challenge is of a theoretical nature. I endorse Berg and Schreck's observation that criminology and victimology lack a sound explanation for the victim–offender overlap. As I mentioned above, they argue that the modern choice perspective is the most promising candidate to account for this overlap. In their view, this perspective has produced theories that were able 'to use the victim–offender overlap to specify how the same mechanisms that produce crime also produced distinctive qualities in target decision making' (Berg and Schreck, 2022: 292). According to them, these theories assume that both offenders and victims are *rational* and self-interested actors who behave according and in response to a particular situation: the motivation to commit a crime primarily arises from situation characteristics that make committing a crime an attractive option, while these same characteristics make it attractive to act in a way that precipitates or escalates victimisation. I partly agree with them. Both offending and victimisation are likely to occur on the basis of situation characteristics. It is also true that they frequently originate in rational choices on the side of the offender or the victim, but not always; whether and to what extent one acts rationally may be a function of a normal or an abnormal psychological condition. The case with which I started this paper provides an example of a normal psychological condition that may cause criminal offending: as said, the watch seller committed the manslaughter under extreme anxiety, panic, and distress. According to the consulted expert witnesses, it was this temporary emotional state which had provoked a series of automatic flight- and fight responses over which he had had no control and which resulted in the manslaughter. And obviously there are also many abnormal psychological conditions that may interfere with one's ability to act rationally. Think of psychiatric disorders which are characterised by experiencing extreme emotions, such as mood and anxiety disorders, borderline personality disorder, and trauma- and stressor-related disorders; due to the extreme emotions they experience, people with these disorders are severely limited in their ability to correctly interpret social situations and react rationally in such situations. Research suggests that this puts them at risk of both victimisation and offending (e.g. Kunst and Winkel, 2013; Taft et al., 2010). The choice perspective can therefore not fully account for the victim–offender overlap (cf. De Haan and Vos, 2003).

Challenge 3: Its meaning for policy and practice

The third and last challenge concerns the implications of the victim–offender overlap for policy and practice. According to Berg and Schreck, the choice perspective can help us to develop strategies that aim to teach young people to behave differently in situations that predispose them to victimisation (Berg and Schreck, 2022). I agree with them, but again only partially; in view of the large body of empirical research on the effectiveness of youth crime prevention programmes (for an overview, see Kovalenko et al., 2022), it indeed seems worthwhile to extend current prevention initiatives to the behaviour of potential victims. However, there is more to it. As I have just argued, neither offending nor victimisation is always the product of rationality. It is therefore insufficient

to rely on the modern choice perspective alone to develop additional prevention strategies. Moreover, if we acknowledge that the victim–offender overlap also includes situations in which subjective experiences of victimisation overlap with offending, the victim–offender overlap has implications not only for prevention strategies, but also for the criminal justice system’s reactions to crime. For example, in the case with which I started this paper, another response than arresting him and taking him into custody could have prevented the watch seller from feeling humiliated.

How can we address these challenges?

Adopting a trauma-informed lens can help us to address the challenges I raised in the previous paragraph. Before I explain how, it is important to briefly introduce what this approach entails. As indicated in the introduction, it is based on the idea that criminal justice responses to violent crime will be less harmful for those involved in criminal proceedings and will result in better outcomes if they take into account victims’ and offenders’ trauma. To achieve this, the criminal justice system needs to adhere to the four key principles or the ‘four R’s’ of trauma-informed practices: (1) realise, (2) recognise, (3) respond and (4) resist retraumatisation (the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (SAMHSA), 2014). The first principle means that criminal justice professionals who come into contact with victims and offenders of violence should be aware that criminal victimisation and offending may be due to prior traumatic experiences and that both may be traumatic in themselves. This can be accomplished by educating criminal justice professionals in trauma and its impact on a person’s life (Branson et al., 2017). The second principle means that professionals who work with victims and offenders should be able to recognise symptoms of traumatisation. This requires training in trauma screening (Branson et al., 2017). The third principle means that they should be able to tailor their responses to current or prior trauma and the fourth that they should do everything they can to avoid retraumatisation, that is, an aggravation of the trauma (SAMHSA, 2014). To achieve this, they need to learn how to interview traumatised individuals in a trauma-sensitive and trauma-response manner and know which support services are available to such individuals (Branson et al., 2017). However, education and training alone are not enough to adhere to these principles; existing government and management structures and policy frameworks should be adapted and financial resources should be made available to guarantee that criminal justice professionals are not only able but also equipped to work in a trauma-informed manner (Branson et al., 2017).

To better understand the trauma-informed principles, it is necessary to know what the term ‘trauma’ means. The SAMHSA (2014) defines this term as follows (SAMHSA, 2014: 7):

An event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. (p. 7)

Addressing challenge 1: Extension of the concept to subjective victimisation experiences

On the basis of the SAMHSA definition of trauma, it is possible to solve the first of the three challenges, as this definition emphasises the way in which events or circumstances are ‘experienced’ rather than the occurrence of these events or circumstances per se. It allows for extension of the

victim–offender overlap to situations in which offending co-occurs with subjective experiences of victimisation. This is first and foremost the case in situations in which the violent offender experiences the crime he committed as an act of *self-inflicted* victimisation. This may happen when someone else forced the offender to commit the crime or when it was committed while experiencing extreme emotions, under the influence of alcohol or drugs, by accident, or out of negligence. In such situations, offenders can feel victimised by their own offending, because the crime they committed violates the way they see themselves. Such a self-inflicted violation of one's self may have a devastating impact on the offender; in the example I gave it led to the development of a posttraumatic disorder. A better known example is the case of Alec Baldwin. At the set of the film *Rust*, he fatally shot cinematographer Halyna Hutchins with a prop gun. Baldwin was incorrectly under the impression that it contained fake bullets. Baldwin too developed a posttraumatic disorder from the crime he had committed (Jacobs, 2025).

The watch seller and Baldwin are certainly no exceptions: a recent meta-analytic review shows that more than 40% of all homicide offenders suffer from a posttraumatic stress disorder which stems from committing the homicide (Badenes-Ribera et al., 2021). For offenders of non-fatal violence, the prevalence rate seems to be slightly lower, but even for them it is higher than 30% (Badenes-Ribera et al., 2021).³ Critics may argue that these figures may be inflated by malingering, that is, the intentional presentation of false symptoms or exaggeration of true symptoms to avoid criminal responsibility or to get a more lenient sentence (Young, 2014). This is not very likely though, as participants in the studies which were included in this meta-analytic review were approached after completion of the criminal trial and thus had no advantage in providing false symptom levels.

Less is known about the impact of non-violent crimes on offenders, but the few studies that have been conducted suggest that they too may develop a posttraumatic stress disorder as a result of committing the crime. For example, Polish researchers have found that 11% of motor vehicle accident offenders qualify for a probable diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder (Merecz-Kot et al., 2015).

Offending also co-occurs with subjective victimisation when the offender experiences the criminal justice system's response to the violent crime as an act of victimisation. In many instances, this response would have qualified as a criminal offence sanctioned by criminal law were it not have been justified by that same criminal law as a legitimate response to the offender's own unlawful behaviour. Indeed, one of the criminal justice response's goals is to add *suffering* to the offender in the hope that he or she will abstain from committing crimes in the future (e.g. Zaibert, 2023). It is therefore not surprising that many offenders truly experience this response as an 'addition' of suffering. This particularly applies to offenders who have been sentenced to incarceration: they may suffer from what Sykes has coined as 'the pains of imprisonment' (Sykes, 1958). These pains result from the deprivation of liberty, goods and service, heterosexual relationships, autonomy and security. A large body of research indicates that many incarcerated offenders experience these deprivations as extremely stressful (e.g. Crewe, 2011; McKendy and Ricciardelli, 2021).

Addressing challenge 2: Explaining the overlap with trauma theories

However, extension of the victim–offender overlap to situations in which offending co-occurs with subjective experiences of victimisation is not the only challenge that can be solved by adopting a trauma-informed lens. It can also help us to better explain the victim–offender

overlap from a theoretical perspective. As mentioned, the first assumption of this lens is that trauma may entail both a cause and consequence of violent victimisation and offending. Trauma theories may help us to understand this. An important theory is Ronnie Janoff-Bulman's *Shattered Assumptions Theory* (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). This theory was developed to explain why some individuals suffer from traumatic events, while others do not. According to Janoff-Bulman, such events shatter people's fundamental assumptions about themselves, others and the world around them (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Relying on the work of developmental psychologists, particularly Erikson's seminal work on identity formation (Erikson, 1968) and Bowlby's influential work on attachment (Bowlby, 1969, 1973), she argues that these assumptions are rooted in early-infancy interactions with the primary caregiver – usually the mother. For most people, these interactions are positive in nature and result in a tendency to see themselves as worthy persons and to think that other people respect them and that the world is a safe place to live (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Obviously, in adults these beliefs are more solidified than in children, as adults have had more time to experience their validity.

When we experience a traumatic event, some of our positive beliefs prove to be false. Those who experience such an event are faced with a difficult challenge: they need to rebuild their fundamental assumptions (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Not all traumatised individuals succeed in this difficult challenge: some of them entirely fail to adapt their prior assumptions to the traumatic experience, while others do this in a destructive way. Let me briefly elaborate on these two maladaptive coping outcomes. In the first case, the traumatic experience is stored in the individual's memory as a collection of separate fragments rather than as a holistic narrative (Brewin, 1989; Brewin et al., 1996; Ehlers and Clark, 2000). A consequence of this fragmented storage of the traumatic experience is that it may be involuntarily re-experienced in situations that remind the individual of this experience (Krans et al., 2010; Taft et al., 2017). This is problematic, as such re-experiences are extremely stressful and likely to trigger automatic flight and fight responses that are life-saving in truly dangerous situations, but which are usually inappropriate in other situations, and which may trigger counter-reactions (Kunst and Winkel, 2013). Re-experiences may explain why some traumatised individuals commit crimes or display victimisation precipitating behaviour when it is not rational to do this. This idea contrasts with and provides a different understanding of the victim-offender overlap than the rational choice perspective. It shows similarities with Crick and Dodge's Social Information Processing Theory, which postulates that aggression and counter aggression – irrespective of prior traumatisation – are the product of misinterpretations of other people's behaviour (Crick and Dodge, 1994). A typical example of this type of coping failure are traumatised police officers who behave in an unnecessarily violent way while on duty or at home; research has shown that such police officers are at an increased risk of committing violence (e.g. DeVolder et al., 2019; Oehme et al., 2012).

In the second case, traumatised individuals rebuild their prior assumptions in a way that may increase the risk of criminal behaviour: rather than continuing to think that they are worthy persons; that other people respect them; and that the world is a safe place to live, they start thinking that they are unworthy persons; that other people disrespect them; and that the world is an unsafe place to live. This is problematic, as such views are typically accompanied by psychological distress and guide people's behaviour choices: we typically behave in line with how we see ourselves, other people and the physical world (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). For example, committing a violent crime or displaying victimisation precipitating behaviour may be a perfectly rational thing to do for those who think of themselves as unworthy persons and others as disrespectful. This idea is in line

with but provides a more precise theoretical underpinning of the modern choice perspective than current criminological theories do. It resembles Lonnie Athens' *Violentisation Theory* (Athens, 1992 [1989], 2003, 2015). This theory argues that violence stems from a process of 'violentisation' during which victims learn that violence is the only strategy to effectively deal with conflicts with other people and which needs to be employed proactively to avoid such conflicts in the first place (Athens, 1992 [1989], 2003, 2015). A typical example of this type of destructive coping are adult offenders who have a history of chronic childhood trauma. The victim from the criminal case with which I started this presentation seems to be such an offender: his offending behaviour appears to originate in a violent and therefore, presumably, traumatic youth. Research suggests that such a youth is a risk factor for violent offending in adult life (for reviews, see Herrenkohl et al., 2022; Malvaso et al., 2022).

Addressing challenge 3: Improving policy and practice

Finally, adopting a trauma-informed lens may help the criminal justice system to break the link between violent victimisation and offending. This is for two reasons. First, it will help to improve current prevention strategies. As said, Berg and Schreck have pleaded for teaching young people how to make more rational decisions regarding criminal behaviour or behaviour that might precipitate them to victimisation. Following Shattered Assumptions Theory and in line with the trauma-informed principles, it seems reasonable to additionally recommend the development of programmes that aim to identify and refer traumatised individuals to professional treatment (SAMHSA, 2014). Professional treatment may help them to rebuild their prior assumptions in ways that stimulate engagement in healthy rather than criminal or victimisation precipitating behaviours (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). This accounts both for individuals who unconsciously display and those who deliberately choose to display such behaviours; several studies suggest that trauma treatment may help them to abstain from violence or victimisation precipitating behaviour (see Briere, 2019; Hoogsteder et al., 2022; Zettler, 2021). Governments should allocate resources to stimulate collaborations between criminal justice and mental health agencies that aim to improve timely identification and treatment of trauma among individuals involved in the criminal justice system and those at risk of violent victimisation or offending (cf. Hood and Komoski, 2023).

Second, it will help to improve the criminal justice system's reactions to crime. Criminal proceedings are traditionally focused on truth finding. Obtaining this objective may interfere with the coping process in which traumatised victims and offenders are engaged (Herman, 2023). As indicated above, this coping process involves a rebuilding of shattered prior assumptions. To facilitate this, traumatised individuals need to lower the level of distress they experience when thinking of the traumatic event. This is achieved by alternating between episodes of avoiding painful thoughts, images and feelings related to the traumatic experience and episodes during which the traumatic event is re-experienced (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Involvement in criminal proceedings is likely to distort this fragile coping process of alternating between avoidance and confrontation; criminal justice professionals want to know what happened and why and try to acquire this knowledge by pressing suspects and victim-witnesses to answer their questions about the crime (Herman, 2023). For those traumatised by the crime or events contributing to its occurrence this is extremely stressful, as it prevents them from switching to an episode of avoidance. As a result, they may experience an unnecessary stagnation or even a relapse in their recovery process and produce unreliable statements. The criminal justice

system currently fails to acknowledge this, because many professionals working in this system do not know what trauma is, let alone that they know how to recognise signs of traumatisation and how to provide tailored responses to traumatised individuals and prevent retraumatisation (e.g. Lorey and Fegert, 2022). Adopting a trauma-informed lens will help the criminal justice system to change this (McLachlan, 2024b). For example, if the police screen suspects for offence-related traumatisation, it can tailor interrogation circumstances based on their individual needs (Birch, 2024; McLachlan, 2024a). It may, among other things, offer traumatised suspects the opportunity to be questioned in the presence of somebody they trust and at times and maybe even locations of their choosing and arrange professional support services. This will be beneficial for both the suspect and the investigation team: it ensures that the interrogation does not interfere with the fragile coping process through which the suspect tries to restore his or her fundamental assumptions and it forestalls that he or she feels victimised by the police. In addition, it helps the police and the public prosecutor to obtain more and more reliable information about the crime and the circumstances under which it was committed. If charges are filed against the suspect, such information will eventually help the judge to make a balanced and impartial decision that contributes to the suspect's trauma recovery and lowers his or her risk of offending and victimisation (cf. McLachlan, 2024a, 2024b). Though by far a textbook example of trauma-informed justice, the case I discussed in paragraph 2 provides a glimpse of how this might work in practice: according to the watch seller's lawyer, the court's decision to acquit him from prosecution would help him to recover from the violent crime (Belleman, 2020). As indicated, this decision was based on the trauma knowledge of the two consulted expert witnesses. To achieve such trauma-informed decisions being taken more often, it is necessary that trauma psychologists teach criminal justice professionals to be aware of trauma in victims and offenders and how trauma can be recognised and responded to in such a way that retraumatisation is avoided (cf. Kunst, 2025; McLachlan, 2025).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that adopting a trauma-informed lens may help us to make more sense and more use of the victim–offender overlap. I have claimed that it can help us to extend its conceptualisation, that it can help us to better understand this overlap from a theoretical perspective and that it can help us to improve policy and practice. More specifically, it allows us to bring subjective victimisation experiences under its scope. This is necessary, as victimisation experiences are subjective in nature and do not always qualify as objective breaches of criminal law. Furthermore, it allows us to improve our understanding of the victim–offender overlap with trauma theories. This is important, as these theories suggest that trauma may be the linking pin between violent victimisation and offending. Finally, it allows us to advance criminal justice policies and practices, as it provides avenues for tailoring prevention strategies and responses to crime. This is needed to break the link between violent victimisation and offending.

My argumentation nevertheless suffers from several limitations. The most important ones are, first, adopting a trauma-informed lens provides an additional though not definitive answer to the black box of victim–offender overlap theory, policy and practice; its conceptualisation and premises need further refinement for proper hypothesis construction and testing. For example, it is necessary to think of subjective victimisation experiences which qualify for inclusion in the

extended conceptualisation of the victim–offender overlap I propose to avoid the concept from becoming too broad. Second, very little is known about the empirical validity of Shattered Assumptions Theory as an explanation of the victim–offender overlap; although a few studies indicate that violent crime victimisation shatters one’s fundamental assumptions (e.g. Schuler and Boals, 2016), no prior study seems to have investigated whether violent offending also results in such a shattering of assumptions and whether this shattering increases the risk of victimisation in offenders and the risk of offending in victims. To overcome these limitations, future research should test whether and how violent victimisation and offending affect people’s fundamental assumptions and whether and how failing to rebuild these assumptions results in trauma and involvement in new crimes (as victim or offender). Such research will be extremely difficult to conduct, as it requires a long time span and varying methods. Third, research on trauma-informed criminal justice is still in its infancy and mainly confined to the Anglo-Saxon world. I hope to have inspired researchers interested in the victim–offender overlap to take up this topic and use it to improve and expand our knowledge on the victim–offender overlap. A good way to start is McLachlan’s recent book on trauma-informed criminal justice (McLachlan, 2024b).

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Data availability statements

Not applicable

Notes

1. This paper is an elaboration of a keynote presentation I delivered for the Spanish Society of Criminology in Lleida on 26 June 2025.
2. Other authors have used terms such as ‘victimization-offending association’ (Schreck et al., 2017), ‘victimization-offending relationship’ (Ousey et al., 2011) and ‘offender-victim link’ (Lauritsen et al., 1991; Sampson and Lauritsen, 1990) to describe the victim–offender overlap more accurately.
3. Similarly, high prevalence rates of offence-related PTSD were documented in a recent narrative review (Soh et al., 2023).

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