

Worth Reading

by Russ Immarigeon*

Family Victims

Don't Kill in Our Names: Families of Murder Victims Speak Out Against the Death Penalty

by Rachel King

Capital Consequences: Families of the Condemned Tell Their Stories

by Rachel King

Reaching out to crime victims is a giant task, often with unintended consequences. For instance, most people easily recognize the need to reach out to families of murder victims. But how extended are these families, and should the criminal justice system reach out to friends of murder victims too? And, if reaching out, what form does this intervention take? Fewer people, I suspect, would have the similar instinct to reach out to the families and friends of murderers, especially those who have been sentenced to death. Furthermore, after reaching out to murder victims' families, I suspect most people would be surprised to hear them espousing regret and opposition to the death penalty.

In these two new books, attorney Rachel King, who started her antideath penalty work in Alaska and now works for the ACLU's Capital Punishment Project in Washington, DC, has recorded interviews and written stories with family members of the murdered as well as the condemned, who report on their feelings about capital punishment. *Don't Kill in Our Names* follows up *Capital Consequences* and both volumes are full of compelling and stirring stories. In the first, King reports the sentiments of members of the group, *Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation* (MVFR). In particular they address their opposition to capital punishment. In the second volume, families of the condemned report how the imposition of a death sentence on a son, daughter, or other relative has affected them.

One thing these books make clear is that capital punishment creates more victims. Moreover, as some murder victims' families suggest, capital punishment does not heal the wounds inflicted when another person kills a loved one. The emotions, and the pain, that families of murder victims and families of the condemned feel is often strikingly similar. So, in some cases, is their treatment (or mistreatment) by the criminal justice system. But important differences also exist. King reports that some of those participating in the second project wanted to drop out, and one finally did. King did a lot of work preparing these stories, reading a wealth of information about each case and interviewing relevant officials and others, so the hesitancy of some family members of those sentenced to death was frustrating for the author. Still, she sees some of the reason for their hesitancy:

The pain of the murder victims' families was tremendous, but the pain of the death row families is in some ways more desperate. With murder a person or group of people makes the horrible choice to kill another. Often it is done in the heat of passion, under the influence of drugs or alcohol or when the killer is not in his right mind. The surviving family members have to come to terms with the crime and find a way to go on with their lives.

But when the death penalty is involved: [T]he entire society makes a calculated decision, planned out over many years, to kill a person. Family members of people on death row are not betrayed by a single person or a small group of people; they are betrayed by the entire society, and they have to figure out a way to come to terms with that betrayal and continue to live within that society.

Of course, the real tragedy, beyond the murder itself, is that too frequently neither party receives the attention or services it deserves from a caring society.

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Victim Compensation

Repairing the Harm: A New Vision for Crime Victim Compensation in America

by Susan Herman and Michelle Waal

One of the lesser examined, self-inflicted tragedies of the September 11th massacre is the way various parties, even those not meaning to do so, have unthinkingly used the event to rip asunder many "ways of being" that may or may not need such attention. As is well-known, for example, the families of those killed in the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Towers, as well as in Pennsylvania, received compensation packages that were heretofore unheard of in terms of their breadth and expense. Victims of the Oklahoma City bombing did not receive such "benefits," and neither will families of soldiers and others (international care workers, journalists, etc.) killed in the Iraqi conflict.

The post-September 11th compensation packages have resulted, not inappropriately I think, in serious concerns about comparative uses of compensation schemes in the United States and elsewhere. In this context, in June 2003, the National Center for Victims of Crime held a National Roundtable on Victim Compensation that brought together at least two dozen researchers, policymakers, practitioners, victims, and victim advocates from Australia and the United States "to sharpen the national conversation and deepen our thinking on how best to compensate victims of crime." Invited papers were distributed before the meeting on such topics as exploring the role and future of victim compensation, the relationship of victim compensation to victim recovery, the nature and scope of state victim compensation programs, international approaches to victim compensation, and lessons from the September 11th attacks. (These papers, as well as this report, are available on NCVC's website at www.ncvc.org/victimcomp.)

The six sections of this report cover the:

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