



# RECONSTRUCTING JUSTICE THROUGH TRAUMA-INFORMED VICTIMOLOGY AND TRANSFORMATIVE DIALOGUE IN VICTIM OFFENDER MEDIATION PRACTICES

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the convergence of trauma-informed care, victimology, and restorative justice practices, with a specific focus on victim-offender mediation (VOM). Trauma-informed approaches offer a crucial lens for understanding victims' needs and vulnerabilities, especially in restorative justice settings. The integration of these frameworks promotes healing, agency, and dialogue while preventing re-traumatization. The paper draws on literature prior to 2020 to highlight foundational insights and debates, then examines models and applications that support a victim-centric and emotionally intelligent justice system. It also discusses ethical considerations, effectiveness metrics, and the systemic shift needed to embed trauma-awareness in criminal justice institutions.*

**Keywords:** trauma-informed justice, victimology, restorative justice, victim-offender mediation, healing-centered engagement, criminal justice reform.

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## 1. Introduction

Contemporary criminal justice systems have traditionally emphasized punitive responses, often sidelining the emotional and psychological needs of victims. In recent years, however, a growing movement toward restorative justice has created space for victims' voices, healing, and relational repair through processes such as victim-offender mediation (VOM).

Trauma-informed care, emerging from psychology and public health, is increasingly being recognized as essential to truly restorative practices. Trauma-aware systems prioritize safety, empowerment, and agency for victims while recognizing the profound and individualized impact of victimization. Integrating this with victimology—the study of victims and their role in criminal justice—forms a holistic framework for justice that is empathetic, ethical, and effective.

## 2. Literature Review

The foundational literature in victimology has long argued for the repositioning of the victim in justice processes. Elias (1986) called for a structural reconfiguration of how justice systems perceive and support victims. Christie (1977) critiqued how the "ideal victim" narrative shapes policy and access to justice.

Restorative justice literature, notably Zehr (1990), proposed that justice should focus on healing rather than punishment. Umbreit et al. (2001) highlighted how VOM allows for storytelling, responsibility-taking, and reconciliation. However, they also noted the risks of re-traumatization if not implemented sensitively.

The trauma-informed framework entered justice discourse in the early 2010s, driven by works like Harris and Falot (2001) and SAMHSA's guidance (2014). These emphasized understanding the neurobiological and psychological impact of trauma, particularly for marginalized populations. Studies by Herman (1992) and van der Kolk (2014) offered deeper clinical grounding.

Despite these advances, integration across domains remained limited pre-2020. Victimologists had yet to fully embrace trauma theory, and restorative practitioners were only

beginning to incorporate mental health-informed practices. This gap laid the groundwork for trauma-informed restorative justice models that emerged in the late 2010s.

### 3. Trauma-Informed Approaches in Victimology

Trauma-informed victimology situates the victim's psychological and physiological experiences at the center of analysis and justice response. It acknowledges that traumatic events disrupt cognition, emotional regulation, and identity, especially if justice systems fail to provide validation or safety.

In practice, this approach advocates for emotionally safe environments, voluntary participation, informed consent, and the minimization of re-exposure to triggering stimuli. These principles contrast starkly with traditional adversarial processes, which often prioritize fact-finding over healing.

Figure 1: Principles of Trauma-Informed Justice

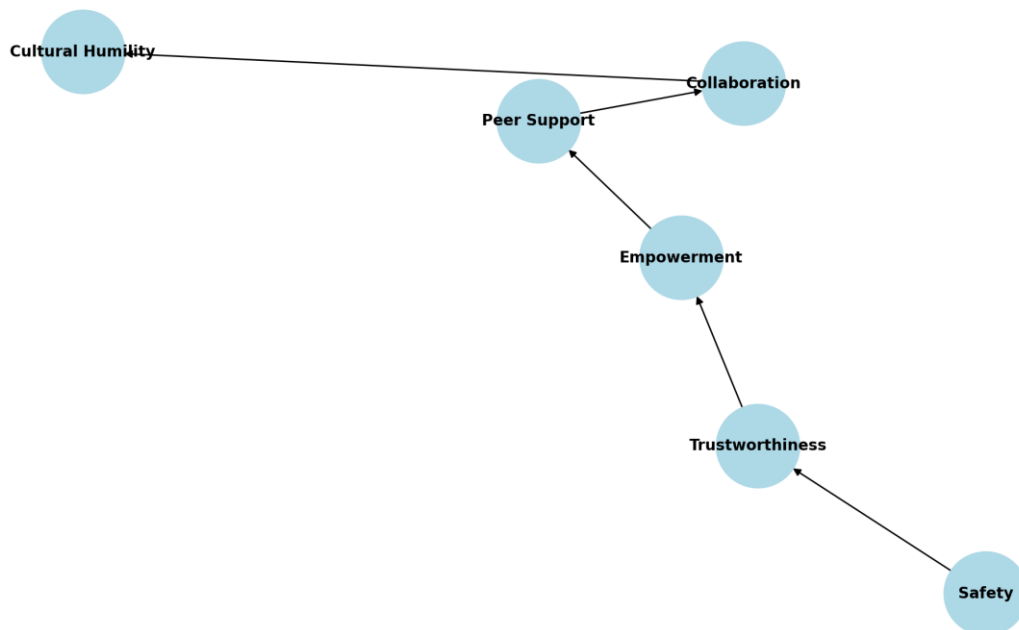


Figure 1: Principles of Trauma-Informed Justice

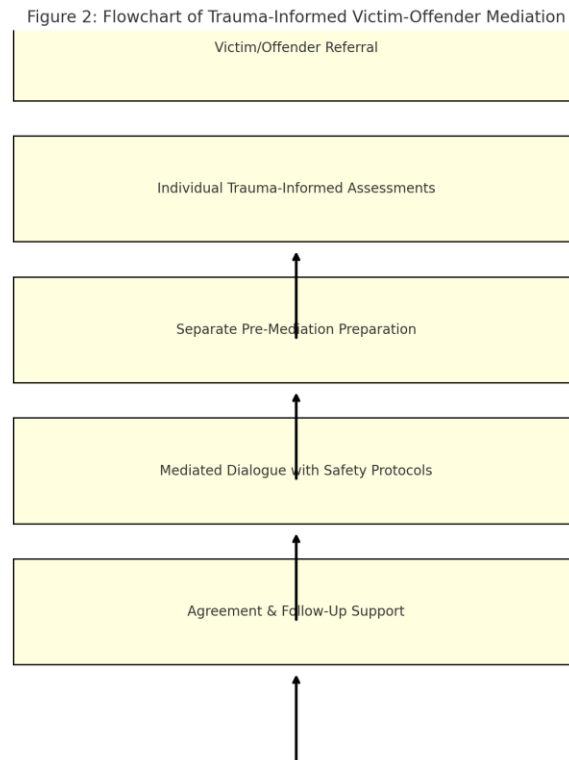
**Table-1: Emotional Impact on Victims by Justice Approach**

<b>Justice Approach</b>	<b>Common Emotional Outcomes</b>
Adversarial	Anxiety, alienation, retraumatization
Restorative (non-trauma informed)	Relief, but occasional retraumatization
Trauma-informed restorative	Empowerment, validation, resilience

#### **4. Victim-Offender Mediation and Restorative Dialogue**

Victim-offender mediation (VOM) provides a structured space for direct or indirect dialogue between the person harmed and the person responsible. Studies suggest that VOM can reduce post-traumatic stress, facilitate closure, and improve satisfaction with justice outcomes when conducted ethically.

However, without trauma-informed facilitation, VOM risks reinforcing power imbalances or silencing victims. Trauma-aware mediators receive training in active listening, boundary-setting, and managing emotional triggers. Moreover, mediators prepare participants separately before any joint dialogue.



**Figure 2: Flowchart of Trauma-Informed Victim-Offender Mediation**

## 5. Challenges and Ethical Considerations

Despite its promise, trauma-informed restorative justice faces operational, cultural, and ethical challenges. There is tension between community-based healing and state-centered justice structures. Questions arise about voluntariness in mediation, especially when subtle pressures exist from courts or community norms.

Additionally, measuring outcomes in trauma-informed justice is complex. Metrics must go beyond recidivism to include emotional, relational, and psychological indicators. As illustrated below, survivor-reported data is essential to assess the healing potential of mediation programs.

**Table 2: Survivor Feedback Themes in VOM (Qualitative Study, 2019)**

Theme	Frequency (%)
Felt Heard	82%
Emotional Closure	71%
Re-Traumatized	15%
Would Recommend VOM	76%

## 6. Conclusion

Integrating trauma-informed care into victimology and victim-offender mediation practices is more than a theoretical aspiration—it is a practical necessity. By centering lived experiences, justice systems can avoid perpetuating harm and instead become spaces of recognition, repair, and transformation.

Going forward, interdisciplinary collaboration among psychologists, legal scholars, and restorative practitioners will be essential. Policies must support ongoing training, evaluation, and survivor-led innovation. In doing so, we can move closer to a justice model that truly embodies care, equity, and humanity.

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