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**Greg Reeves**  
**The Reeves Law Firm**  
Decatur, Alabama

**Gregory Zarzaur**  
**Zarzaur Mujumdar &**  
**Debrosse - Trial Lawyers**  
Birmingham, Alabama

# Civil Justice for Victims of Crime in Alabama

For referrals to an attorney or more information,  
please call the National Crime Victim Bar Association at  
(202) 467-8716 or toll free at (844) LAW- HELP



is an affiliate of:



2000 M Street, NW, Suite 480  
Washington, DC 20036  
**202-467-8753**

**victimbar@ncvc.org • www.victimbar.org**





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Washington, DC 20036  
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*The National Crime Victim Bar Association is an affiliate of the National Center for Victims of Crime, a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit corporation.*

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## I. Purpose of This Booklet

Every crime victim has the right to file a civil lawsuit seeking financial compensation from the perpetrator or from other parties whose unreasonable conduct gave rise to conditions which allowed the crime to occur. The purpose of this handbook is to provide victims and service providers with a basic understanding of the civil justice system so that victims might consider this important option and know where to turn for help.

## II. Victims' Financial Losses and Potential Sources of Compensation

Almost nineteen million Americans are victimized by crime each year. The consequences of crime frequently extend far beyond the criminal act. All too often, victims are left with expenses for medical procedures, physical rehabilitation, counseling, lost wages, and property damage. It has been estimated that crime costs society \$450 billion annually.

### Restitution

Under Alabama law, a court may order a defendant who is convicted in a criminal case to financially compensate a victim through restitution for injuries as a result of the crime. The court may require the restitution to be paid by a certain date, or paid in installments over a certain period of time. The restitution payment can be made a condition of parole or probation for the perpetrator. The judgment remains until the restitution is satisfied, and the court clerk is required to notify the victim at the victim's address of record of the status of the restitution if there is a change due to revocation of probation. In any civil action brought by a victim against the defendant for damages arising out of the offense for which the defendant was convicted, all restitution paid by the defendant to the victim will be credited against any judgment in the civil case.

### Crime Victims Compensation

The compensation awarded by the Alabama Crime Victims' Compensation Commission to eligible victims of violent crime is for economic loss arising from serious personal injury or death. This includes psychological injury as the result of a face-to-face threat of physical injury. The Commission can provide payment or reimbursement for qualified, actual expenses. In order for

expenses to be eligible for reimbursement, they must be related to the crime. Expenses that are covered include medical and dental care, prescriptions, psychiatric care and counseling, rehabilitation, moving expenses, travel expenses, limited property reimbursement, future economic loss, lost wages, and funerals. The Commission does not provide compensation for pain and suffering. The maximum crime victims' compensation award is \$20,000.

The following eligibility requirements must be met:

- The victim suffered serious personal injury or death as a result of a criminal act.
- The crime was reported to law enforcement within seventy-two hours (unless good cause can be shown for not doing so).
- The claim is filed within one year of the date of the incident (unless good cause can be shown for not doing so).
- The victim/claimant cooperated with law enforcement and the Commission.
- The claimant/victim was not the offender, or an accomplice of the offender, or encouraged or participated in the crime in any way.
- The compensation award would not unjustly benefit the offender.
- The victim/claimant was not convicted of a felony after applying for compensation benefits and/or did not perpetrate criminally injurious conduct after applying for compensation benefits.
- The victim/claimant did not contribute to the victimization.
- The victim's/claimant's presence in the United States of America is lawful or he/she is an alien eligible for public benefits.
- The victim's expenses were not paid by a collateral source (another source of payment).

The application is date stamped and assigned to a crime victims' specialist for an eligibility investigation. For claims \$2,000 and under, the Commission's Executive Director determines eligibility. For claims over \$2,000, the three-member Commission determines eligibility at the monthly Commission meeting. If an application is not approved, or approved in a modified form, the claimant may appeal the decision by requesting an appeal hearing



before the Commission. If the claimant disagrees with the Commission's decision after the appeal hearing, the claim may be appealed to circuit court.

Alabama law requires a crime victims' compensation claimant to reimburse the Commission if he/she receives payment from a collateral source as a result of this crime. For example, if a claimant receives an insurance payment/settlement, restitution payment(s) from the offender, a civil suit judgment/settlement, or any other funds as a result of the crime, he/she must notify the Commission.

#### **Contact Information:**

Alabama Crime Victims' Compensation Commission  
5845 Carmichael Dr.  
PO Box 231267  
Montgomery, AL 36123-1267  
(334) 290-4420  
(334) 290-4455 FAX  
800-541-9388 (For Victims Only)  
info@acvcc.alabama.gov (email)

#### **Civil Actions May Help Where Restitution and State Compensation Cannot**

Both restitution and compensation, alone, often do not cover a victim's full economic losses, nor hard-to-quantify damages such as pain and suffering. A civil lawsuit may provide more complete compensation to a victim.

### **III. Why File a Civil Suit**

Some of the benefits of civil actions may include:

- **Control of the Case** - Victims have greater control in a civil suit than in a criminal case because they are a party to the civil case, cannot be excluded from the courtroom, and have final approval of settlement proposals.
- **Compensation** - Civil actions can provide greater compensation for victims for the monetary damages they suffered, such as medical expenses and lost income. Civil actions can also compensate victims for the emotional damage they have suffered.
- **Justice and Accountability** - Civil suits can hold offenders directly accountable to victims. These suits give victims their "day in court," regardless of whether there was a criminal conviction or any prosecution at all.

- **Crime Prevention** - In addition to suing perpetrators, victims can often sue other responsible parties. Civil actions provide economic incentives for crime prevention. Businesses such as hotels, apartments, and shopping centers sometimes fail to enact proper security measures because they view such expenses as unnecessary. When businesses are held accountable for safety lapses, proper security becomes cheaper than the cost of defending lawsuits. Crime victims' civil suits have resulted in increased security protection in public places, better oversight and supervision of daycare facilities, and countless other improvements.

### **IV. Civil Versus Criminal Justice**

A significant difference between the criminal and civil court systems is that in a civil case, the victim controls essential decisions shaping the case. It is the victim who decides whether to sue, accept a settlement offer, or go to trial.

#### **The Criminal Justice System**

The criminal justice process begins after a crime has been committed and reported to law enforcement. If an arrest has been made and charges have been filed, the offender may be prosecuted. In a criminal prosecution, the crime is considered "a crime against the state." The victim's role is primarily defined as a witness for the prosecution. Although the prosecuting attorney may be very helpful to the victim and the victim's family, the prosecutor's primary responsibility is to represent the interests of the state, not the victim.

The criminal justice process judges the guilt or innocence of accused offenders, and when offenders are found guilty, attempts to punish or rehabilitate them.

#### **The Civil Justice System**

The civil justice system does not attempt to determine the innocence or guilt of an offender. Offenders are also not put in prison. Rather, civil courts attempt to determine whether an offender or a third party is liable for the injuries sustained as a result of the crime.

A civil court's finding of liability usually means that the defendant must pay the victim, or the victim's family, monetary damages. The civil justice system can provide victims with monetary resources necessary to rebuild their lives. Furthermore, the civil justice system often provides victims and their families with a sense of justice

# CRIMINAL CASES

## In a CRIMINAL case

...the goal is to hold the defendant accountable to the State.

...the State prosecutes and controls the case.

...the victim is a witness. Although the victim may have rights to participate in the criminal justice process, the victim does not have the right to direct the prosecution of the case or to veto the prosecutor's decisions.

...the State must prove that the defendant is guilty "beyond a reasonable doubt."

...the defendant is presumed innocent until proven guilty.

...if a perpetrator is found guilty in a criminal court, the perpetrator is subject to punishment, such as probation or jail, and is held accountable to the State. The victim will not obtain money unless the court orders the defendant to pay restitution for the victim's out-of-pocket expenses. The court cannot order restitution for non-economic damages.

...if the perpetrator is found not guilty, the state cannot initiate a second prosecution.

# CIVIL LAWSUITS

## In a CIVIL lawsuit

...the goal is to hold the defendant accountable to the victim.

...the victim initiates and controls the case.

...the victim is a party, and as such, is entitled to all important information relating to the case, and can make important decisions about the case, such as settlement of the claim.

...the victim must prove that it is more likely than not that the defendant is liable.

...the civil system makes no presumption. The victim and the defendant appear as equals.

...if the perpetrator is found liable in a civil court, the perpetrator owes an obligation to the victim, such as money to compensate the victim for medical and therapy expenses, psychological damage, damage to family relationships, and lost wages. A civil court can order the perpetrator to pay for non-economic damages, such as pain and suffering, damage to family relationships, and psychological injuries. The civil court can also order punitive damages.

...the victim can sue the perpetrator in a civil court regardless of whether the perpetrator has been found guilty in a criminal prosecution.

that criminal courts fail to provide. Rather than holding defendants accountable for their "crimes against the state," the civil justice system holds defendants who are found liable directly accountable to their victims.

### Burden of Proof

In the civil justice system, liability must be proven by a fair preponderance of the evidence, which simply means that one side's evidence is more persuasive than the other's. In other words, the plaintiff must prove there is a fifty-one percent or greater chance that the defendant committed all the elements of the particular wrong. This standard is lower than the "proof beyond a reasonable doubt" required for a conviction in the criminal justice

system. Therefore, it is sometimes possible to find the defendant liable in a civil case even though a verdict of "not guilty" was rendered in the criminal case. (A civil case can also be successful even if the offender was never prosecuted.)

A good example of this principle is the O.J. Simpson case. Simpson was prosecuted for the murder of his former wife, Nicole Brown, and her friend, Ronald Goldman. The jury in the criminal case found Simpson "not guilty" of the murders. Despite Simpson's acquittal, the families of Nicole Brown and Ron Goldman filed a civil wrongful death lawsuit against Simpson. A trial was held in 1997 and Simpson was found liable for the

deaths of Brown and Goldman. The jury in the civil case awarded the victims' families \$33.5 million in damages. While a criminal conviction may increase the chances of a perpetrator being held civilly liable, it is not a requirement for bringing a civil action.

## V. Parties in a Civil Suit

### Plaintiffs

The main parties in a civil suit are called plaintiffs and defendants. Plaintiffs are the individuals who file the suit. They control the action, are entitled to all information relating to the case, and make decisions, such as settlement. The plaintiff in a civil suit can be the victim, survivors of the victim, or persons responsible for the victim.

### Family Members

Family members who might bring a civil suit include the parents, spouse, children, or siblings of the victim.

### Defendants

The defendants are the parties against whom a civil action is brought. The defendants in a civil suit can be the perpetrators, individuals who have assisted the perpetrators, or individuals or organizations whose negligence has in some way contributed to the commission of the crime known as "third parties."

### Offenders

The offenders are the individuals who committed the original offense, whether or not they were found guilty by a criminal court.

### Third Parties

In some civil cases, a "third-party" defendant may be held liable. Third-party defendants are not the persons who actually commit the crimes, but instead are those parties who may have contributed to or facilitated the crimes. A few examples of possible third-party defendants in a victim's case would include:

- landlords who do not provide adequate security measures, such as locks on doors and windows and adequate lighting;
- colleges that fail to provide adequate security for students or fail to notify students of campus assaults, leaving students vulnerable to victimization;

- shopping malls that do not employ security guards or take other necessary measures, despite a likelihood of criminal attacks on customers;
- people who allow children access to firearms or other dangerous instruments when the children, in turn, use the weapons to injure other people;
- childcare centers, schools, and churches that do not properly check the backgrounds of their employees, or simply transfer employees to other locations following allegations of abuse; or
- tavern owners or social hosts who continue to serve alcohol to inebriated persons who subsequently injure other people in drunk driving crashes.

## VI. Statutes of Limitations

For a personal injury claim in Alabama, the statute of limitations is generally 2 years. However when the injured victim is a minor, the statute of limitations for the child's personal injury claim generally does not expire until two years after the child's 19th birthday. A person claiming injury to personal property has a statute of limitation of 6 years. In addition, libel/slander has a 2 year statute of limitations, fraud is a 2 year period, the trespass statute of limitations is 6 years and medical malpractice is generally 2 years from the date of the malpractice. Alabama follows the discovery rule in fraud actions and certain other limited exceptions including medical malpractice. This allows for a delay in the commencement of the statute of limitations, and applies when a victim discovers or should have reasonably discovered the fraud or wrong done to him/her by a particular act.

For victims of child sex abuse, there is no special statute of limitations and those civil actions must be commenced within two years of the minor reaching the age of majority (19).

Statutes of limitations can change or vary depending on particular factual circumstances. If you believe you have a claim, you should speak to a qualified attorney immediately.

## VII. Types of Civil Lawsuits

There are numerous claims under which civil actions may be brought. They include wrongful death, assault and battery, intentional or negligent infliction of emotional distress, and negligence. Some of these claims are described below.

In civil cases, the crime or wrongful act is referred to as a tort. For most criminal offenses, there is a corresponding tort for which a crime victim may bring a civil suit. Some examples of torts include:

- **Assault** - putting the victim in fear of immediate injury while the perpetrator has the ability to inflict such injury.
- **Battery** - intentional physical contact with a person without that person's consent. Battery includes the crimes of sexual battery, rape, molestation, fondling, forcible sodomy, malicious wounding, and attempted murder.
- **Wrongful Death** - a death caused by another person which occurs without justification or excuse, including murder, manslaughter, and vehicular homicide. In Alabama, only punitive damages are recoverable in a wrongful death case. Compensatory damages are not recoverable in a case brought under Alabama's wrongful death statute.
- **False Imprisonment** - holding a victim against his or her will for any amount of time, no matter how brief. This often occurs in rape and kidnapping situations.
- **Intentional or Reckless Infliction of Emotional Distress** - causing a victim emotional distress or anxiety through extreme and offensive conduct. Emotional distress is frequently seen in stalking cases.
- **Fraud** - an intentional misrepresentation of facts made to deceive the victim, resulting in damages. This is often seen in white collar or economic crimes such as criminal fraud, telemarketing schemes, or racketeering.
- **Conversion** - the theft or destruction of personal property or money. This includes larceny, concealment, and embezzlement.

- **Negligence** - the failure to use such care as a reasonably prudent person would use under similar circumstances, when such failure is the cause of the plaintiff's injury. Examples include negligent security and negligent hiring.

### Defenses

There are several defenses that defendants of a civil lawsuit may use in an effort to avoid civil liability. These defenses include: self-defense, contributory negligence, assumption of risk, and immunity.

- **Self Defense** - perpetrators claim their actions were justified because they were defending themselves or someone else.
- **Contributory Negligence** - The defendant claims that the victim's negligent conduct caused or contributed to the victim's injuries. In Alabama, a victim cannot win a judgment if the victim is even 1% at fault for their injury, as determined by the court.
- **Assumption of Risk** - defendants claim they should not be held liable because the victims voluntarily and knowingly exposed themselves to the danger.
- **Immunity** - Under certain circumstances, the law provides immunity from civil liability to government agencies, government employees, and other parties.

## VIII. Victim Privacy

Attorneys may employ various methods to protect victims' privacy. Victims' names and other personal information can be kept out of public records by filing suits under pseudonyms, such as Jane or John Doe. Victims can also use confidentiality agreements with the offender, or third-party defendant; file cases "under seal" (closed to the public); and videotape depositions. Each of these techniques allows victims to fight for their rights in a safer manner.

## IX. Filing a Civil Lawsuit

A victim begins the civil case by filing a document that in most states is called the complaint. The complaint sets out the facts of the case and the legal claims being made. Defendants then have a certain amount of time to file a document called the answer. In this, defendants set forth their version of the facts and any defenses which apply. As a part of the process of the case, either side



can request information from the other side. (For more information, see “Discovery.”) In addition, either party can file motions asking the court to throw out certain claims or defenses or dismiss the entire case.

## **X. Discovery**

As part of the legal process, each side can ask the other side for information and documents relating to the case. This process is called discovery. Civil discovery involves investigation of the facts of the case, interviewing witnesses, obtaining relevant documents, and questioning parties and other witnesses under oath. The investigation may include a review of police records, informal interviews eye witnesses and photographing the location of the crime. Parties may seek all non-privileged information, even information that will be inadmissible at trial, if that information seems likely to lead to the discovery of admissible evidence.

### **Interrogatories**

Interrogatories are a list of written questions sent to the opposing party. In Alabama, a party may serve up to 40 interrogatories on another party. Additionally, a party on whom an interrogatory has been served must respond within 30 days.

### **Request for Production of Documents**

As with interrogatories, one side can formally request the other to produce documents and materials relevant to the case. Generally, the other party must respond to a document request within 30 days.

### **Depositions**

An additional way to collect information in the pretrial portion of the civil case is a deposition. A deposition is a proceeding in which a party’s attorney has the opportunity to question opposing parties and potential witnesses under oath. Deposition testimony is transcribed, usually by a court reporter. The transcripts may be used at trial for various reasons, including if the witnesses are no longer available to testify or if the witnesses offer testimony at trial that conflicts with the deposition.

After documents have been produced, interrogatories have been answered and depositions have been completed each side should know more about the other side’s case. At this point the parties sometimes engage in negotiations which can lead to the settlement of the case without the need for a trial.

## **XI. Trial**

If a settlement is not reached, the case proceeds to trial. A plaintiff wins at trial if the plaintiff has met its burden of proof and the defendant has not successfully asserted a defense to the claim. If the plaintiff wins, the judge or jury awards damages and the matter is over unless the defendant appeals. A defendant wins at trial if the plaintiff has not met the burden of proof or the defendant has successfully asserted a defense. If the defendant wins, the case is finished unless the plaintiff appeals.

## **XII. Damages**

Judges and juries have the power to decide how much money to award as damages if the plaintiff wins. There are two main types of damages, compensatory and punitive. The goal of compensatory damages is to pay for the losses suffered by the injured party. The primary purpose of punitive damages is to punish and deter criminals or third parties.

## **XIII. Judgment and Enforcement**

A victim contemplating a civil lawsuit should understand that obtaining a civil judgment is only half the battle. In many cases, it may be difficult to collect the money awarded by the court. Some defendants do not or cannot pay judgments entered against them. However, there are potential sources of payment, such as insurance or various types of income, which should always be considered.

## **XIV. When a Perpetrator Sues a Victim**

Occasionally, offenders may sue or countersue victims. Defendants may take this step in order to harass or intimidate victims into dropping charges or withdrawing their civil suits.

Sometimes these suits are filed in response to the victim’s civil complaint, along with answers to the complaint. Sometimes perpetrators file them in response to a criminal charge. Victims need to know that truth is an absolute defense to defamation and slander, which are the most common civil claims filed by perpetrators.



## XV. About Lawyers

### Finding a Lawyer

The National Center for Victims of Crime established the National Crime Victim Bar Association (NCVBA) to facilitate civil suits by crime victims. The NCVBA offers victims free referrals to attorneys for consultation.

**Victims seeking more information or attorney referrals should call the NCVBA at 844-LAW-HELP**

### Selection Considerations

More attorneys than ever are representing crime victims in civil lawsuits, though relatively few specifically list themselves as “crime victim” attorneys. Typically, these attorneys can be found handling premises liability, personal injury, wrongful death, or professional malpractice claims on behalf of plaintiffs. Finding qualified attorneys to represent victims in civil lawsuits often requires diligence.

A productive attorney-client relationship is based on the ability of both sides to communicate fully and effectively with each other. Although relating sensitive details can be difficult for crime victims, they should feel as comfortable as possible in fully disclosing all details and information to their attorneys. Attorneys should be able to effectively explain all aspects of legal proceedings to victims, and they should be responsive to victims’ needs and requests.

Victims should fully understand all the details of any retainer agreement (contract to hire the attorney) prior to signing it. If victims have questions, they should feel comfortable discussing them with their attorneys. If questions persist, local bar association personnel may be able to explain laws, regulations, and common practices pertaining to contracts with attorneys.

Victims should be clear about what they wish their attorneys to do, and attorneys should be clear about what services they are providing. Understanding each other’s expectations—as well as avoiding unrealistic expectations—can minimize the possibility of disappointment and frustration.

Victims should feel free to consult with several lawyers before selecting one. Lawyers are professionals, and it is good consumer practice to obtain a second opinion in selecting professional legal counsel.

Victims should cooperate, as fully as possible, with their attorneys. Such cooperation is necessary for successful representation of their interests. By the same token, victims have the right to expect their attorneys to be understanding, respectful, and responsive to their needs. Attorneys have the right to expect their clients to be honest and willing to participate in building their own cases.

### Information Your Attorney May Need

When crime victims consult with an attorney, they should be prepared to answer detailed questions about the case that will allow the attorney to conduct a proper evaluation. Attorneys might request information such as the following:

#### About the Criminal Event:

- Date and time of criminal occurrence
- Location of events, addresses, and description of premises
- How the perpetrator gained access to the victim
- Identification of witnesses to any stage of the occurrence
- Identification of known physical evidence
- Whether a police report was filed, and if so, identification of: the police department where the complaint was filed, the detective or officer assigned to the case, the complaint or report number, and statements taken as part of an investigation
- Whether there was or is a criminal case, and if so, identification of: the prosecutor, current stage of criminal case, and description of the case investigation conducted
- If a third party might bear some liability for the occurrence of the crime: details surrounding the crime, such as where it was committed become and whether there was any security.

#### About the Perpetrator:

- If the perpetrator is known to the victim: nature of relationship with victim, perpetrator’s name and aliases, address, date of birth and Social Security Number, employment information, and any information known about the perpetrator’s assets and insurance coverage

- If the perpetrator is not known to the victim: physical description of the perpetrator, identifying features

#### **About Damages Sustained by the Victim:**

- Medical information: degree of physical, emotional, and psychological injuries sustained, and extent and cost of anticipated treatment
- Identification of hospital, physician services
- Identification of property damage
- Lost amount of victim's or victim's spouse's time from work, lost wages, money recouped from workers' compensation, or state or private disability insurance
- Source of funds to cover damages or losses such as insurance (policy number), crime victims' compensation, Medicare, and restitution

#### **Fees and Retainers**

Usually, the types of civil cases brought by victims of crime are billed by attorneys on a contingency fee basis. This means the attorney is only paid if the victim is awarded a monetary settlement or judgment. Attorneys will be paid a predetermined percentage of the total award.

There are also costs, such as filing fees, deposition fees, and service of process fees the victim might be responsible to pay before a suit is filed or during the course of the suit. Some attorneys require that plaintiffs pay a retainer fee. A retainer is money paid to an attorney, but kept in a special account from which the above-mentioned costs can be paid. Money not used in the retainer may be returned to the client at the conclusion of the suit.

## **XVI. Conclusion**

The civil justice system offers victims of crime another opportunity to secure what they seek most—justice. Regardless of whether there was a successful criminal prosecution or any prosecution at all, victims can bring their claims before the court and ask to have the responsible parties held accountable. While money awarded in civil lawsuits can never fully compensate victims for the trauma of their victimizations or the loss of loved ones, it can provide valuable resources for crime victims to help rebuild their lives.