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SERVICES FOR VICTIMS: A MARKET RESEARCH STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Victim services programs have proliferated over the past three decades. However, we know little about the forms of assistance that crime victims seek from these programs, whether the programs are meeting the needs of those who seek help, or whether the victims who receive services are the ones most in need. The current research examined these issues through interviews with 240 crime victims (120 persons who had received help from victim programs and 120 who had not) across four cities in the United States. Family and friends were the most frequent sources of victim assistance. Victim services programs helped a substantial number of victims with counseling-related needs but were of little help to victims in dealing with crime prevention, household, or property replacement needs. Victims who received services had more crime-related needs than those who had no program contact.

INTRODUCTION

Victim services programs have proliferated around the world over the past 25 years. The shapes and directions of the victim movement have varied according to local needs and conditions. In the United States, the movement often has been political, emphasizing victim rights and tougher sentencing. In Europe, on the other hand, the emphasis has been more on services and compensation than on legislative reform (Maguire and Shapland, 1997).

The victim movement in the United States began in the early 1970s, spurred by the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration's (LEAA) sponsorship of programs to improve the treatment of victims by criminal justice officials and to create services designed to help victims to recover from the impact of crime. Between 1970 and 1975, LEAA spent more than US$22m for victim programs. Many federally-funded victim programs were based in, or worked closely with, law enforcement agencies in order to encourage victims to cooperate in the apprehension, prosecution, and conviction of criminals (Davis and Henley, 1990).

At the same time that the federal government was supporting programs for crime victims, private sector initiatives were emerging as well. In contrast to the Federal government's interest, which was largely motivated by a desire to increase victim participation in the justice system, private sector efforts were

prompted by the basic humanitarian conviction that society has an obligation to treat victims fairly. Grass-roots initiatives were often founded by former victims, grounded in feminist ideologies, and located outside of criminal justice agencies (Elias, 1993; Sebba, 1996; Young, 1988).

In the 1980s, victim services programs were fostered by federal and state legislation that laid the foundation for victims' services and rights within the criminal justice system. The most important legislation encouraging the growth of services was the federal Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) of 1984. VOCA earmarked ongoing federal funding for federal and state victim compensation and assistance programs. In the 1990s, the 1994 Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) provided another boost to victims services. VAWA grant money assisted local governments in developing and broadening services for female victims of violent crimes. Domestic violence and sexual assault were identified as primary targets for VAWA victim funds.

Victims' involvement in the formal criminal justice process has also grown significantly due to the 'aggressive law-and-order campaigning approaches' adopted by voluntary victim advocate organizations such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving (Maguire, 1991; p. 372). Victims are now privy to information regarding defendants' cases at every step in the criminal justice process, including plea bargaining, court scheduling, and sentencing hearings. Furthermore, victims are compensated for their time as witnesses in court and are frequently eligible for restitution. Finally, they have direct input into the sentencing process through victim impact statements and can affect the release of inmates from prisons by testifying before parole boards.

Victim services programs currently have been established in all United States Attorneys' Offices. Urban, suburban, and most rural county prosecutors also have victim assistance units. The recent program directory of the National Organization for Victim Assistance, which captures most of the universe of victim services programs, contains ten thousand entries (Young, 1997).

ARE VICTIM PROGRAMS REACHING ALL THOSE IN NEED?

The scant evidence about victim services programs suggests that they reach only a small proportion of crime victims. A study of Milwaukee residents, for example, found that few of the persons who reported being crime victims sought aid from service organizations (Knudten *et al.*, 1976). A study of New York City crime victims, by Friedman *et al.* (1982), found that only 15% sought aid from service organizations, including welfare, the housing authority, the Social Security Administration, senior citizens' groups, and the state's crime victim compensation program. Less than 1% sought assistance from the city's victim services agency. An unpublished study by New York City's Victim Services Agency, reported in Davis and Henley (1990), found that between only 2% and 10% of the victims who filed criminal complaints used the services of the

program even when they were sent outreach letters describing the assistance available.

The data are similar in other countries. For example, Maguire (1991) estimated that about only 1% of the crime victims in Britain come into contact with victim services programs. (About 10% are conducted by phone or letter.) Thus, both the failure of programs to reach out to victims and the failure of victims to accept outreach offers contribute to low rates of service utilization.

The fact that victim services programs seem to be serving a small proportion of victims would not be so troublesome if they are actually serving the neediest victims. There is some indication that this is so. The study by Friedman *et al.* (1982), for example, showed that victims who went to service organizations for help tended to be poorer, to have been victimized more often, and to report more crime-related problems than victims who did not seek formal assistance. Another study, conducted by Davis (1987) at New York's Victim Services Agency, also found that victims who used services agencies were more traumatized by crime than those who did not. This study suggested further that services users were suffering from greater life stress (that is, domestic, employment, and health problems) when compared with nonservices users.

We know little about why victims fail to take advantage of (typically) free services to assist them in recovering from the effects of crime. The Knudten *et al.* (1976) study suggests that many victims simply do not know that help is available (see also Cozijn, 1988; Maguire, 1985). In line with those findings, programs that reach out to crime victims through letters and telephone calls to all those who report their crimes to the police might be expected to generate more services users than programs that do not reach out to victims. However, in the victim services agency study reported in Davis and Henley (1990), only a small percentage of victims who were made aware of services through letter and telephone outreach became consumers of the services offered.

A number of victims programs dispatch workers to the scenes of crimes when summoned by the police, or send workers to victims' homes. This method has the potential to attract more victims to services because victims are contacted immediately – a time when they still have unresolved practical problems (for example, stolen document replacement, broken locks or spoilt clothing). But such intervention methods are costly.

ARE PROGRAMS MEETING VICTIMS' NEEDS?

According to a survey by Cronin and Borque (1981), a majority of the crime victim programs operating at the time of the study offered crisis intervention services designed to alleviate the adverse psychological effects of crime. Crisis counseling generally involves listening to crime victims compassionately, helping them to make sense of the incidents, and encouraging them to obtain a variety of social services (American Psychological Association, 1984). In addition to

offering psychological assistance, many victim services programs assist clients in dealing with mundane, yet pressing practical problems (Tomz and McGillis, 1997). These services include material assistance such as emergency food, shelter, clothing or cash; document replacement; relocation assistance; and other services designed to help victims regain control over their lives. Services also frequently consist of advocacy efforts by victim program staff to assist victims in obtaining what they need from other social services agencies. Common advocacy efforts include helping victims to replace stolen government checks, to obtain emergency welfare grants and to receive state crime victim compensation.

Two studies have examined in detail victims' needs in the aftermath of crimes. The study by Friedman *et al.* (1982) of New York City crime victims who reported their crimes to the police, tallied the proportion of victims who needed each of twelve different kinds of assistance, from borrowing money to receiving psychological counseling, to finding a temporary place to stay. They found that improving security (for example, repairing or upgrading locks and doors) and borrowing money were the types of help that victims needed most but were unlikely to receive from family, friends, or neighbors. A study of English crime victims by Maguire and Corbett (1987) came to similar conclusions with respect to the large percentage of victims who need help with improving security and making ends meet, but do not receive such assistance from their social networks.

Other research has emphasized victims' needs for such practical assistance as obtaining compensation for property losses and injuries, repairing damaged property, installing new locks, replacing stolen documents and credit cards, and finding transportation and child care (Shapland *et al.*, 1985; Smale, 1977). Maguire (1985) found that the most common victim need was for information on insurance claims, compensation programs, crime prevention strategies and case progress. Furthermore, he suggested that victims' needs were determined, in part, by the victimization experience. And, as Wemmers (1996; p. 19) noted, 'The extent to which [victims'] needs are perceived as a problem is also influenced by factors such as aid from family or friends and the skills of the victim'.

The importance of security assistance and emergency financial aid, which has been found in various studies, is interesting when contrasted with results of Roberts' (1987) investigation of victim services programs. Roberts surveyed 184 victim assistance programs throughout the United States. He found that security and financial assistance were among the *least* common services that programs offered. Only 13% offered assistance with security and only 24% offered financial help. Moreover, Roberts observed that most programs did not intervene immediately but did so days or weeks after crimes had occurred. By that time, it might be too late to help victims resolve such urgent practical problems as repairing broken doors, windows and locks, or buying groceries.

In summary, research suggests that victim services programs might be failing to meet important victim needs. Studies indicate that the counseling services emphasized by victim programs do not match the immediate, practical, and short-term security needs of many crime victims.

PRESENT STUDY

The victim services field would benefit greatly from basic market research to explore what forms of assistance victims seek from services programs and whether their needs are being met. It is also essential to know whether victims who do not seek assistance are aware of available programs, whether they have a need for services, and whether their needs correspond to the services being offered by programs. The purpose of the present study was to fill knowledge gaps in these areas.

Method

The focus of this study was on victims' needs, the sources from which they sought help, and the kinds of assistance that they received. We were interested in victims who were not served by victim services programs and in the needs of all victims independent of the kinds of services that such programs offered to them. To explore victim services from the perspective of victims, we interviewed them, using a sample that included victims who received assistance from victim services agencies, from other types of agencies, and from their families or friends. In addition, we included a sample of victims who received no assistance at all.

Sample Programs

The research was conducted at four victim services programs nominated by experts in the field as being among the best victim services programs in the United States. Victim programs in two of the cities (Rochester, New York, and Evanston, Illinois) were police-based (that is, their client bases consisted of all persons who reported crimes to the police in the areas they served), and two (Lexington, Kentucky, and Tucson, Arizona) were prosecutor-based. These programs assisted only victims involved in criminal court cases. Each of the four programs served victims of all types of crimes.

Sampling Procedures

At each site, we attempted to complete 60 interviews with victims who were served by the program and 60 interviews with victims who were not served by the program. We stratified each sample of 60 respondents into 30 robbery victims, 20 assault victims, and 10 burglary victims. The utility of the stratification plan was that it focused on victims of serious offenses who were more likely to have a variety of needs. It also ensured that the mix of cases was similar across

the four jurisdictions, and it helped us design a common questionnaire that would make sense to all of the persons we interviewed. We knew from past research that crime victims can be very difficult to track down for post-crime interviews: They are wary of strangers and many move or change their phone numbers as a result of their experiences. Therefore, at each site, we oversampled for purposes of the survey (that is, we selected 150 victims who had used program services and 150 who had not).

We had to tailor our sampling plan to fit the particular outreach procedures and case-filing systems that we encountered at each site. For example, some files were arranged alphabetically by victims' names, others by dates of crimes, and yet others by case identification numbers. Our goal in each site was to achieve a representative sample of victims.

Conducting the Survey

The survey was conducted over the telephone by Northwestern University's Survey Research Laboratory. A draft questionnaire was pilot-tested at the laboratory by experienced interviewers and project supervisors. The pilot test produced several recommendations that were incorporated in the final draft of the survey. The group of twelve interviewers who conducted the survey were initially trained in a half-day session at the laboratory.

Because the survey was conducted by phone, victims without phones were automatically excluded. To some extent, this fact would tend to bias the sample against the poorest victims. However, the proportion of victims who listed no phone numbers was less than 2% of the total. Most victims without phones were able to provide the phone numbers of relatives, neighbors, or friends through whom they could be reached.

The overall completion rate for the survey (completed interviews divided by the number of sampled cases) was 44%. The completion rate did not vary much by city, ranging from 41% to 48%. A relatively small percentage of the non-completions (8%) were attributable to victims' refusals to co-operate in the interviews. Most of the problems in contacting victims came from locating them in the first place. In 34% of the cases, victims simply could not be reached by telephone. As we mentioned earlier, victims may be hard to reach because they move or change their telephone numbers. In addition, victims without telephones often give the police or service agencies the telephone numbers of friends or relatives through whom they can be reached. But this two-step communication channel frequently breaks down. There were also a significant number of telephone numbers (12%) at which no one was ever home, despite the fact that at least 10 calls (and often as many as 20) were made to each of them.

One of our goals was to complete the interviews before victims' memories of what had happened to them began to fade. For that reason, we always selected the most recent case files first and went back further in time only as required to

fill our sampling quotas. Among the 470 completed interviews, the average elapsed time between the day that victimizations occurred and the day that we interviewed victims was 5.4 months. There were no significant differences in this time interval across programs or types of crime.

Results

Victim Needs

Victims were asked a series of 17 questions about possible crime-related needs.[1] Approximately 60% of the respondents indicated that they had one or more needs. Table 1 presents victims' needs grouped into four categories: victimization prevention; household logistical support; counseling, advice, or advocacy; and property replacement. The most prevalent needs overall were 'someone to talk to about feelings that were troubling you' (28%); 'information about how to avoid becoming a victim again' (18%); 'protecting yourself from offenders' (14%); 'repairing a broken door or lock' (13%); and 'installing better locks or improving security' (13%).

Table 2 shows the sources of the help that victims received within each of the four categories of needs. Across all categories, family and friends were the most common sources of victim assistance. Nearly 60% of victims with counseling-related needs and with household logistical support needs received help from friends and family, as did 47% of the victims with crime prevention needs and 38% of the victims with property replacement needs.

About one-third of the respondents recalled being in contact with their local victim assistance programs.[2] A much smaller proportion, however, reported receiving program assistance for their problems. In Table 2, it is striking that only in the area of counseling-related needs did victim services programs provide assistance to substantial numbers of victims. About one-quarter of the respondents who reported counseling-related needs were assisted by victim services programs. But only 4% to 5% of the victims who had crime prevention, property replacement, or household needs reported being helped by such programs. Victims were also aided by other types of social services organizations, ranging from 17% for counseling-related needs to 10% for property replacement needs.

When we asked respondents if there was any kind of help they needed that their local victim services programs could not provide, most (71%) said no. But, among those who said 'yes', the largest category (56%) of unmet needs involved victims' financial problems. The following are examples of unmet financial needs:

> After being assaulted at work, I did not receive workman's comp or pay for sick days; I had to return to work prematurely because I have two kids, I'm

pregnant, I need the money. [Program Name] did not get me any compensation.

I needed emergency funds but had to wait six months and fill out all kinds of forms.

I needed help getting a loan but never received it.

I needed help getting food stamps, but I never received permission to get them.

TABLE 1
Frequency of Crime-Related Needs

Victimi Needs	Percentage
Victimization Prevention (52%)	
Information on avoiding victimization	18
Protection from offender	14
Improve home security	13
Move to safer neighborhood	6
Household Logistical Support (52%)	
Repair broken lock or door	13
Borrow money	10
Ride to doctor, police station, court	10
Repair damaged property	8
Help with household work/shopping	5
Find temporary place to stay	4
Finding housesitter/baby sitter	2
Counseling, Advice, or Advocacy (47%)	
Someone to talk to about feelings	28
Help dealing with court officials	10
Legal advice	9
Property Replacement (22%)	
Replacing stolen checks/property	9
Replacing stolen documents	8
Assistance filing insurance claims	5

TABLE 2
Sources of Assistance for Crime-Related Needs

Victim Needs	Received Help from Friends or Family	Received Help from Victim Local Services	Received Help from Other Agencies	Needs Not Met
	Percentages			
Crime prevention (n = 246)	47	5	11	24
Household logistical support (n = 223)	57	4	13	13
Counseling-related (n = 244)	59	24	17	16
Property replacement (n = 103)	38	4	10	13

Note: Rows do not sum to 100% because some victims reported taking care of needs themselves and victims could report multiple sources of help for each need category

Overall, the most common single complaint regarding finances involved difficulties in obtaining state victim compensation.

Table 2 also shows the proportions of victims who did not receive help (from any source) across the four categories of crime-related needs. Roughly equivalent numbers of victims had unmet needs in the counseling, household and property replacement categories. In these categories, 13% to 16% of the victims reported outstanding needs. Crime prevention concerns were the least likely to be addressed adequately by any sources of assistance. One-fourth (24%) of the victims who expressed these needs reported that they had not been met.

In Table 3, we present initial and unmet needs as a function of victim and crime characteristics. Persons who moved more recently (defined as less than four years at current address) were more likely to have at least one initial need when compared with persons who had not moved recently (65% versus 55%). More transient respondents were also significantly more likely to have at least one unmet need when compared with respondents with more stable residences (19% versus 11%). Other groups that were more likely to have unmet needs included victims injured during the crime, assault victims, employed victims and nonwhite victims (marginally significant). In general, the pattern of results shows a higher number of unmet needs among more vulnerable groups. The higher number of unmet needs of employed respondents (the exception to the pattern) is a consequence of them having more logistical needs (e.g., employer notification of need for time to attend court, child care).

TABLE 3
Percentage Distribution of Initial Needs and Unmet Needs Across Subpopulations of Victims

	% with Needs	% with Unmet Needs
Age		
Under 30 years	58	16
30 years and older	63	15
Race		
White	58	14
Nonwhite	55	20*
Education		
High school graduate	57	15
Less than high school graduate	57	19
Employment Status		
Working	64*	26
Not working	55	13**
Residential Stability		
4+ years at adress	55	11
Less than 4 years at address	65*	19**
Type of Crime		
Assault	63	23
Robbery	52	12
Burglary	62	15**
Property Loss		
Less than $100	57	15
$100 or more	66*	17
Injury		
No	55	12
Yes	76***	24***

* denotes $p<.10$. ** denotes $p<.05$. *** denotes $p<.01$.

Who Uses and Who Does Not Use Victim Services?

The data reported in the previous section suggest that victim services programs helped only a small proportion of respondents with most types of problems. We wanted to understand why that was the case. One reason that respondents were not helped by victim services programs was that they were unaware that help from these organizations was available. Over half of the sample (52%) stated that they had never heard of their local victim assistance program. Among victims who were aware of their local programs, 'hearing from the police' was the most common way that they found out about services. Approximately 40% of the participants who had knowledge of services programs indicated that the police at the scene had informed them verbally about victim services, and another 23% said that they found out about services through leaflets or brochures given to them by the police. Among victims who knew about their local programs, 13% indicated that they had been given advice from the prosecutor's office on groups or agencies that they could contact for victim assistance. Other referral sources included the media (12%), relatives or friends (7%) and other crime victims (7%).

We asked respondents about other reasons why they might have not used victim services. The most common reasons, given by the victims (two-thirds of the sample) who failed to use services, included reports that they 'could solve their own problems' (80%), 'did not need any help' (70%), 'already got help from somewhere else' (50%) and 'did not have time to go to the program' (25%). Less frequently cited reasons for nonparticipation stemmed from program marketing problems. Across the four sites, 16% of victims reported that they did not seek assistance from their local victim services program because they thought the program 'could not give me the help I really needed', while 14% did not participate because they 'felt uncomfortable with the program's services and activities'. The remaining obstacles to participation involved misinformation and logistical problems. Approximately 17% of nonparticipants believed incorrectly that they were ineligible to participate in the program, and 6% did not participate because of a lack of transportation to the program.[3]

We wanted to know whether victims who had the most needs were the ones most likely to use victim services. To answer this question, we correlated program contact with victim and crime characteristics (see Table 4). Victims who had heard about the programs from police or prosecutors were significantly more likely to report program contact. Victims reporting more crime-related problems were also significantly more likely to report program contact. Program contact, however, was unrelated to education, race, employment, age, time living at current residences, type of crime, injury, financial loss, pre-crime life stress or number of previous victimizations.

Complaints About Victim Programs

Respondents who reported that they had used services were mostly satisfied with them. Nearly eight out of ten victims stated that they were 'very' or 'somewhat' satisfied with the assistance they received. Among those not satisfied, the most frequent source of dissatisfaction, reported by 58% of the respondents with program complaints, could be classified as 'poor follow-through or slipshod operations'. Examples of these complaints include the following:

TABLE 4
Predictors of Contact with Victim Services: Variables Significant in Stepwise Logistical Regression

Variable	B	SE	Wald	*df*	Sign	Exp (B)
Number of crime-related problems	0.190	0.09	4.129	1	.042	1.21
Sources of program information	0.894	0.342	6.814	1	.009	2.44

Note: Model chi-square = 7.05, $p<.01$.

They had me fill out forms and I never received any feedback. When I contacted them again they had me fill out the same old forms and nothing happened.

I talked to them on the phone. They promised to help and then never called back or followed through with help.

I always had to contact them. They did not keep me informed about the arrest.

The person I needed to speak with wasn't there and never returned my call.

They didn't help me much besides telling me to talk to the DA, but they didn't tell me how to reach him, and the DA they told me to speak to was the wrong one.

Discussion

The current research investigated the relationship between victims' needs and victim services. There were several crucial findings. We found strong support for the conclusion of Friedman *et al.* (1982) that family, friends and neighbors are the most important sources of assistance to victims in the aftermath of crimes. In the areas of household logistical support and counseling and advice, a majority of victims reported assistance from members of their informal social support networks.

Although one-third of the victims in the sample reported contact with victim services programs, only in the area of counseling-related needs did a substantial number of them report receiving assistance from such programs. Only small percentages of respondents reported being assisted by victim services programs in any area except counseling and advice. In the areas of crime prevention, household, and property replacement needs, 5% or less of the sample reported receiving help from their local victim services program. Several reasons might explain why, even with the relatively high rate of victim services program contact in the sample, few victims were helped in these three areas of need. One reason surely is that many victims' needs must be addressed almost immediately after crimes have been committed. This is especially true of several of the items in the household logistical support category. Having someone take care of the house or children while one goes to the police station, getting a ride to the doctor's office, or repairing broken doors or locks are tasks that need to be done right away. Friends, family and neighbors might be available to help during the critical period immediately after victimization whereas victim services programs are unlikely to reach victims until days later. By that time, many immediate needs have been taken care of one way or another.

Another reason that many victims did not receive assistance from programs in the areas of crime prevention, household support and property recovery is that most victim services programs stress crisis counseling over other services. Our work supports Roberts' (1987) finding that security and financial assistance are generally not stressed by victim services programs. Our work further suggests that the typical emphasis of victim programs on counseling services might be misplaced because a greater number of victims need crime prevention and household support when compared with those who need counseling. Moreover, prevention of future victimization was the area of victim need most likely to go unaddressed in any way and to remain an unresolved problem.

Davis *et al.* (1997) reviewed evidence indicating that persons once victimized by crime are at elevated risk of future victimization and therefore ought to be targeted for crime prevention efforts. These researchers suggested that victim assistance programs are the ideal vehicle for introducing crime prevention services to victims because such programs intervene shortly after crimes occur – a time when victims are most likely to be amenable to crime prevention education. Anderson *et al.* (1995; p. 3) similarly argued that 'crime prevention and victim support are necessary for the *same* people [recent victims] at the *same* time [promptly after their victimization]. *Reaction* to the last offence, if it has a preventive element, is *proaction* to the next'. Victim assistance programs should include a short-term component to meet victims' immediate needs and to deal with the threat of early revictimization, and a long-term component that addresses important, but less pressing, concerns (Farrell and Pease, 1993; National Board for Crime Prevention, 1994).

We found that the neediest victims were those who actually received services. Victims who had the most problems were also the most likely to receive assistance from victim services programs. This finding is consistent with the results of Friedman *et al.* (1982). However, we did not find, as they did, that services use was inversely related to socioeconomic status.

Finally, we found that the most vulnerable subgroups of victims (that is, transients, non-whites, persons injured during the crime) were the most likely to

have needs that were not met by acquaintances, victim services programs, or other agencies. These are exactly the types of victims that services programs are designed to help. Taken as a whole, the current data suggest that victim services programs could improve – in terms of outreach, speed of intervention and service priorities – their responses to the most vulnerable groups of crime victims.

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NOTES

1 We allowed victims to define needs subjectively, such as 'Did you need help with repairing broken locks?' An alternative method might have been to have victims report problems or conditions and infer the degree of need from their answers.
2 This percentage is lower than suggested by agency records, but many of the contacts were only in passing (a telephone call or a letter) and were with victims who probably did not have serious needs.
3 Each victim could give multiple reasons for not participating. Hence, the percentages do not add up to 100%.

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