



National Institute of Justice *Update*

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Victim Assistance Programs: Whom They Service, What They Offer

Each year a substantial number of crime victims in this country seek help from victim assistance programs. More than half the people assisted are victims of violent crime.

The number of victim assistance programs—particularly those based in prosecutors' offices—has increased dramatically in the past 10 years. Despite this growth, little information is available about the staffing levels, operational needs, and training requirements of the programs.

The National Institute of Justice recently conducted a survey of 319 full-service victim assistance programs in law enforcement agencies and prosecutors' offices. The findings revealed that the majority of individuals seeking assistance were victims of domestic assault and the most common assistance they received was information about legal rights, provided frequently by volunteers. Pressing needs were expressed for reaching out to special victim populations (Hispanics, African-Americans, Asians, and Native Americans).

The services provided and the victims assisted

Victim assistance programs serve many types of victims, ranging from the surviving family members of homicide victims to victims of property crime. About 56 percent of the people served sought assistance because they experienced an assault—domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse, or some other type.

About 20 percent of the people who received service from the programs were under the age of 16, and 8 percent were 65 years of age or older. The vast majority—72 percent—were between 16 and 64. Almost two-thirds of the people served (about 65 percent) were white, with 22 percent African-American, 8 percent Hispanic, and 5 percent Asian, Native American, or another ethnic group.

Language barriers and failure to report crime to the authorities partially accounted for the limited program involvement of certain groups.

The most common service consisted of providing information about the legal rights of victims and about the criminal justice process (provided by 88 percent of the programs), followed by assistance in applying for State victim compensation aid (59 percent), and referrals to social service agencies (51 percent). Other key services included accompanying victims to interviews with prosecutors and to court and providing short-term supportive counseling. The program staffs of the responding agencies typically did not arrange for emergency loans to victims or accompany them to view police line-ups.

The assistance programs also encouraged victims to participate in the criminal justice process by educating them about criminal justice proceedings and encouraging them to remain involved. The surveyed programs indicated they kept victims notified about the progress of their cases through such services as providing information about the status of police investigations, bail decisions, court dates, charging and plea bargaining decisions, sentencing outcomes, and parole proceedings.

One of the prosecutors who participated in the survey stressed the importance of witness notification. "Our relatively high trial rate and chronic shortage of available courtrooms mean uncertain trial dates," he said. "This requires constant witness contact on all pending cases."

Volunteers play a major role

The staffs of victim assistance programs were a mixture of full-time, part-time, and volunteer workers. Overall staffs averaged only about two full-time paid service providers. Volunteers augmented paid staff in about two-

thirds (65 percent) of the programs and played key roles in delivering services to victims.

The Senior Victim Assistance Team (SVAT), based in the Colorado Springs Police Department, exemplifies innovation in victim service volunteer programs. SVAT consists of about 40 senior citizens who volunteer their time to serve as the department's liaison to crime victims age 55 and older. SVAT volunteers help victims of burglary, robbery, fraud, neglect, and abuse. Their services include emotional support, visiting the victim in the hospital if he or she has been seriously injured, assistance in obtaining new credit cards if they have been stolen, and help in completing paperwork for the State's victim compensation program. If an arrest is made, the volunteer helps the victim deal with the prosecutor's office and notifies the victim of court dates.

Nearly half of the victim assistance programs surveyed were not providing training to either paid staff or volunteers, either before or after they join. Programs that indicated they had inservice training averaged 24 hours of classes for paid staff and 25 hours for volunteers. About two-thirds of the survey respondents indicated they would like more training in victims' legal rights, obtaining restitution for victims, and working with law enforcement officials. They also would like training in working with special victim populations, including the elderly, juveniles, people who are mentally ill, and members of ethnic groups.

Ways to improve support

Program staff and volunteers wanted to strengthen their programs' ability to protect victims. More than half the respondents would like more resources to investigate threats to or harassment of victims by suspects, a system to check criminal records of people who work with children, and a police system to track and record domestic assaults.

Domestic violence was cited as a special concern. Respondents expressed the need for more arrests for domestic assault and for procedures to remove a batterer or abuser from the home. Two-thirds of the respondents also claimed a need for videotaped testimony of child victims to be admitted as evidence in court.

Perhaps the most pressing need identified in the survey was to reach out to special populations, including Hispanics, African-Americans, Asians, and Native Americans. Respondents noted that additional training in cultural sensitivity, recruiting and maintaining bilingual staff members, and effective outreach programs would enable victim assistance programs to improve service delivery to these groups of people.

The data collection and analysis for this project were conducted by Thomas J. McEwen, Ph.D., Managing Principal of the Institute for Law and Justice, who also wrote this summary.

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