

‘Forgotten victims’? – adults look back on their childhood bereavement by homicide



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OVER THE PAST 20 YEARS increasing consideration has been given to the effects of homicide on surviving family members. This research has been crucial in highlighting the severe and chronic grief of families in this situation. However, much of this work has focused on the parents or spouse of a victim, with perhaps less attention being paid to the young people involved. This paper reports themes from a workshop of adults who, as children, were bereaved by homicide of a parent or sibling and makes recommendations for action.

In studies relating to homicide, the focus has traditionally been on the characteristics and personalities of first the perpetrator and then the victim¹. As Amick-McMullan *et al*² noted, this meant that ‘the indirect victims, those who have lost a loved one to homicide’ were nearly ‘invisible in the existing literature’. Although there have been some exceptions (eg^{1,2,3}) the focus of the work has tended to be the parents or spouse of a victim rather than children. Roch⁴ points out that family members of homicide victims generally ‘have an uncertain status in that they are not themselves the direct victim, but the victim once removed’. It could be argued that siblings and children of victims are actually one part further removed from the crime and this can affect factors such as the amount of information and support they receive. Concern about the status of these young people and the longer-term effects of their loss led to the running of a conference workshop for adults bereaved as children by the homicide of a sibling or parent.

The workshop

This took place at a North of England Victims Association (NEVA) annual conference. NEVA is a charitable organisation helping families of victims

of homicide before, during and after a criminal trial with financial assistance, advice, counselling and support. The conference was open to all families who had been in touch with NEVA, but the 110 attenders were all adult and primarily living in the north east area of England. Any attender who had been bereaved as a child by the homicide of parent or sibling was invited to be part of a workshop facilitated by the authors. This was to be an opportunity for this group to give voice to their experiences and their needs.

Ten people (three men and seven women, all over 16 years of age) accepted the invitation. This represented all but one of the conference attenders who had been children or siblings of homicide victims in their youth. The length of time between the homicide and the conference varied from four to over 30 years. The first part of the workshop was an open discussion, whilst the second part concentrated on drawing together the themes raised for feedback to the main conference.

Themes that emerged

The participants in the group were extremely vocal and seemed to value being with others who had had similar experiences. Experiences were related with great clarity and depth of feeling,

EDITOR'S NOTE

The authors here report on a small group of adults who were bereaved as children by the homicide of a parent or sibling and who volunteered at a conference attended by victims of homicide to talk about their experiences – almost entirely negative it seems – of the judicial system, police, therapists and journalists, amongst others. Those of us counselling children and adolescents where homicide has occurred in their families need to take note of these experiences and be aware what resources are available. For the UK there are two nationwide allied organisations: Victim Support offers information and support through local branches, website and a helpline which welcomes calls from children and young people; Support after Murder and Manslaughter (SAMM) is a self-help telephone support and networking service, giving emotional help and putting families in touch with one another, individually and as groups. However, much bereavement support for families of homicide victims is carried out by non-specific bereavement organisations. DB

and there was a sense that participants’ feelings and memories were very current, irrespective of the time that had elapsed since the homicide. Within the workshop there were a number of specific themes that emerged:

Procedural factors

All of those present had been negatively affected by procedural factors (such as the actions of the police, undertakers, the judicial system, hospitals etc). Participants reported distress at, for example, the number of post-mortems that took place and the amount of time between the discovery of the body and its eventual release for burial.

All those present felt it was crucial that they had a choice about whether or not to see the victim's body. They acknowledged that not all of them would have chosen (or indeed did choose) to see the body, but they felt that it was important that they themselves should make the decision, rather than the police, funeral director or another family member. However, they also wanted to be fully prepared before making the decision. So, for instance, a detailed explanation of what the body would look like, whether there were any wounds, what clothing the victim was wearing etc would be very important.

The participants felt that organisations and systems were currently biased towards the perpetrator and not the victim and their family. For example, their experience was that it is very difficult for relatives of the victim to get re-housed (even if the homicide occurred in their home), whilst the perpetrator can be re-housed on release from prison. Participants also resented the fact the perpetrator could have anonymity whereas this is more difficult for relatives of victims.

The judicial and court system

Participants felt that, as siblings and children of homicide victims, they had not been given enough direct information. Some had heard distressing information about the homicide, for example how the victim was killed, for the first time in court. Families were not allowed access to the same reports as the accused (eg the trial and probation report) and, in some cases, had not been informed when the perpetrator had been released.

There was a great deal of discussion about terms being unclear, eg the use of the word manslaughter for what participants regarded as murder, or life imprisonment for what in fact is a shorter term. They also felt that decisions were in effect made before

court proceedings and were specifically unhappy about plea-bargaining. They did not think victims' relatives should have to sit with the family of the accused at the trial, as this was both distressing and frightening for them.

"Participants' feelings and memories were very current, irrespective of the time that had elapsed since the homicide"

In the UK the sensitivity of these issues has now been recognised and the Criminal Justice system has published a Victim's Charter, setting out a statement of improved services for victims⁵. There is a similar Courts' Charter⁶ recommending that that courts try to accommodate victims separately from defendants before and during a trial. However, where there are practical difficulties, for instance in older court houses, these recommendations are not always implemented.

The media

Experiences of the media varied greatly but everyone wanted the coverage to be objective and factually correct. There was a consensus that the press and television were commercial institutions and that this resulted in insensitivity and a lack of consideration for the victim's family.

Some participants had experienced severe intrusion, eg reporters lying about their identity in order to gain access to their home. It was also felt that the media were only interested in 'higher profile' cases and the group felt that one human life should not be treated as any more important or 'newsworthy' than another.

Compensation and other financial issues

There was criticism of the UK Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority for its poor information systems: some families had not even been made aware that they were eligible for criminal injury compensation. The group wanted eligibility extended to include siblings, partners, sons and daughters. They also felt that the time limit for compensation was unacceptable as it was often simply too painful to fill in the necessary forms in this time.

More generally, homicide can have considerable financial implications, ranging from loss of the victim's wages to legal costs, travelling to the trial and staying in a hotel. The group talked about the impact of this on their families and felt that there should be an official statement as part of employment law relating to rights for relatives to take a set period of paid time off.

Police and family liaison officers (FLOs)

The FLOs had been very important figures for the individuals at the workshop. However they felt that there was a clear conflict of interest: on the one hand FLOs were there for the family, but on the other they were employed by the police and therefore were also there to gather evidence. There was a consensus that the FLOs should be flexible and involved for a longer period, and that families should be allowed to ask for a change of FLO if desired (eg due to a personality clash).

Participants again highlighted a lack of good information from the police, especially for young siblings, sons and daughters. As children, they had often not been told what had actually happened. Not knowing had left them imagining and replaying their worst scenarios over and over and this was often more distressing than the truth. Participants also felt that how they were told about the homicide was extremely important. They wanted to be told by someone trained and experienced who was able to include all close relatives in the process, not just a few.

Ongoing effects of the homicide

The effects of the homicide were clearly still in evidence. Participants talked of family members still trying to protect one other from pain, thus making open communication difficult. People were left feeling scared, vulnerable, fearful and, in unsolved cases of homicide, wondering whether the perpetrator was living nearby, and would come to kill them or other members of their family.

Like most bereaved people, the participants faced constant reminders of their loss, and had difficulty with answering everyday questions such as 'how many brothers and sisters do you have?' Others sometimes reacted strangely to a bereavement by homicide and found it particularly difficult to know what to say. All of those present

still suffered from, or had suffered from, intrusive thoughts and images.

Therapeutic services

The participants were extremely clear that they wanted to be helped by someone who had experienced the effects of a homicide; those who had not had the same experience simply could not understand. They also felt counselling and other psychological services had not been sufficiently available and, when they were, these were available neither soon enough nor flexibly enough. They were consequently keen to attend self-help groups such as one for siblings of victims of homicide.

Summary

Many of the themes highlighted here by participants thinking back to their childhood are similar to those highlighted by spouses and parents of victims and fit with the wider literature. The Victim Support 'Families of Murder Victims' Project⁷ (1990), for example, interviewed a number of families, eight of them in depth, and many of the issues raised here were highlighted in their substantial report. In addition, Riches and Dawson⁸ found evidence of anger towards the justice system whilst Freeman *et al*⁹ found that people felt devalued and 'like a number' to those in the system. Applebaum and Burns¹⁰ also found evidence of high levels of ongoing distress and intrusive imagery.

Poor information

From the workshop, however, there were also themes that pointed to participants not having had their needs met. They frequently described a severe lack of information, which is not surprising given that they are second in line for information that is already of a poor quality. Often families were not told how the person died, about trial adjournment, access to compensation, the release of the perpetrator and what services were available, etc. Obviously some information has to be withheld

for legal reasons, but the participants felt that working closely with families, making sure that they are as well informed as possible and have clear explanation of what facts are being withheld and why, would go a long way towards helping them through this difficult process.

Overprotectiveness

Workshop participants spoke of a strong sense of needing to protect their parents. Not wanting to add to their distress, they had sometimes been reluctant to ask older members of the family either for information or for their emotional needs to be met. It is probable that this further exacerbated the situation for some. This wish to protect was certainly not one-way: there was also evidence of parents desperately trying to shield their children. This probably included keeping from them any information that was perceived to be too painful, resulting in what Harris-Hendriks, Black and Kaplan¹¹ refer to as 'the conspiracy of silence' However, the lack of information about what actually happened is likely to have exacerbated or maintained some of the participants' intrusive imagery, both as young people and now, as adults. As Riches and Dawson⁸ note, the fantasy of what happened can often be more traumatic than the reality.

Discussion

Overall, then, the information gathered here suggests that, in many respects, these participants did feel like forgotten victims. There was also a lot of evidence that their experiences mirrored those of other family members and that in general the services for secondary victims of homicide could be improved⁷. The message from this workshop was clear about what areas the group saw as needing improvement:

- how children are told about a homicide
- the quality of the information they are given
- support in viewing the body and in deciding whether or not to do so

Homicide is, thankfully, rare. Most professionals will never deal with a secondary victim of homicide, and for those who do it is likely to be only once or twice in their career¹¹ (eg in

mental health settings, general medical practice). In looking at the information gathered here, perhaps a way forward would be a more co-ordinated package of care bringing together people with regional expertise in this area. This would not necessarily mean a dedicated team of professionals all working in the same building, but rather identifying those with expertise in the area who could work with these families or advise other professionals of specific resources available.

Ideally, we need specialist medical, mental health and voluntary service professionals who have had experience in working with people affected by homicide, and who understand the system and the help available. Police officers involved in this sort of work should have detailed training on the impact of homicide and the consequent judicial procedures on families, and what helps and hinders people affected. In all these situations, but especially for an isolated practitioner, one of the most helpful resources would be Harris-Hendriks, Black and Kaplan's book, *When Father Kills Mother*¹¹, which includes therapeutic techniques for countering the negative effects of homicide on children.

The emphasis within the courts is (not surprisingly) on justice being done and not on the effects of this on a family. However, it seems from the evidence here that the systems surrounding homicide exacerbate rather than alleviate families' distress. Although the system is unlikely to fundamentally change, perhaps it could incorporate the needs of the family more centrally. Some welcome changes have been made in recent years to the procedures of the police, prosecution service and courts so that they are more sensitive to families' needs than in the past^{5,6} but much remains to be done. A key change that would make a substantial difference for these families would be better access to good information.

The sample presented in this paper is small and is unrepresentative (the participants were attending a conference on homicide and therefore already seeking support) and we did not tape the workshop or perform any discourse analysis. Our remit, to provide an opportunity for sharing experiences, necessitated an open discussion from which we then brought together the

UK CONTACTS after a homicide

Victim Support: tel: 0845 3030900;

Support After Murder and Manslaughter (SAMM): tel: 020 7735 3838

NEVA: PO Box 111, Jarrow, Tyne and Wear NE32 4SE; tel 0191 4232210

pertinent themes, so scientifically our findings are not rigorous. However, the discussion was rich with information, and does support the findings of much more rigorous studies in the literature. These people have spoken clearly about what they need; our job is surely to listen and to try and bring about changes. ☛

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Every culture, from ancient to modern, has developed unique ways to pay tribute to its dead. Some believe that these rituals give special benefits to the deceased, but most simply see the funeral and memorial arrangements as a powerful source of comfort and support for the living. Indeed, for many people the best way to deal with the pain and loss immediately after a death is by doing something positive that reflects the interests of the person who has died.

Where the body or ashes are buried or scattered is particularly important for many, offering a specific place where family and friends can visit and remember the person who has died. The most common arrangement in our culture is a grave, or plaque or plant in a crematorium, though of course many other forms of memorial exist. Recently, however, families have been finding different ways of disposing ashes which are meaningful to them and, even if the body or ashes are elsewhere, they may want to establish a spiritual link by creating a place where they can feel close to the person they loved.

Traditional funeral flowers last only a few hours, and even a shrub in a crematorium is there for a relatively short time. There is a strong desire to link a loved one with a special place forever, but graveyards and gardens of remembrance can feel too public and impersonal. For many, woodland is a uniquely peaceful and spiritual place and trees offer a permanent, living memorial. The Woodland Trust, a charity set up more than 30 years ago to protect the UK native woodland heritage, now owns over 1,000 sites. It runs a tree dedication service for individuals and groups to dedicate either a single tree in one of 20 recently planted woods, or a larger area of woodland from a choice of hundreds of woods around the country. Trees are dedicated for many reasons, as a present or to mark an occasion but,

increasingly, as a memorial after a death. In 2005, there were over 30,000 dedications of trees and woodland. A map is provided so that families and friends can locate their wood, and ashes may be scattered there. Although generally no marker or formal ceremony is allowed, plaques are available for those dedicating an acre or more with bench or post.

Dedicated woodland offers a peaceful place where people can reunite with the natural world, think about those they loved and events that were special to them. From ancient times, trees have had great symbolic value: touching wood for luck is a throw back to tree worship in pagan times. Yews, especially sacred to our ancestors, are often found in churchyards, planted to sanctify burial sites. Both Druids, believing in reincarnation, and later Christians, teaching of the resurrection, regarded the yew as a natural emblem of immortality and rebirth because of its longevity and capacity for renewal by layering, growing saplings from its trailing branches. Other trees also have symbolic meanings for us - the oak for



Joy and Kurt Larsen who have dedicated new planting and stone benches to the memory of family members at this Woodland Trust site in Glen Finglas, Scotland.

Photo by Jane Begg