

# Supporting people bereaved through homicide

## Developing Victim Support's response



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**IT WAS DECIDED IN 2004** that the service of Victim Support, the UK national charity for victims of crime, would benefit from being reviewed in the light of current research evidence. The findings would then form the basis of a new service framework and set of service standards to guide our work in this area. This article describes the main findings from the research we carried out, particularly in relation to the needs and wants expressed by bereaved people themselves, and some of the implications for support services and other agencies working with them.

Victim Support offers practical help, emotional support and information to over a million people every year through a website (see review by Aitken, 2006), local branches and a helpline. In 2006/7 the service received 1,157 referrals relating to murder and manslaughter.

### THE RESEARCH

The primary aims of the study were to discover more about the service needs of people bereaved by homicide and the extent to which these are met by Victim Support and other agencies. The research was designed to include a wide range of viewpoints and comprised:

- an extensive review of existing research
- in-depth interviews with 44 bereaved people recruited through Victim Support and SAMM (Support After Murder and Manslaughter)
- focus groups with police Family Liaison Officers (FLOs) and probation service Victim Liaison Officers
- interviews with Victim Support staff and volunteers

A report bringing these findings together was published in 2006 (Paterson *et al* 2006) and the work on developing new guidance and standards is now well under way. The richness of the material gathered during the project is not easily summarised in the space of a short article, so I will focus on some findings around key themes that emerged: the psychological impact of homicide and emotional support needs, negotiating the criminal justice system, dealing with practical issues, and the services and support offered by voluntary agencies. Research participants quoted in this article are referred to by their relationship to the victim and age.

**The emotional impact: a synergy of trauma and loss**

The emotional aftermath of homicide is often characterised as 'traumatic bereavement'. Rynearson and McCreery (1993) note that 'the coexistence of trauma and loss is presumed to create a synergism of delayed recovery', and suggest that this combination of factors is strongly associated with the high prevalence of PTSD symptoms commonly found among people bereaved by homicide. Their suggestion that loss complicated by trauma results in a delayed grief process is echoed in our findings: the first year or two after a murder appear to be marked more by the impact of trauma than bereavement. Common trauma reactions such as emotional numbness and dissociation appear to disrupt and set back the grief process, and the demands of the criminal justice system and the need to

deal with other pressing financial and practical matters can have a similarly disruptive effect:

The first year is just filling in forms. You can't think about your loss. It's the forms, finding the money, the funeral, the court case. The second year is trying to come to terms with your loss. (Mother, 59)

I had to put my emotions on hold so I could do the things that needed doing. There was just so much going on – I was just doing things on auto-pilot without having any time any to process feelings or emotions. (Brother, 29)

### ABSTRACT

*A study by the UK charity Victim Support examined the practical and emotional needs of people bereaved by murder and manslaughter. In-depth interviews were carried out with 44 bereaved people, along with a mapping exercise of support agencies, and interviews with police and probation officers working with victims' families. This article presents some of the main findings, focusing on the psychological impact of homicide, support needs in the short and longer term, negotiating the criminal justice system, dealing with practical issues, and the services offered by voluntary agencies. The uniquely traumatic nature of this bereavement gives rise to complex support needs and significant challenges for service providers.*

The duration as well as the intensity of grief after a murder may therefore be significantly greater than that which follows other deaths.

Scarce or poorly-communicated information is an issue mentioned frequently that also seems to have an impact on grief and recovery processes. Participants often felt that their ability to accept the facts of the death and mourn the victim had been adversely affected by a lack of information at almost every step of the way – about the details of the murder itself, the progress of the investigation, what to expect in court, about support services and resources they would be able to access, and about common psychological and physical reactions. There were clear signs that this lack of information had intensified people's anxieties, anger and sense of isolation and powerlessness:

I didn't know how to behave – you don't know what the normal natural reaction is. (Son-in-law, 45)

I thought I was the only one in the world with these kinds of problems. (Mother, 59)

I need to know the reason [for the murder] because it's the only way you can complete the picture and then perhaps deal with it. (Father, 60)

I didn't have an understanding of what I was going through or how to deal with it. I was having flashbacks where I was actually in the fire instead of my mother – it would have been helpful to have had someone help me through the symptoms. (Daughter, 46)

### Negotiating the criminal justice system

Although some characteristics and effects of bereavement by homicide are shared with other violent or sudden deaths, a unique distinguishing feature is a protracted and often fraught involvement with the agencies of the criminal justice system. On top of the overwhelming emotional strain of traumatic grief, bereaved people have also to cope with the sometimes bewildering criminal justice process. The needs and instinctive responses of family and friends are repeatedly overruled by the demands of the machinery of investigation and prosecution, and it is often suggested that

the grief process is severely hampered and distorted by the frustrations and additional distress that this creates (see for example Armour 2002; Mezey, Evans and Hobdell 2002).

Participants in our study referred to numerous incidents throughout their dealings with the criminal justice agencies that they felt exacerbated the trauma they were experiencing. Examples were being questioned by the police while the victim was dying; not being told of the nature of the victim's injuries before going to identify the body, and being forbidden to touch the victim in case forensic evidence was contaminated; defence lawyers' requests for numerous post mortems, which delayed the funeral and issue of the death certificate; insensitive and intrusive questioning by detectives about the victim and other family members; and the most common complaint of being given incomplete, inaccurate or unhelpful information.

In cases where a perpetrator has been charged, relatives will often have high hopes for the trial, expecting that murder will be automatically be punished with a lengthy sentence and that a sense of closure will prevail once the trial is over. Our research and previous studies (for example Riches and Dawson 1998; Rock 1998; and Harrison 1999) found that during and after the trial is often a time when bereaved people feel at their most powerless, angry and distressed. This is compounded by factors such as delays and postponements in court, hearing and viewing harrowing evidence, including learning new details about the death; poor communication from barristers; charges being reduced through legal technicalities or plea-bargaining; and being unprepared for the eventual verdict and sentence.

The period after the trial is often when feelings that people had suppressed, so that they could function in the months immediately after the death, may start to become overwhelming. Unfortunately it is also the time when sources of support become less available. Police FLOs normally end contact after the trial, and friends and other supporters often believe that those who have been bereaved will start to 'move on' at this point and may also start to withdraw. For many, however, this is when their pain and grief become most intense.

### Other practical issues

Those bereaved through homicide often have also to cope with a wide range of other unanticipated practical issues. Murder almost always attracts interest from the media, and more than half of the participants in this study referred to feeling a need for protection from reporters. Many families faced significant financial difficulties in the wake of the murder, falling into three main categories:

- costs resulting from the death, for example funeral expenses and travel
- ongoing problems relating to managing finances, such as dealing with debts, bills benefit claims
- problems associated with Criminal Injuries Compensation claims

Participants also often referred to employment-related difficulties which can exacerbate financial anxieties when long periods of absence or problems returning to work are involved.

Employers' initial responses ranged from compassionate to insensitive, but they often underestimated how long it would take for bereaved people to return to their previous level of performance and capacity at work and several became subject to disciplinary procedures on capability and attendance matters.

Similar issues were mentioned relating to school attendance. Some education authorities were sympathetic towards bereaved children's circumstances, arranging counselling and allowing flexibility about attendance and coursework, whereas others showed little appreciation of the emotional and psychological turmoil that bereaved young people were experiencing, leading to truancy, behaviour problems and exclusion. Several families in this study found themselves with unanticipated new or additional child care responsibilities overnight, including four sets of grandparents caring for children whose mothers were murdered by their fathers. In these cases the financial, emotional and physical strain of bringing up highly traumatised children was extremely difficult to cope with, a situation made more stressful by the amount of paperwork and meetings associated with arranging custody, benefits, financial settlements, school transfers and so on.

## Services and support received from voluntary agencies

Finally, our research asked bereaved people about the emotional and practical support they had received, and also asked providers of those services about their experiences and perceptions.

Some qualities specifically mentioned as having been helpful in terms of emotional support were confidence, experience, 'the ability to listen without being too directive or resorting to clichés', friendliness and warmth. Some would have welcomed proactive offers of help with managing funeral arrangements, making phone calls, getting shopping, arranging transport and paying bills, for example. Several Victim Support interviewees noted that bereaved people tended to ask for practical assistance before they would talk about their feelings – this could reflect either the delayed reaction/emotional numbness discussed above, or a sense that helping with these matters builds trust that then allows bereaved people to feel more able to open up emotionally.

Not surprisingly, there were wide variations in the nature and style of support people said they wanted, in which factors such as age, gender, other sources of support available, and the impact of the murder played a part. Some felt that a crisis management type of service was needed to steer people through the immediate aftermath, whereas others had wanted counselling or therapy to help with the emotional reactions that overwhelmed them months and years later. Some found one-to-one professional support preferable, some welcomed the 'ordinariness' of a volunteer, and for others, only peer support from other people who had experienced homicide themselves helped.

While many spoke positively of the support they had received from various sources, there were inevitably criticisms. The lack of support outside office hours was often mentioned, along with a lack of knowledge of issues associated specifically with bereavement by homicide, volunteers or counsellors being overly affected by the bereaved person's grief, or not proactively offering help and not being able to give helpful information. The

uniquely traumatic nature of bereavement by homicide means that general bereavement or general trauma services are not always adequate in the long term: several participants had been helped by bereavement counsellors and other counselling services but there was a sense that they fell short in their appreciation of the intensity and duration of grief and pain. The shortage of services for children and young people is a particular cause for concern: there were long waiting lists for children's services, and in the meantime family members found it difficult to know how to talk to them about the murder, or to meet their needs.

## CONCLUSION

The report concluded by making wide-ranging recommendations to improve the services provided by Victim Support. These covered the following main areas:

- overall service objectives and delivery
- partnership working with the police and other organisations
- campaigning work, training and supervision of volunteers
- further research

The views and feelings of bereaved people that had been expressed in the interviews were of central importance in drawing up the report's recommendations. Examples of good practice and less helpful practice were highlighted, which will be taken on board in reviewing Victim Support's services.

### Good practice

In one area, for instance, the police involve Victim Support at a very early stage, usually a few days after the death, in contrast to the usual practice of bringing Victim Support in once the investigation nears its end. Early introduction allows the FLO and Victim Support volunteer to develop a closer working relationship and to discuss how best to meet the needs of bereaved people, instead of them being 'handed over' to Victim Support before the FLO disengages. A programme of joint training is in place in the same area, which has given the police and Victim Support a greater understanding of each other's roles and processes. The report therefore recommends that the police plan the involvement of Victim Support so that a volunteer is intro-

duced when they will be of most help to the bereaved, rather than to facilitate the withdrawal of the FLO.

### Scope for improvement

The research also identified aspects of Victim Support's practice which could be developed. It recommended that volunteers take a more proactive approach in giving practical help rather than waiting to be asked, that areas of the country with the highest murder rates ensure they have volunteers trained in bereavement by homicide, and that referral systems are put in place so that bereaved relatives living in different parts of the country are offered support as well as those in the police area where the murder occurred.

The picture that emerges from this and previous research is that no single agency or individual can meet such a range and complexity of support needs alone. The key to effective support is not only a high level of competence among individual supporters, but also clear agreement between criminal justice agencies, service providers and support organisations about their respective roles and a commitment to working together effectively. ●

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