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Problem

In 2019, the City of Memphis was awarded funding from the OVC Law Enforcement-Based Victim Services Program to develop victim services for secondary victims of homicide. Victims in general, and secondary victims in particular, are often less aware of the existence and scope of services available to them (Sims, Yost, & Abbott, 2005). In the case of homicide, families and friends of homicide victims may be burdened with issues related to obtaining copies of death certificates, life insurance, and loss of income, on top of the existing experience of trauma and shock occurring from the loss of a loved one. Thus, the especially heinous nature of homicide crimes, and the recognition of secondary victims from these crimes, make the focus on this category of victims for services especially pressing.

Using the OVC funding, the City of Memphis Victim Specialist Unit (VSU) was formed and housed within the Memphis Police Department (MPD) Homicide Unit as a way to respond to these issues. The VSU partners with faculty at the University of Memphis Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, who serve as the research partners evaluating the project. Ms. Alicia Denton is the lead victim specialist in the homicide unit and coordinates a team that responds to homicide cases with law enforcement. When a homicide occurs, the MPD VSU responds and connects with the family and friends of the homicide victim. After the initial contact, the unit is tasked with connecting the secondary victims of homicide with community services. Once the VSU makes contact, they record data on the case specifics and referral information. These data are shared by MPD on an ongoing basis with the research partners Drs. Amaia Iratzoqui and James C. McCutcheon for analysis and evaluation.

Both the VSU and the research partners identified two main goals, for research purposes, as well as provide a greater understanding of impact on the population served: 1) satisfaction with services and 2) to address the full scope of needs of this population. Initially, clients serviced by the VSU were asked to complete a satisfaction survey at their next point of contact after stabilization. Stabilization was defined as a point in time reached after victims had 1) received contact from law enforcement investigators; 2) received referral information from the VSU; and 3) chose whether to seek out referred resources for further assistance. Clients were given a text message link to a five question, electronic survey to complete online and asked to complete the survey at a time of their convenience.

However, most clients served have not completed the survey, which leaves in question the extent to which they are satisfied with services. In addition, since the time of the original project proposal, researchers, and law enforcement partners have discussed whether the use of a survey is suitable to capture satisfaction with services and the extent of identified needs. In addition, recognizing that traumatized individuals may not be equipped or encouraged to complete a survey to report their experiences and discuss their larger issues with the system has since made urgent the need for a more comprehensive, nuanced approach.

Approach

To respond to this issue, the research partners have aimed to do focus groups with victims to better get at all experiences with the victim specialist team, positive and negative, as a means of improving the quality of care given to clients. The MPD applied for the JRSA mini-grant as a means of extending the LEV Grantee-Researcher Partnership project to encompass an evaluation component more tailored to client needs.

Focus groups are the preferred solution to replace surveys as they provide multiple advantages. First, by allowing the scope of conversation to go beyond several planned questions,
they can capture more nuanced and detailed responses on issues, as well as highlight additional benefits (or concerns) of and with their experiences, in this case, their experiences with the VSU. Similarly, by holding focus groups away from the law enforcement agency, and with the research partners rather than the VSU members, this setting looked to allow victims to be more open and honest in their responses and provide a venue for adding their voices beyond the limited scope of the criminal justice process. In sum, qualitative research may be a more appropriate tool for addressing sensitive topics (Tewksbury, 2009). It provides the ability to obtain a deeper understanding of contextual factors related to these topics because it allows study subjects to engage with the researcher in a conversation, rather than only permitting them to respond to pre-determined survey questions.

To recruit victim/victim participants, service providers posted flyers in the hallways of their respective buildings, distributed hard copies via postal service, and recruited via word of mouth through face-to-face meetings and phone contact. The flyers described the interview’s purpose, interview date, time, and location, and directed interested victims to provide their contact information to agency staff. Clients were also called directly on the telephone and asked if they were interested in participating. All victims who initially received communication and assistance from the victim specialist team were asked to participate in the focus groups. Victims were asked to speak about all experiences with the victim specialist team, positive and negative, as a means of improving the quality of care given to clients. One possibility is that clients served during the initial months of the program, while the victim specialist team was developing their services, may have different experiences than the clients served by the team once they have been more integrated within the community.

Data Source(s)

Three focus groups were planned for the grant period, with a goal of 5-7 participants in each focus group held. Researchers conducted each hour-long interview session on the university campus. All participants were given an incentive of a $50 Kroger gift card, with funds provided by an MPD private donor. Participants signed consent forms and were instructed that they could leave the session at any time. Participants also were advised that the discussion would be audio-recorded and that they should not reveal any identifying information.

The following five questions were used for each focus group session, drawing from the original satisfaction survey:

1. Has your sense of safety and security increased as a result of the treatment received from the victim specialist?
2. Are you satisfied with your interactions with the victim specialist? Why or why not?
3. Has the victim specialist made you feel more connected to services in the community?
4. Do you now feel more knowledgeable about the criminal justice system? Why or why not?
5. Do you now feel more knowledgeable of the services and community resources available for victims and witnesses? Why or why not?

Taped interviews provided the data for this study. Content analyses from the full transcripts were used to identify themes and issues of importance to participants. Participants were identified individually within groups, but responses were collated for each focus group and reviewed by group, then across groups. Multiple researchers were used to account for possible variations in
the subjective interpretation of the transcript output. This content analysis was used as the final output driving findings and directions for future program improvements.

Results

Three themes were identified across the three discussions, including 1) communication; 2) information and connection; and 3) timing. Many of the participants were still experiencing a high level of trauma during our discussions. The researchers met this with a high level of sensitivity and discretion, as discussed below. Direct quotations are used throughout this section to give a voice to these participants and allow them to communicate in their own words their specific experiences. Participants are identified by the group (e.g., 1, 2, or 3) they were in, as well as individually within groups (e.g., A, B, or C).

Communication

Participant 2A: *I'm hurt. They took my son. They shot and killed my son for nothing because they call him a snitch, a rat. It hurts so bad, this is. I need some help. I need to get some help.*

Communication was one of the recurring themes in our discussion, from the initial contact by investigators all the way through the case. From the quote above, it is clear to see that many of the participants were still seeking assistance and needing communication from anyone involved in their case. Attending the focus group interviews was seen as a means to communicate with someone to explain their needs and ask for help. This contact did not only involve the VSU, but also included contacts from the investigators and the district attorney’s office. All these individuals and experiences were seen as part of a larger impression of the criminal justice system. The first contact was crucial, because it weighed the overall quality of the response for the secondary victims of the homicide.

 Also apparent from our discussion was that the role of the VSU was not often clear to participants. They were confused when asked about the specialists and instead discussed more broadly the experiences they had with the investigator, prosecutor, as well as others who were with and are associated with the Criminal Justice System.

Participant 1A: *“So would it be the sergeant that, you know, that was involved with the initial report or would it just be the people that were contacted that works with the state of Tennessee? Is that the specialist team you’re referring to?”*

Additionally, participants were not even sure who the researchers were and what the meeting was related to with regards to their case. Most of them wanted more information and to simply communicate their issues. In our discussions, they often asked the researchers for help. During the interviews, the researchers had to explain who the VSU is; most participants were able to identify them with help. However, some did not remember ever being contacted by the team.

Researcher 1: *“Who called you about today?”*
Participant 2A: *“I can’t remember...[name stated as a question]?”*
Participant 2A: *“Yeah. And they called, I guess, a couple of days ago, maybe been a week, and said it would be, do I still want to come? And I said, yeah.”*
Researcher 2: *“Did you have contact with that person before?”*
Participant 2A: *“I don’t know. But the lady I talked to, she invited me here.”*
Participants also had varying experiences of communication with the team. Some seemed to be in continual contact with the team, while others had more limited contact. However, the role of the VSU is to be a liaison for services, not to provide services itself. In short, the experiences of the participants are at minimum congruent with the goals, but not necessarily in terms with the participants’ own expectations.

Participant 3A: “She did. She did. She did check on me every night. And then she called back and she checked on me. She called probably a week prior to the day. She called and checked on me with everything’s okay.”

Participant 3B: “…she called me. As matter of fact, she's been good to me. She call me once a week…Her team came out to my house. She’s called and met with me...She's been real good to me.”

Most of the discussion from participants centered on what occurred during the initial contact and during the criminal justice process. The initial contact is the first exposure to the trauma and the Criminal Justice process and when they will often learn the news of what occurred to their loved one. All the participants gave their account of the first contact. Unfortunately, some of them had already heard informally of what had happened before police made contact.

Communication through the full criminal justice process was also an important topic as many of the participants were unsure when court days were and what their part was in that process. Participants were asking each other for their advice and assistance during the interviews. For instance, one stated that they had a preliminary hearing to attend the next day and was asking the other participant if they knew what that was. Participants would share concerns over not being able to reach investigators to learn where their case is in the process.

The knowledge of the process and what occurred in their case weighed heavy on the parents who stated that they wanted justice for their children. Perception of safety was also hindered by what participants believed to be a lack of communication. More than one participant expressed concern about the suspect in the trial. One participant was disturbed by not being contacted when the suspect was released from custody. She stated that she found out from “the street” and that it was a month later before anyone in an official position contacted her.

Participant 3B: “I haven't really talked to them at all since when the girl got released from jail. I haven't talked to them. I found that on the street.”

Another felt strongly she knew who killed her son but did not know how to fully explain and communicate that to police. She also felt the threat on her life and the rest of her family from this potential suspect and their friends. The participant did not know how to communicate this information to the investigator, or anyone stationed at MPD.

Information and Connection

Participants often felt they were underinformed about their case and its progress through investigation and prosecution. They were concerned about the lack of knowledge in relation to their case and the Criminal Justice System. This often started with initial contact. The
information regarding the initial incident and what occurred in the case was something that participants were yearning for to properly process.

Participant 1B: “They never contacted me. I would never knew unless someone had called me and told me that my daughter had been shot. She was taken to Regional one. I would never knew. But...I wish they would have contacted me because it was mostly in their hands than anybody else...And they didn't really contact me about that...Though she was 30, I'm just saying reach out to somebody. I mean, a parent or something, and letting them know that your daughter got shot. Is this what happened? I never I just got bits and pieces of different from everybody else and not from there.”

The participant’s account of the initial contact was crucial. Many times, they were just asked to come down to the police station without any other knowledge. Informal means of gaining information was also a concern as family members preferred learning what occurred from an official source.

Once secondary victims get past the initial contact, they then must go through investigation and the court process. Many of the participants expressed frustration from not being able to contact the investigator and not having information on the investigation. Similarly, they also listed concerns over lack of information regarding court dates and when they need to be at court and what each step entails. They did not feel as if they were part of the process, only an accessory that would be called on when needed. Their experiences involved being informed about their need to be at court at the last moment. When they arrived, they were told to wait outside the courtroom, often time to only be needed once, if even then. They often lacked the knowledge or understanding of why they would be called on some days and not needed on others.

Participant 2A: “They said they would call me, let me know when it's time to come to court. Nobody called me, so I had to go downtown to go...they give me the court dates... I go early in the morning so I can take my time and then I sit up in the courtroom. You know, there's the courtroom right there, and I sit over there by the bathroom...you know, when I go to the courtroom, I have to [tell] the bailiff that I'm a victim. And can I come in the courtroom and they tell me, just sit outside and they'll call me. And that's all the time, all day. Sometimes the prosecutor come out.”

The lack of information also meant they lacked connection to the process. They recalled individuals by description, not knowing who they were or their role. When they cited a negative interaction, they weren’t sure who the person was or in which step of the process it was. When they had negative experiences during the process it could come at any step from any person. The trauma became integrated with the process itself. They wanted the knowledge that came from resolving their loved one’s homicide, which is reliant on the connection they have with each person who has information on the case each step of the way. It is important to note that most of the concerns that were demonstrated by the participants related to the Criminal Justice process. Given that the VSU is meant to remedy some of these connection issues, it did appear to be a success in that regard.
Participant 3A: “They've been to my house. I get a call once a week. My son's birthday was a few days ago, they called for his birthday. They actually called me to come down to meet them. They discussed what I needed to do as far as if I wanted to do a victim's comp or what I needed to do if I needed some help. She told me in time I needed some help. Then she called me. They kept me up on most of everything.”

**Timing**

Multiple participants discussed their initial contact as negative as it took time for investigators to contact them post-homicide. One particular instance that was discussed was a family member who was attempting to call their son’s phone multiple times to finally have law enforcement pick up the phone to instruct them to come to the station, without any additional information.

Participant 1A: “…And they said, you dial this number several times that we have this phone at the police station. If you have an interest in the person whose phone this is, we would need you to visit the police station. That's sort of how I got, I guess started with my awareness as far as, you know, my family member being involved in something different than the normal day to day stuff.”

Participants at the time of their loss were interested in the case and what had happened. They stated that they were not ready at the time close to the loss for counseling or even to fill out paperwork. Often, participants explained that they had not worked through the paperwork for assistance from the state earlier in the process, because they had yet to process the information and didn’t have the strength.

Participant 1A: “But I’m not certain that I was prepared to deal with much of it at all, honestly. In fairness to them, I think I mean, thinking back, I can say they were very much probably attempting to be helpful. But when you were in a certain degree of pain, I don't know that there's a lot of comfort to be found in regular conversation. That's what I would say.”

As discussed earlier, for a participant to understand their needs, they first need the knowledge of what occurred. Timing is crucial in this regard. Participants, once they found out about their loss, needed information regarding what occurred and what it now means for what happens next. They must first process the loss and they must have the knowledge of the trauma before they know whether they need counseling or any other assistance.

Participant 3B: “She talked about counseling several times, but I told her that I didn’t think I needed. But I think I do now.”

Follow through was an important topic brought into the discussion. Participants wanted to be followed through the system. They desired to maintain contact with those with information on their case. They had forgotten in some case that they had the option for counseling and other forms of assistance. It is important to have continued communication with the liaison and the Criminal Justice System at large, to ensure help is provided through each step of the process, whether it be knowledge or support.
Most of those who were interviewed believed that the VSU contacted them in a timely manner, additionally most participants experienced the VSU going beyond the role of liaison.

Participant 3A: *They’ve been to my house. I get a call once a week. My son's birthday was a few days after they called for his birthday. They actually called me to come down to meet them. They discussed what I needed to do as far as if I wanted to do a victim's comp or what I needed to do if I needed some help. She told me in time I needed some help. Then she called me. They kept me up on most of everything.*

Only a few participants had already taken up counseling as many had not reached that time yet. For those who had, they saw it as positive.

Participant 1B: “[I accepted] counseling...And it was it was a success. I got through day to day basis when she called me and asked me questions and stuff. So it helped. It was positive.”

**Limitations**

Several limitations were identified at the conclusion of this research. First it is important to note that participants were volunteers. This research is limited to those who were willing to volunteer their time and were ready to discuss their experiences. The initial focus groups were planned for May 2022, but due to physical illness and family conflicts by the researchers, were rescheduled for July 2022. It is unknown how many potential participants were lost due to this unavoidable change.

As noted above, many of the participants just wanted to talk to someone, which was something that most of them stated was difficult to do until now. In fact, the ones that had previously refused counseling were now reconsidering their decision. Thus, the participants that were present at our focus groups were either seeking additional help or wanted someone to communicate with on their case. As discussed above, they had processed their grief enough to understand that it was time to talk. As a group, they cannot represent all stages of the grieving process, or all experiences with the VSU through its current operation.

Holding the interviews at the University of Memphis also proved more problematic than anticipated. Focus groups were held in the conference room on the third floor of Browning Hall in the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, where the researchers are housed. While the University of Memphis is on a public transportation route, we aimed to ease the burden of transportation by providing parking reimbursements for participants. One of the researchers was also present outside the parking garage with a sign detailing parking. In addition, signs were posted outside Browning Hall on the location of the meeting. The building is handicap-accessible and had access to both stairs and elevator. However, several participants commented that they had parked in alternate locations and had difficulty finding the building.

This created another problem. The group setting had been preferred during the planning of this research. One-on-one interviews are generally not preferred for several reasons. First, because a mixed-methods approach was not adopted (e.g., a survey conducted on a computer with the researchers present), we were concerned that participants would aim to increase social desirability of responses when the researchers were solely focused on their individual responses. Rather, we as researchers aimed to have clients find common ground with one another, which will naturally aid in discussion. As well, we were concerned that one-on-one interviews after
focus group participation will unduly burden clients who are already experiencing significant trauma. Unfortunately, in part due to the above issue, turnout for the focus groups was overall poor (n = 5). Even amongst the participants who attended, several commented that they had not received the original flyers mailed to their home, and only responded when VSU staff contacted them via telephone, and/or sent photos of the flyer via text message. One participant even showed up one day, was unable to find the building, and then through follow-up communication with a VSU staff member was able to arrange to come again the next session.

Implications
An inclusive process is necessary to ensure enhanced collaboration between MPD, service providers, and researchers with the intent of developing the best possible victim-centered approach. As a whole, the researchers’ findings from the focus groups aim to benefit the MPD victim services unit to better their process and policies in relation to contacting and providing assistance and referrals to secondary victims of homicide, as well as providing a foundation for a lasting program necessary in a high-crime jurisdiction.

The formation of a research partnership is instrumental to improving data quality and highlighting new ways to use data collection practices. Research is beneficial in identifying the unmet needs of victims and determining factors that keep the program on track for successful outcomes. The expertise of research partners enables effective evaluation of the VSU to ensure the needs of victims. This partnership is also instrumental in showing the impact of services to victims and identifying any problems in practice. The strong partnership between academics and practitioners is paramount to establishing an effective program long-term.

Recommendations
Understanding the impact the VSU has on this vulnerable population is crucial for both community well-being as well as program sustainment post-funding. Surveying clients/participants has not provided the data needed in understanding needs and means of improvement for this program. It is unclear why there was such low participation in the surveys, but it is clear from the use of focus groups that there remains difficulties in reaching these especially vulnerable populations. Given that homicide rates in Memphis and Shelby County are only increasing (with more than 345 homicides at the end of the 2021 calendar year), the needs of this population will only increase, rather than decrease.

Moving forward, several recommendations look to address the needs of this group as part of the partnership between MPD, the VSU, and the University. First, initial contact needs to be swift and guided with sensitivity. An advocate or Victim Specialist if available should assist in the first contact with the victim’s family. Second, secondary victims of homicide need help from others to assist with applying for financial assistance or any other help in relation to the loss. Simply referring victims to services does not ensure that they have the understanding or are equipped to handle the processes of filling out paperwork or following all the required protocol for assistance to be available.

Personnel
Research Partner Dr. Amaia Iratzoqui is an Associate Professor at the University of Memphis and was primarily responsible for administering focus groups for the secondary victims of
homicide. Dr. Iratzoqui has previously developed and ran focus groups for victims of intimate partner violence assisted by victim service agencies in the City of Memphis and Shelby County.

Research Partner Dr. James C. McCutcheon is an Associate Professor at the University of Memphis and works on various projects with MPD including as principal investigator for the Law Enforcement Victims Services Grant. His role in this project was to assist Dr. Iratzoqui with focus groups and analysis of the project.

Alicia Denton is the supervisor of the Memphis Police Department Victim Services Unit (VSU). Under the supervision of the Major of Homicide, Ms. Denton is responsible for the administration of the daily activities of the unit. Ms. Denton is also responsible for overseeing the Victim Services Specialists who provide support and referral assistance to victims and witnesses. Ms. Denton’s role was to contact participants inviting them to take part in the focus groups.

Major Webb Kirkdoffer is the Major of Memphis Police Department’s Homicide Bureau and is responsible for overseeing eight units in Investigative Services, including the Victim Services Unit. Major Kirkdoffer is responsible for bridging the gap between the Victim Services Unit and homicide investigators to facilitate exceptional rapport and maintain positive relationships. Additionally, Major Kirkdoffer provides active participation and support of activities, policies, and procedures implemented by the VSU.

References