

A Focus for the Future: Victim-Oriented Policing

Dana Packard

Abstract

Today, resources for law enforcement have become limited, officer retention is an issue and violent crime is on the rise. These factors increase the demand on the officer and limit their opportunity to focus on the crime victim. Technical advancements and public scrutiny have impacted officer time with training, documentation and increased calls for service. Time and attention provided to the victim are often lost on “getting the job done.” Often cases are “no filed” and successful prosecutions are declining due to lack of victim cooperation. Skilled intervention with victims has proven to significantly increase the victim’s level of participation in criminal cases and improve conviction rates. Despite the availability of funding, many agencies lack effective victim services. This study looks at the current status of victim services provided by municipal law enforcement agencies within the State of Florida to identify strengths and weaknesses in current approaches and identify potential future improvements.

Significance of Research

The status of crime victims in policing and the role of the victims’ movement have changed so much in the last thirty years that it is hard to imagine how it was in the past. The support provided to victims has grown from isolated informal grassroots networks to nationally and internationally recognized formal networks of victim services providers. The services provided to victims by the police and by victim service organizations are better than ever before. Yet there continues to be much room for improvement.

This study will look at the status of the victim and the status of the relationship between victim services programs and police departments. It may provide a preliminary platform for change and improvement. The aims of such improvement would be improved services for crime victims, improved policing, improved post-victimization services, and improved working relationships between police and victim service providers. After an assessment of current conditions we can identify strengths and weaknesses in current approaches and thereby identify possible pathways to improvement in the future.

Literature Review

Victim - Defined

A victim, according to s. 960.03(13), Florida Statutes, is a person who suffers personal injury or death as a direct result of a crime or a personal loss; or

a person less than 16 years of age who was present at the scene of a crime, saw or heard the crime, and suffered a psychiatric or psychological injury because of the crime, but who was not physically injured.

Status and Role of the Victim

The crime victim has always been a part of policing. Without victims, there would be no need for public policing agencies. Victims report crimes to police and the police respond to victims' calls for service in a variety of ways. Essentially, crime victims are the consumers of the criminal justice system. If victims and policing have always been inextricably linked, then why would we want to study the relationship between victims and policing? The reason is victim oriented policing is different from traditional policing. If victim oriented policing could be captured in one phrase it might be 'policing for the people'. It involves consciously making the victim, rather than the defendant, the center of their focus and service.

With crime victims being such an important component in the equation, surprisingly, there is very little research focused on victim oriented policing but rather on community policing. According to the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, community oriented policing is defined as a policing philosophy that promotes and supports organizational strategies to address the causes and reduce the fear of crime and social disorder through problem-solving tactics and community-police partnerships (Bureau of Justice Statistics). And while this is a valuable approach, the focus is on community building and problem solving - not on the crime victim.

Victim Services

All 50 states have now enacted victims' rights laws and victim compensation funding. Victim assistance programs are being implemented in a variety of ways (Roberts & Kurst-Swanger, 2002). Often, small police departments simply partner and collaborate with agencies in their area. Some departments designate a staff person(s) to follow up with victims, providing information and referrals (Marans, et al., 1995). Some larger departments have organized entire units to handle services for victims of crime. Yet, despite the growth in the number of victim service programs, available services to crime victims remain largely uneven and fragmented.

Incidents

According to the National Crime Victimization Survey reported by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 2005, U.S. residents age 12 or older experienced approximately 23 million crimes – 18 million were property crimes, 5.2 million were crimes of violence, and 227,000 were personal thefts. In 2005, for every 1,000 persons age 12 or older, there occurred – 1 rape or sexual assault, 1 assault with injury, and 3 robberies (Bureau of Justice Statistics). Despite these

ever increasing numbers, it is estimated that less than one-third of crimes ever result in prosecution (Turman, 2006).

Law enforcement officers see more crime victims than any other component of the criminal justice system. However, more victim assistance is provided through the prosecutors' offices than law enforcement. But only 21 percent of major crimes get to the prosecutor's office. This means that about 80 percent of crime victims may not have victim assistance available to them unless a victim assistance specialist or unit exists within law enforcement (Parker, 2001).

The philosophy of victim-oriented policing would lead to police and victim service programs to consistently partner in providing assistance to crime victims. Together, providing more comprehensive services to the crime victim.

First Response

Despite knowing that law enforcement officers are often the first officials to encounter victims in distress or shock following a crime, we have not always recognized the importance of these interactions (Turman, 2006). The officer's first response is an opportunity for police to build a positive relationship with victims. The first response can help to make a bad situation better. The first response can also alienate victims and reduce the possibility of a successful investigation and/or decrease the victim's willingness to participate in the criminal justice process (Parker, 2001).

An effective first response should meet both the needs of the police and the needs of the victims. Police should be sensitive to the victims' emotional responses to crime. They should also respect the important role that victims play in the investigation of the crime and the prevention of future incidents. The first response is the perfect opportunity to learn facts of the present, understand the past, and develop strategies to prevent repeat victimization in the future.

The first response should provide the opportunity for all victims to play a responsible role in the aftermath of crime. Police departments should be prepared to dispatch special services including victim services personnel who play an increasingly important role in the response to victims (Parker, 2001).

Expectations

Helping the crime victim understand what to expect is essential to building an effective relationship between police and victims. Research into victim assessments of police response found that "...greater attention should be paid to the manner in which police officers interact with crime victims and that the officers should provide victims with information and advice that is pertinent to their particular victimization " (Parker, 2001).

The Benefits of Establishing Victim Services

Establishing a victim services program within a law enforcement agency makes sense for several reasons. If victims receive support, they may be more likely to report a crime or cooperate in the investigation. That support is an added tool for law enforcement agencies to increase their conviction rates. Having a victim advocate on scene can free up officer time; the advocate can address the needs of the victim while the officer goes back into service. And, the victim feels they are coming away from the experience feeling the system has treated them fairly and sensitively (Reed, 2007).

Victim of Crime Act (VOCA)

There are several funding sources available to assist agencies with implementing victim assistance programs. One of the most prominent funding sources is the individual State's Victim of Crime Act (VOCA) program. The VOCA program is a federal grant program that the states use to provide funding for local victim assistance or domestic violence programs (Parker, 2001). The Bureau of Advocacy and Grants Management administers the federal Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) assistance grants. Through the United States Department of Justice, Office for Victims of Crime, these federal funds are awarded annually to the states to provide direct services to victims of crime. The Office of the Attorney General is the designated pass-through agency to administer the federal grant funds in Florida. Grants are then awarded to local community public and not for profit agencies for use in responding to the emotional and physical needs of crime victims, assisting victims by stabilizing their lives after the incident, assisting victims to understand and navigate the criminal justice system, and providing victims with a measure of safety and security. Collections into the fund are generated from federal offenders.

The VOCA program funds approximately 4,000 victim assistance programs nationwide (Parker, 2001) and in Florida, in 2006, 232 grants were awarded to various victim assistance agencies throughout the state. Of those 232, only 43 were awarded to City Police Departments and 39 were awarded to County Sheriffs Offices. When you consider the number of law enforcement agencies throughout the State of Florida, there is obviously a huge disparity between the funds awarded to first responders and those awarded to secondary agencies.

Hypothesis

It is this researcher's hypothesis that while each municipal police agency within the State of Florida has some form of victim service practice or protocol there is much room for improvement to make the crime victim the primary focus of their interaction thereby reducing recidivism, increasing conviction rates, and strengthening the relationship between law enforcement and the crime victim.

Method

The purpose of this research was to determine the current level of service law enforcement is providing to crime victims and to examine the possibility that more information may better prepare interested agencies with implementing assistance programs within their own agencies. The survey reflects what each department currently does to assist crime victims in their community. This data established a baseline on current policies and practices regarding the level of involvement between law enforcement and crime victims to identify the degree of possibility a change might be necessary to move toward victim oriented policing.

Characteristics of the Sample

The Florida Department of Law Enforcement provided a list of the municipal law enforcement agencies within the State of Florida. The established criteria for inclusion in the sampling were that the agency had a minimum of 5 sworn personnel and that they were included on the FDLE list. There were 240 police departments that fit these criteria. The data was collected through telephone surveys with a random sample of 57 municipal law enforcement agencies.

The survey instrument was developed after consulting a local university research methods director and prior studies. The telephone interviews were conducted with careful protection of the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. A team of 2 law enforcement volunteers conducted the telephone interviews from the Palm Bay Police Department in Palm Bay, Florida. The survey took an average of 15 minutes to complete. It was designed to be completed by a senior staff officer or designee who could accurately represent his or her views as the head of the agency. A copy of the survey is included as Appendix A.

Results

Table 1 - Overall Telephone Interview Response Rates

Organization	Sample Size	Completed Surveys	Response Rate
Municipal Law Enforcement Agencies	57	55	96%

The survey received a 96 percent participation rate, with 55 of the 57 agencies participating.

Table 2 – Victim Service Units within Law Enforcement Agencies

Has Victim Services	12	22%
Does Not Have Victim Services Unit	43	78%

Twenty-two percent (12 agencies) of the responding agencies currently had victim service units. Seventy-eight percent, 43 agencies had no established victim services housed within their organization. Of those 43 agencies, 4 stated that they previously had victim services units but budgetary cuts had resulted in their losing the positions. Only 6 (14 percent) of the 43 agencies indicated no interest in incorporating a victim service component into their agency.

Table 3 – Agencies interested in implementing a victim service program

Agencies Interested	37	86%
Agencies Not Interested	6	14%

Thirty-seven (86 percent) of the 43 agencies without victim services indicated that if funding were available, they would be interested in a establishing a victim service program and all six of the responding agencies not interested stated that their agency was too small to support the program. Thirty-six (65 percent) of the 55 responding agencies had not heard of the victim of crime act grant which so prominently funds these types of programs. Only 9 of the 55 participating agencies (16 percent) reported receiving VOCA funds which means that 25 percent of the agencies with victim service programs are unaware of funds available to supplement their programs.

Table 4 – Where Agencies Are Referring Crime Victims

Non-Profit Agencies	3	7%
Local Sheriff's Advocates	17	39%
State Attorney's Office Advocates	12	28%
Not Referred – Handled by Officer	11	26%

The forty-three agencies that did not have victim service personnel referred their crime victims to the State Attorney's Office, non-profit organizations, their local Sheriff's Department victim advocates, or no referral was made – the responding officer handled the incident.

Table 5 – How Many Agencies Include Victims In Their Mission Statements?

Included	17	31%
Not Included	38	69%

Of the 55 participating agencies, 17 agencies (31%) included victims in their mission statement. Thirty-eight (69%) agencies did not mention crime victims in their mission statements.

Discussion

Imagine doing business with a service provider who during your interaction makes it obvious that you, the consumer, are not their top priority. This situation arises thousands of times every day throughout the United States for crime victims. Crimes involving violence or the loss of property affect millions of people each year, however just a small percentage of these individuals and family members obtain the services they need to manage the victimization. These individuals, the principal “consumers” of services provided by law enforcement, frequently have no direction or assistance provided to them and involuntarily gets caught up in a system that is complex and that directs the majority of its resources toward the offenders.

With the crime victim being referred to as the consumer of the law enforcement agency, it was interesting to note that only 31 percent of the responding agencies mentioned a commitment of service to crime victims in their mission statement.

The hypothesis was proven true. Every agency has a protocol for handling calls and victims but only twenty-two percent of the responding agencies had a victim service program in house. The other seventy-eight percent dealt with victims in a variety of ways. Twenty-eight percent of the responding agencies that did not have a victim services program referred their crime victims to their local State Attorney’s Office (SAO). According to the Brevard County State Attorney’s Office Domestic Violence Division Chief, the victim advocates at the SAO only work with victims of felonies whose cases are being prosecuted. When you look at the crime statistics and realize the probability of being victimized and consider how many misdemeanor crimes occur and the minimal likelihood that the felony case will be prosecuted, you realize that the majority of the crime victims referred to the SAO will not qualify for services.

Other referral options utilized were the local Sheriff’s Office advocates and non-profit agencies while the remaining agencies made no referral for outside services. With no additional follow-up there is no way to tell the level of service, if any, these victims received from these other agencies.

On a positive note, of the 43 agencies that had no formal services for victims, eighty-six percent were interested in establishing and implementing a program if funding was available. With the availability of VOCA funds, most interested agencies should be able to implement some type of formal service for their crime victims.

A reassessment of basic law enforcement priorities would provide a perfect opportunity for change, thereby creating a focus for the future, victim-oriented policing.

Recommendations

This research clearly identified a gap in services provided to crime victims within the State of Florida. With the obvious benefits for both the law enforcement agency and the victim of crime, it would be beneficial for all law enforcement agencies to be familiar with funding options and implementation strategies.

All law enforcement agencies should familiarize themselves with Victim of Crime Act program. The Florida Attorney General's Office could promote and market the availability of funds to the law enforcement agencies currently not receiving funds. Officers should realize the impact a first response has on the victim and consider that when responding to calls for service. Any agency interested in implementing a victim services unit may contact the Palm Bay Police Department for assistance.

Dana Packard has been with the Palm Bay Police Department since 1998. She worked as a Victim Advocate, Supervisor of the Domestic Violence Unit and currently serves as the Community Services Division Manager. Dana has a bachelor's degree in Psychology with a minor in English from Rollins College.

References

- Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved July 6, 2007 from the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs website:
<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/cvictgen.htm>
- California Attorney General's Crime and Violence Prevention Center website retrieved on July 6, 2007: Community Oriented Policing Definition;
<http://safestate.org/index.cfm?navID=7>
- Marans, S., Adnopoz, J., Berkman, M., Esserman, D., MacDonald, D., Nagler, S., Randall, R., Schaefer, M., & Wearing, M. (1995). *The Police-mental health partnership: A community-based response to urban violence*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Parker, S.G. (2001, March). Establishing victim services within a law enforcement agency: The Austin experience. *The U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Victims of Crime website; OVC Bulletin* retrieved from:
http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc/publications/bulletins/evs_3_2001/welcome.html

Reed, K. (2007, August 5). Helping crime victims heal. *Orlando Sentinel*. p. B3.

Roberts, A. R., & Kurst-Swanger, K. (2002). Police responses to battered women: Past, present, and future. In A. R. Roberts (Ed.), *Handbook of Domestic Violence Intervention Strategies: Policies, Programs, and Legal Remedies*. London: Oxford University Press.

Turman, K.M. (2006). The FBI experience: Bringing victim assistance into a law enforcement agency. *National Center for Victims of Crime Networks, Summer/Fall*, Retrieved April 14, 2006, from <http://www.ncvc.org/ncvc/AGP.Net/Components/documentViewer/Download.aspx?DocumentID=41306>

Appendix A

Victim Services Survey

1. Does your agency mission statement include a commitment to victims of crime?

_____ yes _____ no

2. Do you currently have a victim services program within your agency?

_____ yes _____ no
(if yes, proceed to question 5)

3. Have you ever had a victim services program within your agency?

_____ yes _____ no

If yes, what happened to the program?

4. Where do you refer victims of crime for assistance?

5. Does your program receive Victim of Crime Act (VOCA) funds?

_____ yes _____ no
(if yes, the survey is complete)

6. Are you familiar with VOCA funding?

_____ yes _____ no

7. If funding were available, would you be interested in implementing a victim services program within your agency?

_____ yes _____ no