

Understanding the 2013 Victim Services Needs Assessment Recommendations, Clarification and Next Steps

In 2012, the PA Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD) selected the Pennsylvania State University's Center for Survey Research (CSR) to undertake the task of conducting a needs assessment to develop an understanding of unmet needs and service gaps for victims of crime in Pennsylvania. The Access To Services Subcommittee (ATS) of PCCD's Victim Services Advisory Committee served as the advisory group to this needs assessment.

Emergent Research

The Needs Assessment of Pennsylvania's Victim Community (Needs Assessment) should be considered emergent research. In other words, it should be viewed as an initial attempt to construct an understanding of a complex problem which few have attempted to study. The needs of victims of crime are not uniform, nor is there a standard reaction to being criminally victimized. The value of the Needs Assessment lies in its ability to begin adding shapes and colors to an enormous blank canvas. A second phase of research could continue to add to this canvas. Phase Two would seek data to answer more specific questions; for example, what are the needs of specific types of crime victims or why are crime victims of certain types of crime not seeking services? Phase Two data collection would be gathered through qualitative research such as focus groups and in-depth interviews.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE VICTIMS SERVICES ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The Pennsylvania State University's Center for Survey Research (CSR) developed recommendations as part of their summary report of findings for the Needs Assessment. Their recommendations are focused specifically on the data gathered and the analysis of that data. The Access To Services Subcommittee then adapted some of these recommendations to incorporate next steps to be taken and identify Phase Two priorities. The following updated recommendations mirror the order of recommendations that appear in the Summary Report of Findings (Volume VII) of the full needs assessment; the ordering is not reflective of their priority.

1. Recommendation: The needs assessment identified that many victims experience multiple crimes. In addition, crime victims do not have the same needs or access services in the same way or with the same frequency. To address the varying needs of crime victims, the Access To Services Subcommittee should develop an action plan that identifies core services to meet those needs specific to type of victimization and victim population, and provide this information to all counties in Pennsylvania for identification of gaps and services.

2. Recommendation: Attention should be directed toward understanding the service needs of property crime victims and violent crime victims, as victims of these crimes less

frequently use victim service organizations (VSOs). It is important to understand why this occurs. Is this due to: their needs being met otherwise; they require services that are not currently offered by VSOs; or they were not aware that services were available?

3. **Recommendation:** Overall, victims expressed satisfaction with services received from formal sources (formal sources included law enforcement, district attorney's offices, victim service organizations, medical services, counseling agencies, and related entities). More work will need to be done to bring interpersonal crime victims' levels of satisfaction with law enforcement and district attorney services into parity with other formal sources of services.

4. **Recommendation:** Many victims are not aware of services or where to access services. Traditional public awareness campaigns are not always effective because they are time-limited and are broadly focused. To address this issue, VSOs should build outreach efforts that provide: the right information about services to the right person at the right time. It is important to note that this would require resources to implement and to support the anticipated increased demand for services.

5. **Recommendation:** According to victims and agency administrators, victims need services that address basic areas of well-being, such as access to affordable housing, meeting economic needs, transportation support, adequate medical care, and counseling. To determine the appropriate next steps in this area, two things must first happen: 1) further data analysis, to determine trends in needs compared to type of victimization; and 2) a discussion about the scope of services that can be supported through current or future funding streams, and who is best to provide such services which complement traditional victim services.

6. **Recommendation:** Despite VSOs offering Victims Compensation assistance, many victims are not using the service and some identify compensation as an unmet need. PCCD and local VSOs should work together to identify and overcome barriers to accessing and/or receiving compensation.

7. **Recommendation:** Pennsylvania has a diverse population that emphasizes the need for training of VSOs to increase competency for the provision of culturally competent services. Further data analysis is needed related to geography, gender, gender identity, age, ethnicity, race, disability, sexual orientation, and other special populations (e.g., veterans) to identify where and what type of culturally specific training is needed.

8. **Recommendation:** Victim service organizations have experienced significant funding cuts and challenges as well as staffing concerns over the past decade. In spite of this, they strive to meet the needs of the increasing numbers of diverse crime victims in their communities. Continued commitment by leadership at the local, state and federal levels to support adequate funding for services is the key to meeting the varied and complex needs of the large percentage of Pennsylvanians who are victims of crime.

9. **Recommendation:** The data from this needs assessment provided emergent research (Phase One). Phase Two is needed in order to get to deeper and broader understanding of the needs of crime victims across Pennsylvania. This data would be best gathered through additional research, including qualitative research.

CLARIFICATION

Sampling

Children

Surveying individuals under the age of 18 creates unique challenges for researchers, particularly in gaining informed consent to participate, gauging participant capacity to answer survey questions as well as ensuring the safety of the child participant. For these reasons, the needs assessment design did not include a component for children to be surveyed. The scope of the surveys to victims captured only crime experiences that occurred during the respondent's adult life. The authors of this report understand that many clients seen by VSOs include children and teens who have been victimized as well as adult survivors of child sexual assault. The ATS acknowledges that lack of information pertaining to child victimization is a gap in Phase I of the Needs Assessment that would be addressed in Phase Two.

Demographics

Much of the data gathered from victims for this needs assessment came from a telephone survey from the community at large. The CSR randomly generated the telephone numbers it used to reach participants from a bank of land line telephone numbers. In addition, the survey design did not allow for respondents who did not speak English. As a result, respondents to the survey tended to be white, older, have an above-average income, be victims of property crime – and did not fully represent PA's demographics. The absence of cellular phone numbers in the calling pattern used by the researchers could have skewed the data. The ATS acknowledges that more representation is needed from younger people and individuals of varying socio-economic and racial/ethnic classifications.

Focus Group Size

It is challenging to identify victims of crime who are willing to talk about their victimization experience and/or experience with VSOs. The CSR and ATS worked with the victim service programs in the field to solicit participants for seven focus groups based on type of crime. A total of 22 victims participated in the focus groups. The data gathered from these focus groups may be skewed towards the views of people who sought victim services, because the participants' entrée to the focus groups was the result of their connection to a VSO. Additionally, the demographic makeup of the focus groups was much different from the demographic makeup of the respondents to the telephone survey. The number of participants per focus group (an average of 3 per group) was lower than had been anticipated. The data from the focus groups should be viewed in this context.

Property Crimes

Property crime is significantly more prevalent in PA than violent or interpersonal violent crime. The nature of crimes (property versus violent/interpersonal violent) are

vastly different from one another, with notable differences in impact and on what victims do and need post victimization. The survey design did not allow for an analysis of these differences. Therefore, the data gathered through the needs assessment appears to put a disproportionate emphasis on property crimes. In addition, the report states that property crime victims are currently an underserved population in Pennsylvania. However, a review of the data does not directly support this conclusion. The ATS acknowledges that the needs assessment design did not allow for deeper analysis of this issue.

Classification of Burglary

The CSR classified burglary as a property crime when collecting data for the needs assessment. This occurred because the classification system upon which Pennsylvania's Uniform Crime Report data is based does so. This classification conflicts with the Pennsylvania Crime Victims Act. Pennsylvania's Crime Victims Act includes burglary with personal injury crimes. The ATS acknowledges the inconsistency between the classification of the crime of burglary used during the data-gathering phase of the needs assessment and the classification of burglary with personal injury crimes in the Crime Victims Act.

Wording of Questions

Although the ATS worked closely with the CSR to craft questions that were clear and unambiguous, there were still instances in which the terminology used was open for interpretation by survey respondents. For example, a question asked about "educative/options counseling" which could mean different things depending upon the background and experience of the respondent. Additionally, there were a small number of instances in which wording was problematic. An example of this was "supportive peer counseling for children." The ATS acknowledges that the wording of certain questions could have skewed the responses given by the respondents.

Nuances of Service Provision

There is diversity in the services provided under the broad umbrella of victim services. Specifically, there are procedural services that mostly occur within the sphere of the criminal and juvenile justice systems. Examples of procedural services, which typically occur at systems-based programs, include providing crime victims with notifications of court dates, assisting victims with victim impact statements and crime victim compensation claims, and orienting victims to the justice system. There are also direct services, the majority of which occur at community-based VSOs. Examples of direct services include support groups, therapy, shelter and 24 hour hotline services. There is no discussion in the needs assessment of the services provided by criminal/juvenile justice system-based agencies and community-based VSOs – how they complement one another, how they differ or how the services are actually provided to victims. The needs assessment design also did not provide for a discussion of the role each type of VSO may have in addressing a victim's needs. The ATS is uncertain whether the lack of this information has an impact on any of the analysis contained in the needs assessment.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

The results of this needs assessment must be considered emergent research. The results give Pennsylvania the initial pieces of information needed to shape its next phase of inquiry and refine its strategies for further research on the status of victims' services in Pennsylvania. Readers should exercise caution against making broad generalizations about the state of victim services in Pennsylvania based solely on this report (for example, a reader should not conclude that 83% of victims had their needs met from the data that 17% of victims had unmet needs). Additionally, while this first phase of the needs assessment provided valuable data, the information contained in this report of emergent research should not be used as a basis for funding decisions.

The ATS recommends a second phase of this needs assessment. Phase Two would: delve more deeply into questions arising from the data, address any shortcomings in sampling in the initial phase and require more extensive use of qualitative analysis methods. It is only through the support of additional research that the full range of needs of Pennsylvania's crime victims will be identified.