

## **Chapter 4: Crime Victims Helpline**

### **4.0 Introduction**

This chapter examines the responses and issues arising in relation to the Crime Victims Helpline (CVH). The Helpline was established in 2005 and aims to provide support, information, and empowerment for victims of crime. It offers support and an initial contact point for victims and their families.<sup>1</sup> The Helpline also make referrals to general and specialised support services, provides information regarding the criminal justice system, support services locally and nationally and liaises with other organisations. The Helpline is examined separately in this report from other support organisations because it plays a different role within the victims' support network. Whilst it does provide specific services as part of its remit, its primary role is the provision of information about services available to victims of crime and about the rights that victims may have. As part of this it undertakes a very significant function in referring victims onto independent specialised assistance. In this way it plays an important role as an entry point for many victims into the network of support services available to them. The Helpline is therefore a key “front line service” in relation to victims and it would be expected that its existence and role in this context would be well recognised and understood.

### **4.1 Knowledge of the Crime Victims Helpline**

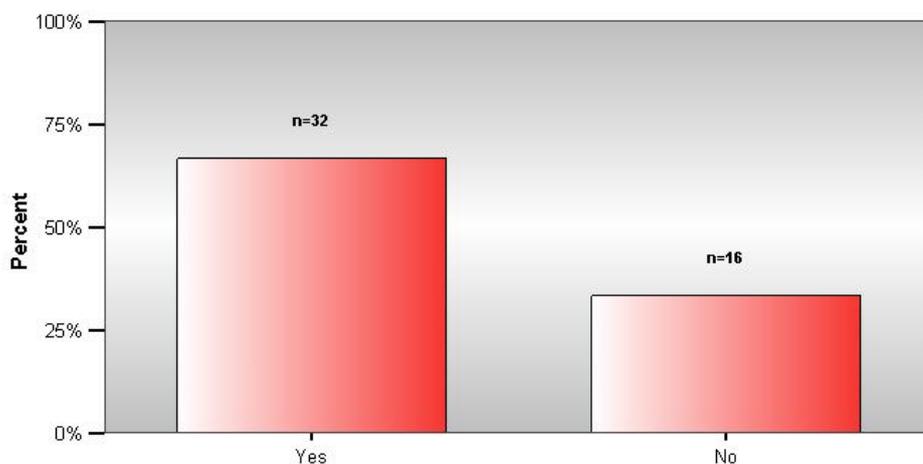
In order to ascertain the general level of knowledge about the Crime Victims Helpline, both amongst the public and professionals working with potential victims, the research included questions about the Helpline in both the Street Survey and Community Awareness Survey.

As part of the Street Survey people were asked the question: “Have you ever heard of the National Crime Victims Helpline?” Of the 48 people responding, 32 (66.7%) confirmed that they had heard of the Helpline.

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<sup>1</sup> The Crime Victims Helpline answered 2,413 calls in 2008. There are also a number of other helplines not supported by the Commission for the Support of Victims of Crime. The Women's Aid National Freephone Helpline, for example, answered 10,140 calls in 2008. Similarly, the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre helpline dealt with 12,741 calls in the same year. Many victims therefore approach these helplines directly rather than contacting the more general service provided by the Crime Victims Helpline. There are also a number of more specialised helplines such as Children at Risk in Ireland (CARI), the Irish Tourist Assistance Service and Missing in Ireland Support Services.

**Fig 4.1: Awareness of the National Crime Victims Helpline (Street Survey)**



As part of the Community Awareness Survey, 23 representatives of professions and groups within the community were asked if they were aware of any organisations providing support to victims of crime. This question sought to identify the level of awareness of victim support groups among key community based actors to whom victims may turn for help or advice. It is these groups/people who will be sources of information on victims' support, particularly for those victims who choose not to report crime to the Gardaí. As a result of this question the Community Awareness Survey revealed that just 2 participants, both working in Citizen's Information Centres, could name *unprompted* the Helpline. One of these participants went on to confirm that s/he had experience referring victims to the Helpline.

The Community Awareness Survey then went on to ask participants if they were aware of a number of named organisations. Over two thirds, 17 of 23, recognised the Helpline when prompted in this question.

These responses indicate that when prompted the majority of the respondents to the community awareness survey recalled the existence of the Helpline but only a minority were fully knowledgeable about it. This low level of awareness among key

professional/community actors is significant given the potential role which these individuals play in providing an effective referral and information service.

As will be discussed further in Chapter 5 below, the level of knowledge/recognition in relation to almost all support organisations is problematic. Many respondents use the terms “victim support” or “victims support group” when asked about their knowledge of victims organisations without a clear sense of whether they are using this term generically or specifically.

However, the low level of recognition of the Helpline highlights the fact that information about the Helpline should be directed to professionals and key community workers who act as an important access point to information for victims. This targeting of information is crucial if the Helpline is to operate to its full potential in providing an effective referral and information service.

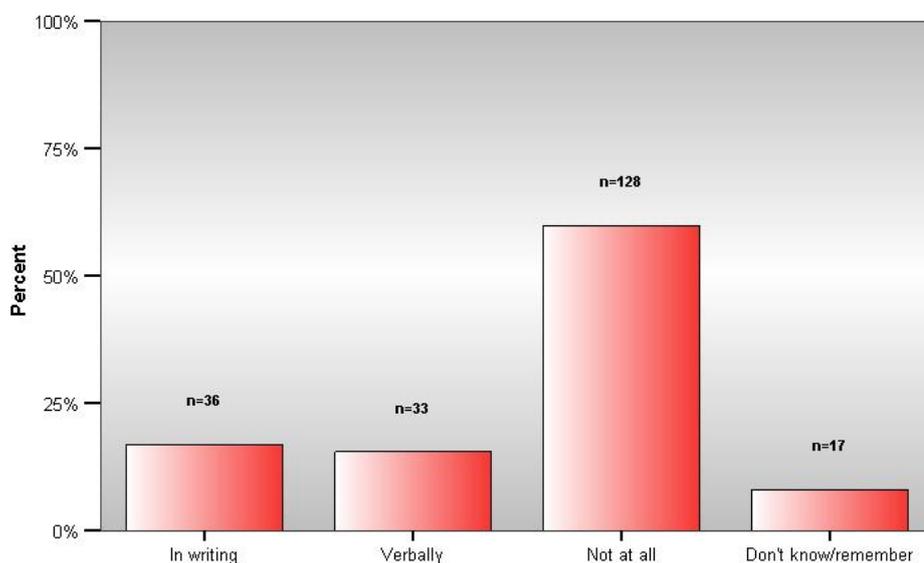
#### **4.2 Referral to Crime Victims Helpline by Gardaí**

As was noted in chapter 3, of those who reported the crime and answered this question validly (214 respondents), 16.8% of respondents (36 respondents) received a number for the Helpline in writing from the Gardaí; 15.4% of respondents (33) received it verbally; 59.8% did not receive it at all (128) and 7.9% (17) did not know or could not remember.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The failure by the Gardaí to pass on the number of the Crime Victims Helpline to victims may, in part, explain the limited use made by victims of the Helpline. Only 31.4% of survey respondents indicated that they had contacted the Helpline. The large numbers of victims using more specific helplines may also partially explain the relatively low numbers using the Crime Victims Helpline.

**Fig 4.2 Crime Victims Helpline – details received from the Gardaí (Victim Postal Survey)**



The interviewees who received the number from the Gardaí emphasised its importance. Barry, a victim of assault, was given the phone number to the Helpline by a Garda.

I asked the guard if there was anything I could do...a wee brochure or something, so I contacted them [Crime Victims Helpline] around four to six weeks after it happened...I contacted them about two or three times...They sent out volunteers to me who supported me through the whole thing, they were very nice...They came out once, I asked them about counselling...They asked me how I was...They'd give me some names...It was good to speak to somebody...The victim support was good, out of the blue every now and then they'll ring up to ask how things were going...

**(Barry)**

Donal received written information about the Helpline from the Gardaí after a burglary.

I think the guards gave me a number to ring and they answered straight away...They were very sympathetic and sent me literature...

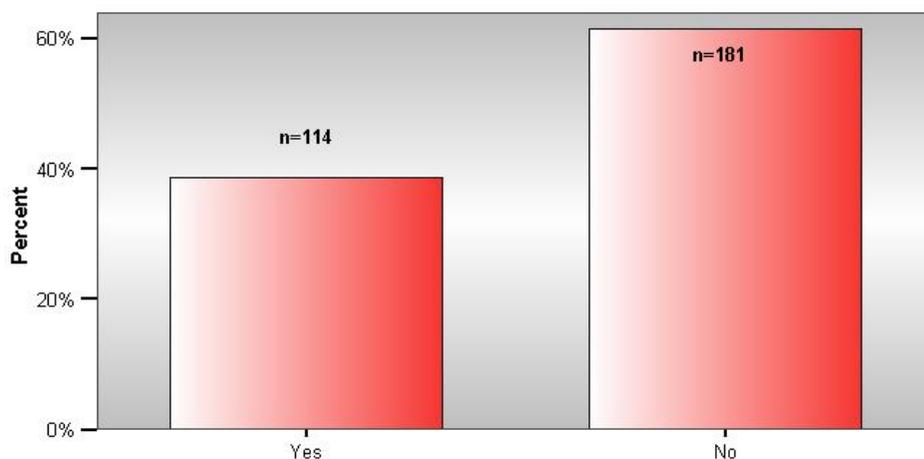
**(Donal)**

Significantly, more than half of the respondents who validly answered the question reported that they had not been given the number by the Gardaí. In the interviews, many victims outlined how they discovered this information. This material is outlined in section 4.3 of this chapter.

### 4.3 Contacting the Crime Victims Helpline

In order to establish the level of use of the Helpline and experience of that use amongst victims of crime, the victim survey asked a number of specific questions. When asked if they had contacted the Helpline, 38.6% of respondents (114) who replied to this question said they had, indicating that just over a third of respondents had utilised the Helpline.

**Fig 4.3: Contact with the Crime Victims Helpline (Victim Postal Survey)**



This means that the majority of respondents (61.4%) had accessed the services of support organisations other than through the Helpline. When those who contacted the Helpline were asked to identify how they had become aware of it, the Gardaí emerged as the most common source of information with 35.8 % (38) identifying them.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> 69 respondents were provided with a contact number for the Crime Victims Helpline by the Gardaí. 40 of these made contact with the Helpline.

Family and friends (18.9 % or 20 respondents) and the phone directory (9.4% 10 respondents) were also identified as common sources of information about the Helpline. Other sources of information identified by respondents included victims support organisations, criminal justice organisations and newspapers.

Insights into experiences of accessing information about the Helpline were provided in both the Community Awareness Survey and individual interviews with victims. One respondent to the Community Awareness Survey who knew of the Helpline, observed that s/he had “struggled to find the number to the Crime Victims Helpline when [s/he] googled for crime victim support.”

In the interviews with victims, some interviewees reported that they had become aware of the Helpline themselves and subsequently sought out contact information. For example, Phil, a victim of an assault on the street, rang the Crime Victims Helpline a couple of months after the incident. It was a friend who was concerned about him who gave him the number and asked him to ring.

A friend in college told me about it...I wasn't going to do anything about it... but I got to a stage where I got a bit upset so she got on to the number...so I was talking to the person who was asking how I felt, and I was not too bad. I was more really embarrassed what had happened to me, because it was basically my fault for being drunk, but it wasn't my fault for nearly losing my eye and getting a couple of stitches and being picked on because you're drunk.

**(Phil)**

Phil felt supported by talking to someone who listened and who also rang him back later to check on him and see how he was coping. Phil's assailants were never arrested and he did not hear anything back from Gardaí after giving his statement, so the support from the Helpline was the only follow up he received.

John, a victim of sexual assault, found the number to the Crime Victims Helpline on the Internet.

The Internet...five months later...I rang but I also went to the Citizens [Information Office] you know, for the free legal advice, after I contacted the help line...I had no confidence in them [the Gardaí] anymore...She [woman in Crime Victims Helpline] put me in touch with a clinic with solicitors...All the other bits given to me to go forward were given to me by the Crime Victims

Helpline...[She was] extremely pleasant and friendly and conscious of what was happening and what I was going through and I did not find her patronizing and condescending...which I found the guards were.

**(John)**

Another victim of assault, Ted, got the number to the Helpline in a booklet about going to court, which he found in his local library. He decided to ring for support as he was dreading the court experience:

I was in the library one day and I saw these books in the library...but I've never seen them advertised in the papers or ads on television or anything like that...It's pretty unnerving [going to court]...so that's why I got in touch with the victim support people...the Crime Victims Helpline...I got in touch with them a couple of days before hand...I rang them twice...gave a history of the case...I was quite pleased with them...that they acted so quickly and there was people that understood what I was talking about...

**(Ted)**

Valerie, a victim of dangerous and careless driving, found the number to the Crime Victims Helpline in the same booklet as Ted. She phoned the helpline as she felt increasingly frustrated with the slow process of the criminal justice system:

Two years [after the crime]...I phoned...They had an answering machine and I left a message with my details...It might have been two days later when the lady phoned me back...I had felt that there must have been someone else somewhere else who was experiencing the same thing, so I had asked Gardaí, in relation to the process, if they could put me in contact with a support group. I didn't receive this information directly, but when I went to make another statement in my local Garda station I picked up that little purple booklet with information about the DPP and attending court as a witness and it [the number to Crime Victims Helpline] was in the back of that...It was just lying in the waiting area and I just said if anyone would have told me a year ago this book was available I would have been so appreciative...

**(Valerie)**

Harriet, who had her passport stolen, found the number of the Crime Victims Helpline in the phone book.

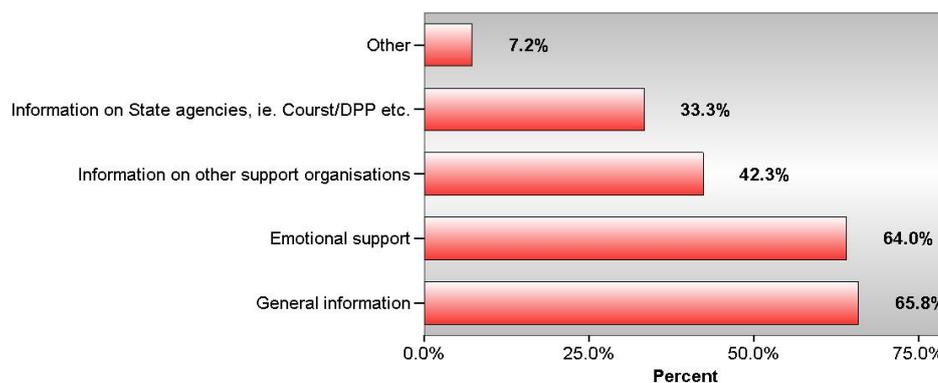
It was after about a week, or two weeks later, I actually got the number from the phone book... I had heard people talking about it...I just looked up crime in yellow pages...They answered straight away, she was very helpful, the lady I was speaking to was fantastic really.

Overall the data collected regarding awareness of, and the provision of, information about the Crime Victims Helpline indicates that victims are not systematically receiving or locating such information.

#### 4.4 Services Utilised

Having established how common it was for victims to contact the Helpline, the victim questionnaire went on to ask those who had been in contact with the Helpline which services they had accessed. Respondents of the Victims Survey were asked to indicate which of a list of possible Helpline services they had availed of. The services listed included information, emotional support, and issues regarding referrals. Well over half (65.8%) of those who responded stated that they had availed of the Helpline for the purpose of “general information”, whilst a similar number (64%) said they used the Helpline for “emotional support”. Nearly half of respondents had availed of information about other support organisations (42.3%) and just over a third had availed of information about state agencies (33.3%).

**Fig 4.4: Services Utilised (Victim Postal Survey)**



The data collected from the interviews with victims revealed that in fact many respondents accessed multiple services offered by the Helpline. The accounts

provided by some of the victims suggest that the Helpline provides a very useful and effective service which acts as an entry point allowing victims to access not only information but also ongoing emotional support and reassurance

I think the guards gave me a number to ring and they answered straight away...They were very sympathetic and sent me literature...If we need counselling I could get in touch with them...They offered the counselling...

**(Donal)**

Donal highlighted the fact that he felt supported by the knowledge that there was somebody that he could phone and talk to and that he knew he could ring this person anytime. Barry, a victim of assault, also commented that "... it was good to speak to somebody..."

The research clearly highlighted how significant it was for victims to have access to a person who was prepared to listen to their fears and concerns, and offer reassurance. The victim responses both in the postal survey and the interviews repeatedly reiterated how important it was to be able to contact someone and have their concerns acknowledged in a sympathetic way. This is indicated by the fact that when answering the question about which Helpline services they used, 64% of those responding indicated that they had sought out emotional support, nearly as many as those who had been seeking information (65.8%).

However, for some victims, a telephone conversation is insufficient to deal with their needs; more direct and personal contact is needed. Kylie, a victim of domestic violence experienced this:

My mother and father [rang the Crime Victims Helpline] and the phone was passed on to me...I just couldn't focus on anything. I was in a lot of pain and I was extremely scared...I didn't want to admit that it was real even though the whole injuries did say, look it did happen...A couple of months going through that...It just didn't register with me straight away...The woman wanted to talk to me...She wanted me to realise that there was support out there and that it wasn't my fault...It was helpful initially but when I was off the phone I was feeling just as bad...

**(Kylie)**

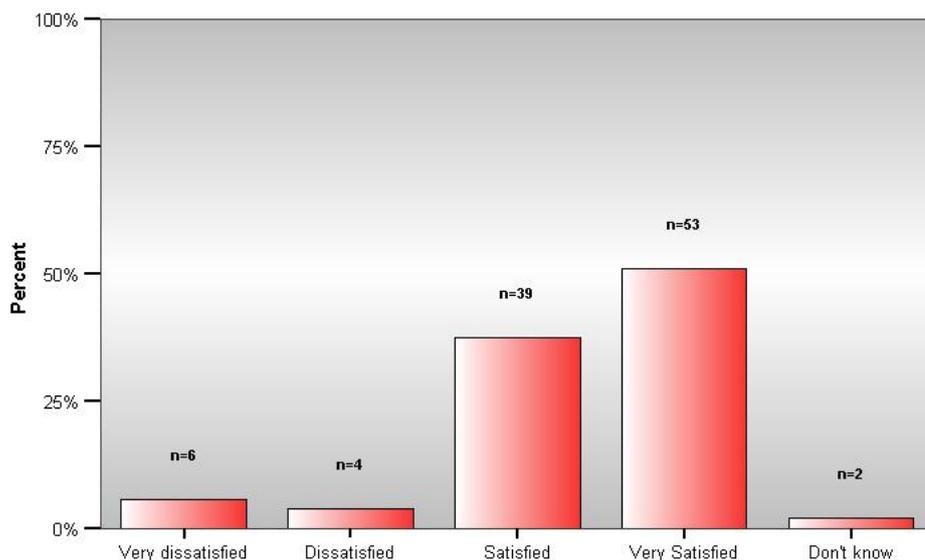
This emphasises the value of referrals made by the Helpline. Initial contact is important not only in reassuring victims but also in highlighting the services that are

available. When victims first make contact with the Helpline they are often in a traumatised state and not able to make decisions at this early stage. Follow-up from support workers and an effective referral process is therefore important.

#### 4.5 Satisfaction with the Crime Victims Helpline

In order to assess the level of satisfaction of those using the Crime Victims Helpline services, the victim survey asked: “How satisfied were you with the response from the Helpline?” Overall there was a very high satisfaction rating. Fifty three respondents out of the 104 valid responses (51%) stated that they were very satisfied and another 39 (37.5%) indicated that they were satisfied. Four respondents (3.8%) stated that they were dissatisfied and a further 6 (5.8%) stated that they were very dissatisfied.

**Fig 4.5: Satisfaction with the Crime Victims Helpline (Victim Postal Survey)**



Interviewees provided a clearer picture of what the Helpline was doing well and why there was such a high satisfaction rating with the services they provided. Aspects of

the Helpline service which victims appreciated included promptness in answering the phone and the helpfulness and understanding displayed by staff. Harriet, a victim of theft, stated: “They answered straight away, she was very helpful, the lady I was speaking to was fantastic really...[T]hey were very nice...”.

The Helpline’s efficiency in providing much needed information was praised by many interviewees who reported that they were seeking very specific types of information. John, a victim of sexual assault, was looking for contact details for a solicitors’ firm:

I knew I was looking for a list...and that’s what I got...I needed to get legal advice. It was mainly to speak to somebody from a legal perspective...I had no confidence in them [Gardaí] anymore...She [woman in Crime Victims Helpline] put me in touch with a clinic with solicitors...All the other bits given to me to go forward were given to me by the Crime Victims Helpline...

**(John)**

The empathic approach of the support staff was also highlighted as was their helpfulness, understanding and lack of patronising tone:

[She was] extremely pleasant and friendly and conscious of what was happening and what I was going through and I did not find her patronising and condescending...which I found the guards were...I felt that her concern was coming from her heart...It was like a vocation for that woman that she was there to do a job...and she genuinely wanted to help...

**(John)**

The accessibility of the organisation was very important for many interviewees, as was the fact that the Helpline would call back over time to follow up on their clients and check on their progress and needs:

The victim support was good, out of the blue every now and then they’ll ring up to ask how things were going...

**(Barry)**

Victims of what might be considered less serious crimes such as burglary and theft also noted that whilst they felt their cases were not considered important by the authorities the Helpline took their needs seriously.

One issue that emerges from interviews was that of referral from the Helpline to other organisations and the related issue of communication. Two interviewees who were very pleased with their overall experience of the Helpline received follow up visits and court accompaniment from volunteers, but they were unable to identify which organisation had provided those services. Barry contacted the Helpline a month or so after the crime occurred.

They sent out volunteers to me who supported me through the whole thing, they were very nice...They came out once, I asked them about counselling...They asked me how I was...They'd give me some names...It was good to speak to somebody...

**(Barry)**

However, when asked who the volunteers were or which organisation they came from, he was unable to say with certainty, although he was grateful for what they did for him.

In Ted's case he enquired about court accompaniment which was provided to him, but similar to Barry, he did not know where the woman providing the court accompaniment service came from or what organisation she represented.

I don't know who it was, just a woman came along that particular day. She wasn't a legal person, she was an older person like myself. She was good...very helpful on that particular day.

**(Ted)**

It is perhaps not surprising that victims may not be able to recall all information regarding the support they receive. At stressful times such as attendance at court the issue of who is supporting you will be less important than the fact that someone is there to help. However, this in itself reinforces the need for all organisations and their support staff to systematically provide contact details to their clients, not least to ensure continuity of support by allowing follow up to be achieved should the victim need further assistance.

The role of the Helpline is significant as an entry point into the victims' support system. However, it cannot be regarded as the only system of support, or even the

main system. When asked, victims were generally happy with the service they received from the Helpline, but regarded it as only part of the response to their needs:

“Damaged broken people need more than a helpline. They need a safe place to recover and an assurance that a real effort is being made to round up criminals.”

**(Victim of burglary)**

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

Access to information about victim support services is regarded as a minimum right under the European Commission’s *Framework Decision on the Standing of Victims in Criminal Proceedings*. The Crime Victims Helpline is a key national organisation in the system of service provision for victims in Ireland but it is clear from this research that the provision of information to victims about the Helpline is currently inadequate. The findings also show that when victims do make contact with the Crime Victims Helpline the quality of support and information they receive is for the most part very satisfactory.

The general level of awareness about the Crime Victims Helpline among those who participated in the community awareness survey is a cause for concern. Only two thirds of key professionals/members of community group surveyed had heard of the Helpline when prompted. Given that the Crime Victims Helpline is viewed as a key access point for victims of crime to wider support services, it would be better if there was a far higher degree of awareness of the Helpline than this research revealed.

The lack of knowledge and understanding about the Crime Victims Helpline was reinforced by comments made by respondents to the Community Awareness Survey:

Victim support is so fragmented, there is such a multiplicity and [it is so] incoherent. If there was one common access, a portal, such as a phone line/website – one common website with links to various types of services. This is what is missing – a well recognised portal with links.

**(Medical Doctor)**

And:

I like the notion of a One-Stop-Shop – an entry point for all victims at a local level.

**(Social Worker)**

The apparent lack of awareness of the existence and role of the Crime Victims Helpline among relevant professionals and community groups is likely to reduce their ability to offer effective support to victims. This lack of awareness also extends to members of the public. Even when prompted, 1 in 3 street survey respondents were unaware of the Helpline.

In terms of how victims became aware of the Crime Victims Helpline, leaflets, advertisements and the internet did not score highly as sources of information. This suggests that the promotional materials used by the Helpline may not be particularly effective in directly reaching crime victims. Victims reported gaining access to the organisation via a variety of routes, but mostly via personal referrals from the Gardaí or family/friends.

When the Crime Victims Helpline is accessed by victims they usually avail of a variety of supports. The importance of victims receiving a sympathetic hearing and gaining support from Helpline staff cannot be overestimated. However, the very positive role currently played by the Crime Victims Helpline needs to be reinforced by effective communication between itself and those organisations to which it refers clients. The fact that some interviewees in this research were unsure who had assisted them after contacting the Crime Victims Helpline is troubling in the context of their situation. It is important that victims are provided with written details of the name of the individual and organisation who is providing support and those who provide support should have appropriate identification. Organisations need to establish and implement systematically applied protocols in this regard.

