

Chapter 5: Support Organisations

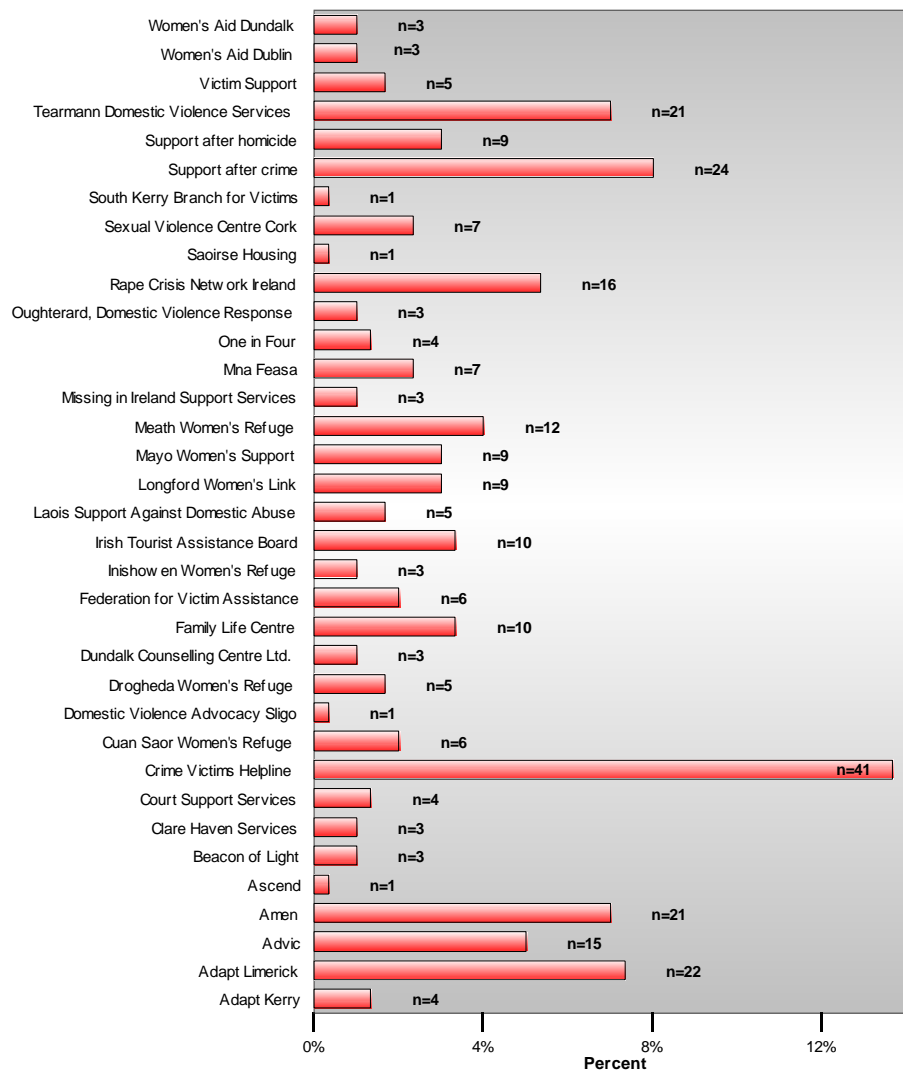
5.0 Introduction

Having considered victims' access to, and satisfaction with, the Crime Victims Helpline in the previous chapter, this chapter will examine similar themes in relation to the various support organisations currently involved in providing more direct and specialised services to victims of crime.

A total of 35 organisations were represented among the 303 questionnaires returned in the victim survey. The largest number of questionnaires came from the Crime Victims Helpline (41) followed by Support After Crime, based in Cork, with a total of 24 questionnaires completed and returned. Both of these organisations deal with victims generally. Victims who obtained assistance from 3 domestic violence organisations accounted for the next largest number of questionnaires. Twenty two questionnaires were received from victims who had used the services of Adapt (Limerick), while 21 questionnaires were received from victims who used Tearmann Domestic Violence Services, based in Monaghan. A similar number of questionnaires were returned from victims who received assistance from Amen, a group based in Cavan for men who suffer domestic abuse.

Sixteen questionnaires were returned by victims supported by the Rape Crisis Network and victims of murder/manslaughter who were assisted by AdVIC (Advocates for Victims of Homicide in Ireland) returned 15 questionnaires, while 9 questionnaires came from victims who were helped by Support After Homicide. The remaining number of completed questionnaires came from victims supported by a diversity of support groups, the majority being domestic violence groups for women.

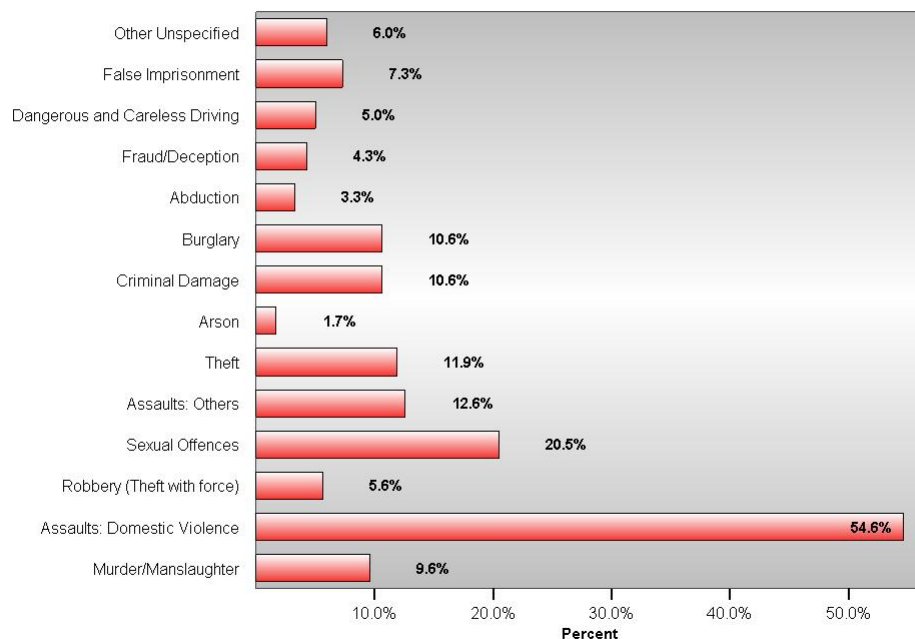
Fig 5.1: Breakdown of Survey Participants by Support Organisation (Victim Postal Survey)



As previously noted in the methodology chapter, the breakdown of respondents in relation to type of crime experienced revealed that the greatest number of respondents (165), representing 54.6% of total valid responses, reported being victims of domestic violence. The next most common type of crime experienced by respondents was sexual offences, which accounted for 20.5 % of total valid responses. Figure 5.2 indicates the level of respondents who experienced specific offences listed on the questionnaire. These included assault (12.6%), theft (11.9%), burglary (10.6%),

criminal damage (10.6%), murder/manslaughter (9.6%), and robbery (5.6%). Almost seven in ten respondents reported experiencing just one crime, with a further 15.5% reporting that they had experienced two crimes, 8.2% three crimes and the remainder experiencing four, five, six or ten crimes each.

Fig 5.2: Types of Crime experienced by Respondents (Victim Postal Survey)



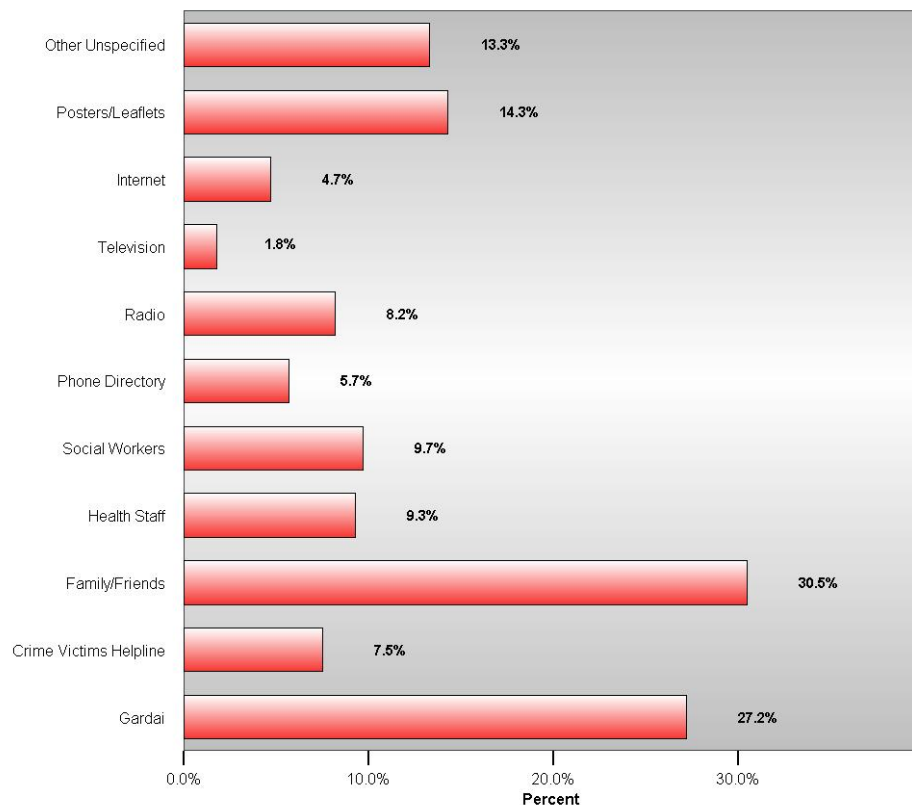
5.1 Hearing About the Organisation

In order to ascertain how victims accessed the services of victim support organisations, the victim survey asked the question: “How did you hear about the Support Organisation you are currently receiving support from?” 279 respondents answered this question with 30.5% reporting that they had heard about the support group through family and friends. The Gardaí fulfilled this function in just over one quarter of cases (27.2%) with support organisation information materials providing another significant source (14.3%).

As discussed in chapter 4, 38.6% of respondents (114) reported that they had used the Crime Victims Helpline. Many of these respondents accessed multiple services offered by the Helpline including information on other support organisations,

emotional support, general information, and information on state agencies (Courts, DPP etc). In particular, 47 respondents noted that they availed of the Helpline for the purpose of information on other support organisations.¹ This figure suggests that the Helpline is currently operating in a limited way as an initial contact for victims as a key referral organisation. Other sources such as the internet, phone directory, radio and television were identified as information sources by only small numbers of respondents.

Fig 5.3: Methods by Which Respondents Became Aware of the Support Organisation That They Receive Support From (Victim Postal Survey)



¹ 21 respondents noted that, at the time they answered the survey questions, they were using a support organisation that they heard of from the Crime Victims Helpline.

The spread of responses in relation to how victims heard about support organisations suggest that there is no one source of information about support organisations that is systematically availed of by victims.²

The interviews with victims also highlighted difficulties in accessing such information. Victims often appear to have found contact numbers to relevant groups by chance or through word of mouth. Catherine, whose brother was murdered, cannot recall whether or not she received information from the Gardaí about any support group immediately after the crime. There was a general lack of information initially and also confusion surrounding existing victim support organisations. It was not until Catherine and her siblings were denied the right to see the Book of Evidence that Catherine began looking for support. She went to the Coroner's office on another matter and it was there she received written information about the support organisation.

The girl in there was really, really nice and she said to me: "Have you contacted [a support organisation]?" and she sent me out the [organisation's] booklet and I rang them then after the trial because we were so shocked that we could not see the Book of Evidence when we were told all along, there were so many unanswered questions...I chatted to [a support worker]...I found the booklet very helpful and factual, in practical ways, practical things you could do...You could speak to the pathologist...She also recommended that I'd go and see one of their counsellors...If I had known about them before the trial I probably would have been on to them a lot.

(Catherine)

Carol cannot recall being informed about various support groups by the Gardaí. She relied on the internet for much of her information and approached various groups for various different types of support. One particular support organisation ultimately proved to be helpful to Carol.

Initially, I didn't know what was out there. I was basically educating myself on what help was out there...I rang [one support organisation] first and they [referred me to another] and I just didn't look for anybody else because I didn't need anybody else because they answered all my needs...Regardless of what, I was assured always somebody on the phone, day or night.

(Carol)

² It should be noted that under the Victims Charter the Gardaí have committed themselves to issuing a letter to the victim, after a crime is reported, informing him or her, among other things, of the number of the National Crime Victims Helpline, and the national and regional organisations that support victims of crime.

The need for easily accessible and identifiable information about what services are available was also identified in the victim survey and interviews. As one respondent noted:

A traumatised person is not capable of looking at lists of groups and picking the one that suits. [What is needed is] a one stop shop that identifies [the] needs of [the] caller.

(Victim of criminal damage, fraud, burglary)

Confusion or controversy around groups can also have negative effects on a victim's ability or desire to access help. Catherine was critical of the general lack of information being provided to her initially and also the confusion surrounding existing victim support organisations.

In the beginning there was a lot of confusion. We might have been told about [support organisations] but we were probably not taking it in properly. Somebody told me that there were two or three groups and that there had been some sort of a split³ and I thought I'm not able for that...but I rang one of the numbers...It was very early on and everything was very raw. [The woman] mentioned to me that there was no government funding anymore and that there had been some sort of split...So that turned me off...The actual bureaucracy of the state...

(Catherine)

The uncertainty found in the interviews about the identities, roles and competing territories of the different support groups was mirrored in the Community Awareness and Street Surveys.

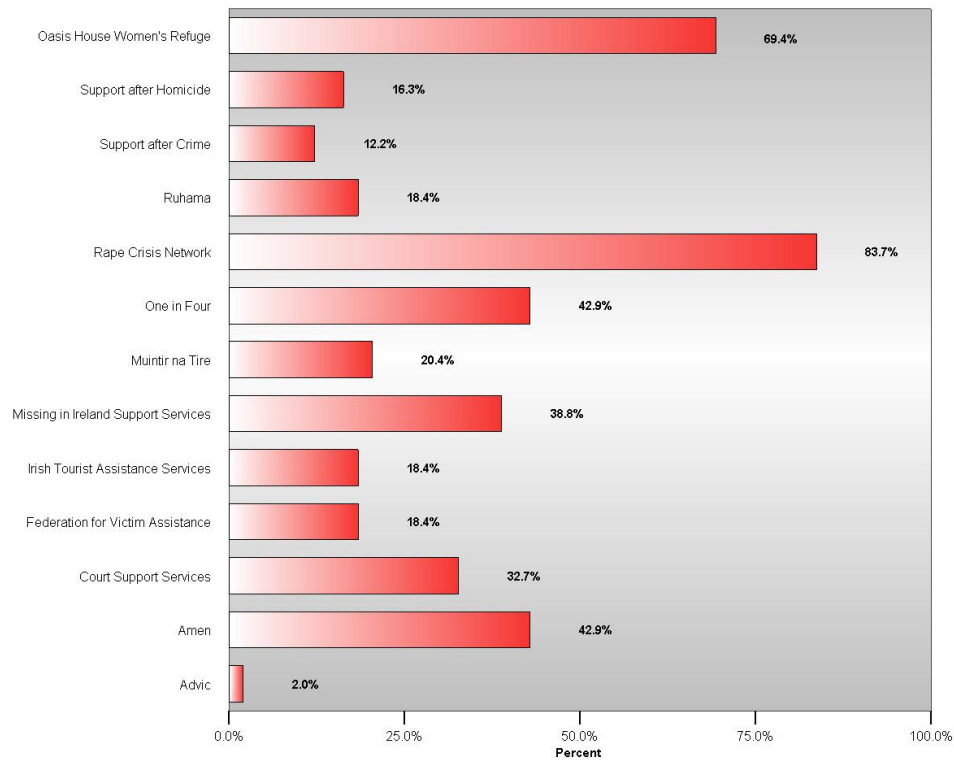
The Street Survey asked members of the public if they were aware of services available to support victims of crime. Respondents were prompted in relation to 13 organisations.⁴ The Rape Crisis Network received the highest rate of recognition (over 80%) with Oasis House Women's Refuge⁵ being the only other organisation to gain a recognition rating of over half (69.4%). Amen and One in Four both received a recognition rating of 42.9%. Around a third of respondents reported knowing of Missing in Ireland Support Services (38.8%) and Court Support Service (32.7%). All other organisations received a recognition rating of 20% or less.

³ This refers to a period around 2005.

⁴ The 13 organisations were: AdVIC, Amen, Court Support Service, Federation for Victim Assistance, Missing in Ireland Support Services, Muintir na Tíre, One in Four, Rape Crisis Network, Ruhama, Irish Tourist Assistance Service, Support after Crime, Support after Homicide, and Oasis House Women's refuge.

⁵ Note that this support organisation is specific to Waterford city, the location of the Street Survey.

Fig 5.4: Awareness of Support Organisations (Street Survey)



The data from the Street Survey therefore shows that even when prompted many organisations had a low recognition rate indicating a poor level of awareness amongst the general public. The highest recognition rate was for the Rape Crisis Network, which has a local service where the Street Survey was conducted, closely followed by a local domestic violence service.

The Community Awareness survey of 23 key professionals and employees/volunteers in relevant community services revealed that 15 respondents could name a victim support organisation unprompted. Many referred to “Victim Support”, or a variation on that phrase, and it is unclear if this reference was to the former organisation or a generic title being used to cover a range of support groups.

When prompted, all respondents in the Community Awareness Survey indicated that they had heard of the Rape Crisis Network. High levels (over 80%) of prompted recognition were found in relation to Victim Support, Muintir na Tíre, the Sexual Violence Centre, and One in Four.⁶ The response rate indicated little or no differences in awareness between respondents from the urban and rural areas surveyed. More than 90% of those from Cork city questioned had heard of Mná Feasa, a domestic violence service in the city, and all of those questioned in West Cork had heard of West Cork Women Against Violence, a domestic and sexual violence service.

Less than half of the respondents to the Community Awareness Survey had heard of organisations such as One Stop Shop, Cork⁷ (43.5%), Irish Tourist Assistance Services (43.5%) and Court Support Service (39%). Approximately one quarter had heard of Missing in Ireland and AdVIC. Only 2 respondents in the Community Awareness Survey had heard of the very specialised victim support groups, Support After Homicide and the general crime victims' organisation, Support After Crime (with a headquarters in Cork city). Even when prompted, none of the Community Awareness Survey respondents indicated that they had heard of the Federation for Victim Assistance (with a headquarters in Tralee). It is clear that the names of these groups have yet to become widely familiar to people in the community.

⁶ For the full list of organisations, see Table 5.1 below.

⁷ This is a support organisation in Cork that provides a range of support services to victims of domestic violence.

Table 5.1: Awareness of Support Groups Among Community Awareness Survey Respondents

Organisation	Total known	Cork City	West Cork	Percentage
Rape Crisis Network	23	13	10	100
Victim Support	20	11	9	87
Muintir na Tire	19	11	8	83
Sexual Violence Centre	19	10	9	83
One in Four	19	11	8	83
Crime Victims Helpline	17	7	10	74
Mná Feasa	17	12	5	74
Amen	16	10	6	70
Ruhama	12	9	3	52
West Cork Women Against Violence	12	2	10	52
One Stop Shop Cork	10	5	5	44
Irish Tourist Assistance Services	10	5	5	44
Court Support Services	9	3	6	39
Missing in Ireland	7	4	3	30
AdVic	6	3	3	26
Support After Homicide	2	1	1	9
Support After Crime	2	2	0	9
Federation for Victim Assistance	0	0	0	0

The Community Awareness Survey reveals that there is some recognition of certain victim support groups by respondents, particularly when prompted, but many respondents reported that they simply did not have enough information about such groups to help their clients find suitable support:

You have listed a lot of organisations that I have never heard of. They should make themselves known to relevant people, such as GPs. I see many victims, but due to intimidations they do not want to go to the guards. If there was a lay person from an organisation that they could go to, if we were aware of such organisations... They could produce a booklet or something similar for us to have.
(Medical Doctor)

It was suggested by another respondent in the Community Awareness Survey that information about victim support organisations should be linked into already established information and support networks within communities:

We need to create awareness through Community Alert, and make it available as a linkage with Gardaí. These groups are very active in all rural areas. Citizens information centres have all these lists and could pass them on. Support for violence against women is directly in your face and you know

where these groups are. But if I was assaulted and robbed on the street, I wouldn't know where to turn.

(Medical Doctor)

Many respondents also voiced the concern that there were too many groups and they were too splintered, it was suggested that there should be a central point from where to access support for all types of crimes:

There are too many organisations out there – they are too splintered!

(Medical Doctor)

Victim support is so fragmented, there is such a multiplicity [of groups] and [they are] 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)

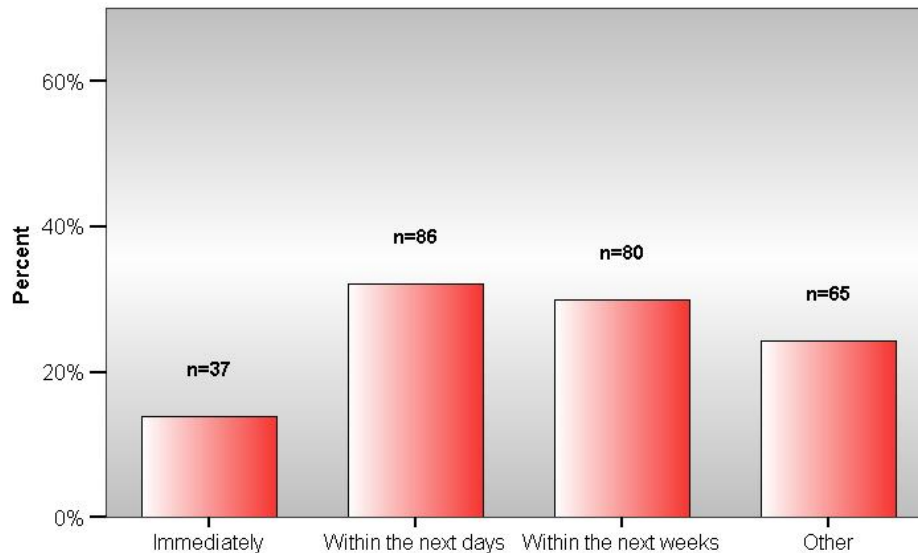
This call for a single access point to information on victim support was echoed by many of the respondents in the Community Awareness Survey. It was believed that such an initiative would not only counteract difficulties for victims in seeking knowledge about services but would also assist professionals and community organisation workers to provide effective referrals to their clients. The concerns voiced here reinforce the fact that there is insufficient awareness of the Crime Victims Helpline, which is in fact designed to provide this common access point.⁸

5.2 Contacting the Organisation

Just under half of the respondents to the victim survey reported that they had contacted the support organisation immediately (13.8%) or within days (32.1%) of experiencing victimhood. Another third (29.9%) contacted the support organisation within several weeks of the incident.

⁸ The Commission for the Support of Victims of Crime has launched a new website (after the research fieldwork for this project was completed). It contains a county by county list of support organisations by crime type. These details are available at www.csvc.ie.

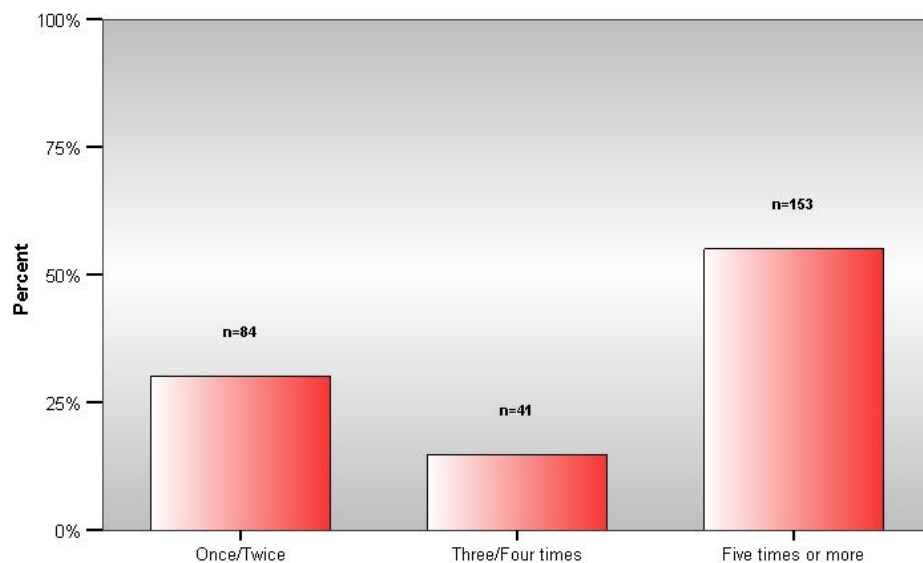
Fig 5.5: Time of Making Contact with the Support Organisation (Victim Postal Survey)



One quarter of the victims (24.3%) who contacted the support organisation did not do so within the weeks immediately following the crime. The time it took for these respondents to seek support ranged from several months to 39 years. Reasons for delayed access to support can be numerous: a respondent could have been a victim at a time when the victims' support system was extremely limited; victims of domestic violence may live with violence for long periods before seeking help; or a victim may delay seeking help whilst trying to deal with the situation himself/herself.

Respondents were asked how often they had been in contact with their support organisation. More than half of the respondents (55%) reported that they had been in touch with the support organisation 5 times or more after the initial contact, indicating the high level of importance of the services to them. Another 14.7% had contacted the group 3 or 4 times, while approximately one third (30.2%) only contacted the organisation once or twice.

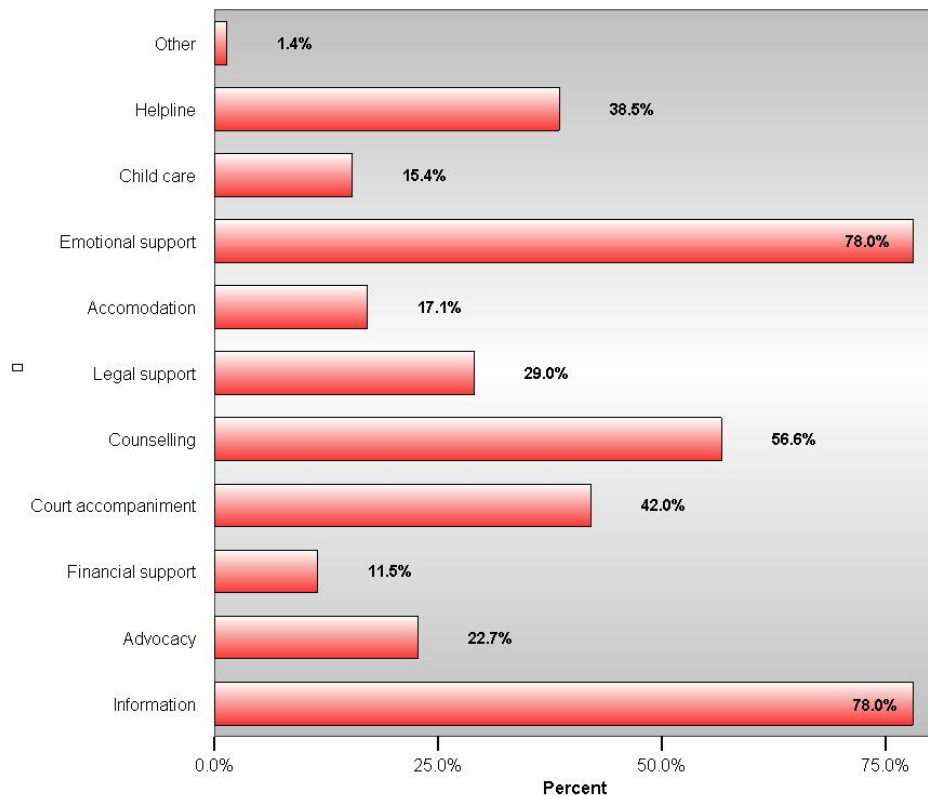
Fig 5.6: Frequency of Contact with Support Organisation (Victim Postal Survey)



Where victims contact an organisation on multiple occasions the level of interaction suggests that they are seeking more than one service, and/or are using services, which require a longer period of involvement with that organisation. For example, emotional support/counselling may include group sessions, whilst advice about legal procedures and court accompaniment may involve long term engagement with an organisation due to protracted court proceedings.

The respondents to the victim survey used multiple services provided by support organisations. The two most common were information (78%) and emotional support (78%). 56.6% (162) of the respondents reported that they availed of counselling services whilst a further 42% used court accompaniment services and a slightly smaller number (38.5%) received support from the help-line services of the organisation. Other services availed of were legal support (29%), advocacy (22.7%), accommodation (17.1%), child care (15.4%) and financial support (11.5%). Finally, a small number of more specialised services were named by participants including translation, transport and photocopying.

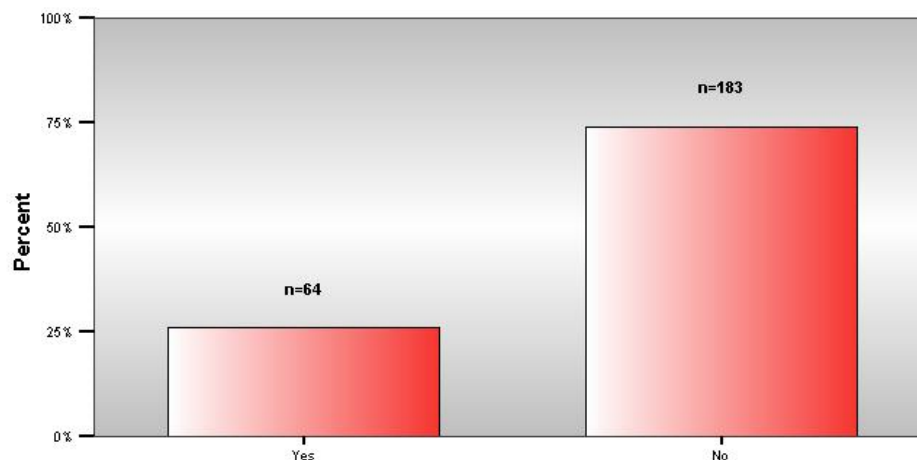
Fig 5.7: Types of Services Availied of From Support Organisation (Victim Postal Survey)



It is therefore clear from the results of the victim survey that the support organisations are identified as a source of many services.

In order to assess whether victims were accessing private counselling services participants to the victims survey were asked if they had paid privately for counselling after the crime. Sixty four (or 25.9%) of the 247 respondents who answered the question replied that they had used private counselling.

Fig 5.8: Use of Private Counselling Services (Postal Survey)



One of the issues which is evident from the victims' survey is the absence of a clear distinction between provision of support services and professional counselling. Some victims found the familiarity of the organisation with their experience to be an important factor and expressed a preference for that peer support as opposed to referral to professional counselling. There is a distinction between what might then be termed peer support or emotional support and professional counselling. Of course some organisations can and do offer both, but the distinction is important and victims need to be appreciative and aware of it from the beginning. A difficulty may arise if the two are confused.

Victims differ in their needs in regard to counselling, both from person to person, and at different stages in the process of coming to terms with the crime that they have experienced.⁹ Thus Tracy, a victim of domestic violence, commented in interview that she preferred informal friendly contact rather than formal counselling:

...A friendly face and somebody who could understand...I didn't know what to expect...When I was talking to her [support worker] on the phone I just felt we connected...It was just more so going in having a coffee with a friend rather than going in having a counselling session...I received just a few friendly sessions with [my support worker]...I'm not one for sitting down with a counsellor pouring my heart out...I deal with it by myself...but with [my

⁹ Some domestic violence groups emphasise that counselling is not appropriate at a time of crisis, particularly when the violence is on-going. Practical support, advice, and emotional support are more important, it is suggested, at that stage.

support worker], she wouldn't let me bury it...She didn't just help me with the domestic violence. She helped me with the loss of the kids through the court case...

(Tracy)

Tracy also reported that the support she received was important emotionally but also emphasised the significance of the support she received in relation to the use of crèche facilities, and in relation to a family law case that followed on from her initial experience.

For other victims, the informal peer-support offered by some groups was insufficient. For example Brendan, also a victim of domestic violence, chose to go privately for counselling to complement the group sessions he was attending with a domestic violence group:

I went for private counselling myself and I found that very, very good. I was lucky enough to get recommended a guy who had dealt with a lot. He was a marriage counsellor. He focused my mind on what I wanted to achieve...With Amen you talk to a group of other men, you don't get down to that level...I had to pay fairly costly for that and I needed it weekly, maybe twice weekly...I think there should be counselling for people who go through traumatic times like this in domestic abuse cases.

(Brendan)

For some victims, the nature of the crime meant that the search for a suitable form of counselling was important. Thus Mary, a co-victim of murder stated:

I went for counselling, I tried a few people...A friend of mine whose husband committed suicide went to this chap and he also dealt with murder, so I had to go to someone who was able for me...Six years I went...Whenever I was able...You always feel afterwards that you're different to everybody else...because you had somebody who was murdered...I must have paid him thousands...

(Mary)

The importance of the "friendly face" and the connection many victims make with support workers is also reflected in the category of emotional support. The interviews with victims reinforced the importance of this, particularly in relation to victims of domestic violence. For example, Kylie was supported by a specialised domestic violence group. It did not take long before she established a good friendship with one of their support workers:

Once I built up a rapport with [my support worker], after about a week, then I could ring her myself...I rang her to book an appointment...about once a

week...Here I could open up 100 percent and know that I was being understood and I wasn't being looked down because that was the one thing I was afraid of...being called stupid, naïve, a child.

(Kylie)

Clodagh, another victim of domestic violence, had a similar experience:

[The support organisation was] 150 percent brilliant.... She [support person] came to every court case with me. She sat with me the whole time, she listened to me 2-3 times a day...They gave me the strength and encouragement to keep going...I was over with [the support person] all the time...She explained everything, went through step by step. Only for them...nobody came forward to tell me... I couldn't survive [without the support person] because I know that she's there...

(Clodagh)

For co-victims of homicide, the emotional support and guidance is also vital, particularly where children are also affected by the crime. Thus Bernice, whose partner was murdered, stated:

. ...I wasn't able to leave the house at all, to have someone with that compassion and understanding...[person from support group]. She was like an angel coming in the door...The kids were a bit all over the place, they used to do make-up on her eyes...We used to have a laugh in the mix of all that madness...She would have rang quite a lot...just amazing to have that and for her to filter through the information...I would never have known about the tribunal criminal compensation, even that there are grants available and all that information...She was such an encouragement to us all...

(Bernice)

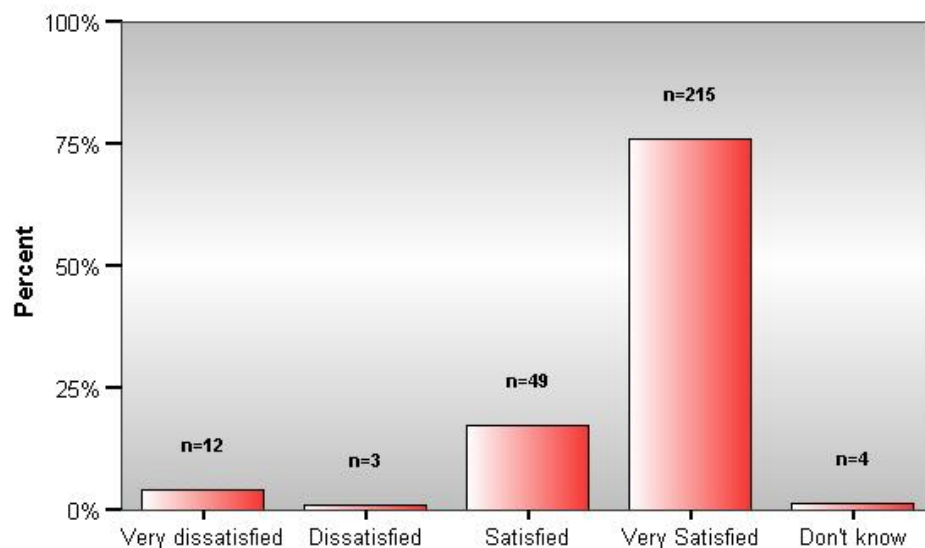
5.3 Satisfaction with Services

In order to assess the level of satisfaction with services, the victim survey asked about the speed of organisations' responses to initial contact, the adequacy of the location of services, the adequacy of any helpline accessed, and the ability of the organisation to meet needs. The overall reported rates of satisfaction with the organisations' services were very high among the respondents.

When asked whether participants were satisfied with the speed of the organisation's response to their initial contact, 76% of those answering said they were very satisfied and 17.3% said they were satisfied. Only 5.3% reported they were less than satisfied and 1.4% did not know whether they were satisfied or not. This data indicates that

victims' organisations are currently responding to most victims' contacts in a timely fashion.

Fig 5.9: Satisfaction with Speed of Organisation's Response to Respondents Initial Contact (Victim Postal Survey)



Once a victim decides to get in touch with a support organisation, the speed of the response can be very important. Bernice, a co-victim of homicide, received support from an organisation after a Garda liaison officer gave her the contact number three days after the murder of her partner. Bernice rang the number straight away.

There was a mobile number on the sheet and when I got on to that line, that was somewhere else in Ireland, so what they did they put me through to somebody. They gave my information to a lady here in [city], so she actually called to the house straight away. She rang me and called to the house... We kept in contact until we sort of had closure after the trial.

(Bernice)

Bernice's case illustrates why a prompt response can be so important as she was not only having to come to terms with the death of her partner, but she also had to take care of her young children who had lost their father. The early presence of a support worker can mean that quick decisions can be made in such circumstances, for example, in relation to obtaining specialised support for children in difficult situations. Thus Bernice was able to access specialised counselling:

[With the support organisation], we would have done play therapy...for my children and then I had a couple of sessions myself, separate from the children before the trial...When the kids were young and it was so dramatic for them...[The support person]...would be really good for the kids and do a lot of house calls for months, she really did...

(Bernice)

A quick response from support organisations was identified by some victims as critical. Gerry, a victim of kidnapping, highlighted this fact:

The guards contacted [the support organisation] on our behalf...The morning after...[the support worker] came to the house...There was a phone call first and then she met us within 48 hours...[The] first couple of days were crucial...You need guidance, support and direction...The guards suggested that this was a good way...We needed a guide, someone to point the way to us. [The support worker] did that, listening, giving her experience as well, her kindness, her advice and support right throughout the court case six months later....to me and my wife...a vital part, very important, we were looking for that....If it was absent....where would your head wander to?

(Gerry)

Speed of response can also be particularly important in relation to domestic violence cases. Victims of domestic violence may experience crime on an ongoing and long term basis. A decision to seek help may reflect an escalation of the violence and it has been shown that the point at which an abusive relationship ends can be a high risk time for the victim.¹⁰ The speed of the response of support organisations can therefore be critical both in terms of accessing information on how to protect themselves, available court protection procedures and in gaining much needed emotional support. Kate, a victim of domestic violence, reported that a friend of hers had contacted a support organisation for her:

[A] lady came out to visit me within a day or two, it was very quick...I took all the information from her...I needed advice on what steps I could take and the advice I got was very good and I followed it...The lady told me if possible to save some money, that if I needed to go to have some cash...to get all birth certs belonging to me and the kids, the insurance policy numbers...if I had to flee the house I wouldn't have to go back...which was great advice...

(Kate)

A problem of “out of hours” access to support services was raised in the community awareness survey.

¹⁰ See Watson and Parsons (2005).

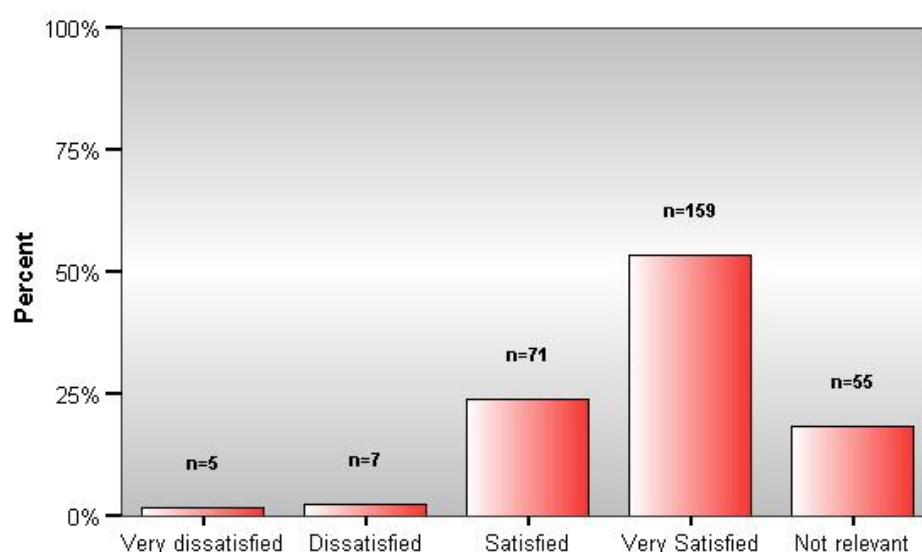
From my experience working with victims of domestic violence, there is a lack of emergency [support] after 5 pm.

(Community Worker)

The difficulty in relation to victims of domestic violence is significant given that many may wish not to approach the Gardaí regarding their situation.

When asked about the adequacy of the organisations' help-lines, more than half of those responding (53.5% or 159 respondents) stated that they were very satisfied and a further 23.9% (71) stated they were satisfied, whilst 18.5% (55) indicated that they had not used a helpline. Therefore, of those who had actually used an organisation's helpline, 65.7% indicated that they were very satisfied, 29.3% indicated that they were satisfied, and only 5 % registered a response lower than satisfied.

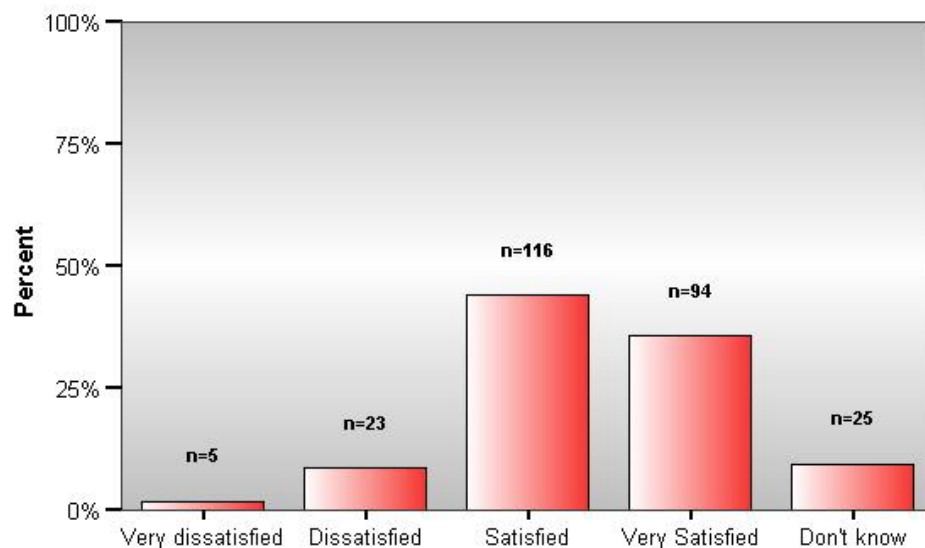
Fig 5.10: Adequacy of Organisation's Help-line (Victim Postal Survey)



When asked whether participants were satisfied with the proximity of the organisations to their home, a total of 44.1% reported that they were satisfied and 35.7% were very satisfied. Just over 10% were less than satisfied, suggesting that in the main the spread of victim support organisations is efficient in delivering an accessible service. It should be noted however that the respondents were all victims

who had accessed services. Other victims who possibly did not have a local service and therefore accessed no service were excluded because of the survey design.

Fig 5.11: Satisfaction with Proximity of Support Organisation to Respondent's Home (Victim Postal Survey)



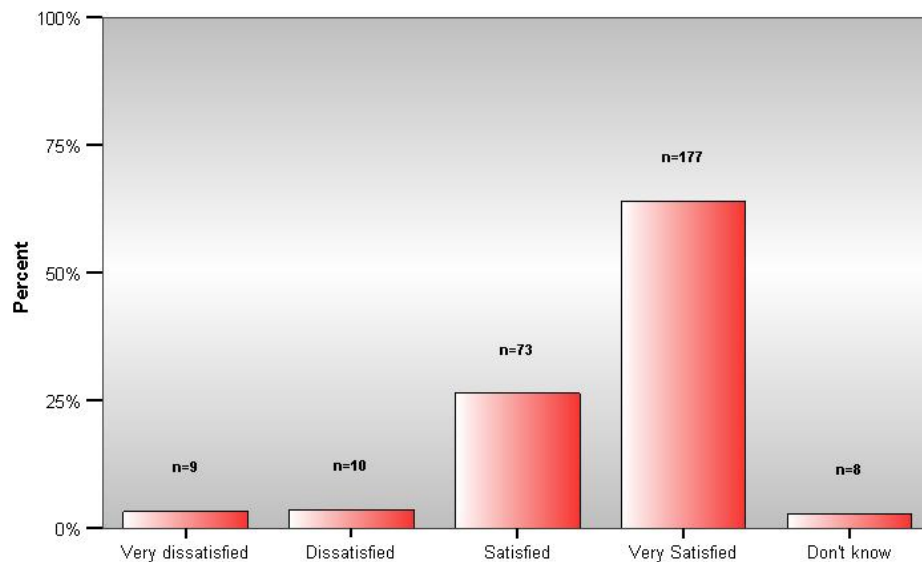
However specialised, victim support groups may be unable to provide adequate geographical coverage. For example, Brendan, a victim of domestic violence, was very positive about the organisation assisting him, but found the distance he had to travel from his home to their office a difficulty. In interview he highlighted the need for them to set up a network of places where men in similar situations to him could go.

[It] was the only place where people could go and I would love if there was a nearer place where I could go, say around Dublin and say around the area that I lived in. I certainly would have coped better because this travelling put me off...There could have been a network of places where men could meet, run by [support organisation], outreach places...

(Brendan)

Finally, when asked about the ability of the organisation to meet respondents' needs an overwhelming majority of those answering reported that they were either very satisfied (63.9%) or satisfied (26.4%). Thus only 6.8% reported a level below satisfied in response to this answer.

Fig 5.12: Ability of Support Organisation to Meet Respondent's Needs (Victim Postal Survey)



Victims reported in interview that they were not initially aware of what services were available and ultimately what they would need. The organisations were often able to guide them through the criminal justice process from start to finish, or were crucial in providing long term emotional support at different stages of their cases. For example, Kylie, a victim of domestic violence, stated:

At the beginning I expected to have someone sitting there listening to me and telling me that it wasn't my fault, but after I met [my support worker], I realised she was going to do so much more. She'd come to the court with me. She was literally there whenever I needed to talk...She did everything for me...

(Kylie)

This lack of understanding by victims of services available and what services they need when first accessing support organisations, was raised by some interviewees who noted that at the time of their initial victimisation they had insufficient knowledge to be able to access services.

I think more advertisements are needed to highlight victim support. I never knew about them until just before going to court. This had been 2 ½ years after making a statement. If I had known there were such organisations it would have made dealing with the procedures so much easier as I would have had the support I needed.

(Victim of sexual offences)

Where victims have been left unsupported at the early stages of the criminal justice process, their lack of understanding of procedures can add to their feelings of trauma and helplessness. Thus early support is essential in minimising the possible negative impact of the criminal justice system and reducing ongoing harm caused by the initial victimisation.

Catherine, a co-victim of homicide, wished that she had been put in contact with the relevant support organisation at a much earlier stage in the process:

If I would have been put on to [support organisation] in the beginning I would have been very happy...I rang them first, it was easy to access them...If I had known about them before the trial I would have been on to them a lot.

(Catherine)

Valerie, a victim of dangerous and careless driving, expressed similar sentiments after she eventually gained support via the Crime Victims Helpline:

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...Given our situation....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 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 DPP and attending court as a witness and it [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)

Some interviewees raised concerns in relation to gaining access to more 'professional' and coherent support regarding legal information from support organisations. Heather, a victim of domestic violence, experienced excellent services in relation to court support from her support group but when her ex-partner took a custody case against her she began to realise her lack of knowledge regarding the law

[Support group] assumed solicitor [educated her regarding her legal rights]....They did my emotional needs...Really they should have been more empowering...They did not educate me about how [adversarial] it was...They did not give me a proper education about what I was dealing with...or my solicitor should have...They probably thought he did...

(Heather)

In Heather's case, the assumption that someone else would provide her with the relevant information appeared to leave her unsupported in relation to this important area of information and knowledge. A more positive experience in this area, showing good practice on the part of the support organisation, was described by Clodagh, a victim of domestic violence.

I was over with [support person] all the time...She explained everything, went through [it] step by step. Only for them...nobody came forward to tell me [anything]...When I had my first interview with the solicitor that was doing our case, I went in, and that was the day before the court...He sat behind the desk, looking at me...He says: "You live in [town area]? Well, so do I, can't represent you, but you know what, I'll have somebody there in the morning". That was it, get out of my face, that's the way I felt...I went back up to [support person] "How can they speak to people like that"...She phoned them...and she found out who it was...I couldn't survive [without Support person] because I know that she's there...

(Clodagh)

Organisations therefore need to be able to provide basic information regarding legal terminology and ensure that their clients are supported and empowered to seek out good legal assistance in relation to cases arising out of their experience of crime and other related matters, such as custody cases.

Some respondents in the Community Awareness Survey drew attention to some issues which they believed constituted barriers to victims accessing support. A lack of information about the specific focus or orientation of some support groups led to a perception among some professionals and community organisation workers that there was an overlap of service provision in some aspects of victim support. This often caused confusion in relation to which service a victim should be referred to.

We need greater clarifications regarding various groups and the difference between them. There appear to be several groups for victims of sexual crimes that are competing?

(Social Worker)

This concern about overlap among groups relates not only to a concern about ensuring effective referrals but also underpins a concern among some professionals/community organisation workers that while victims of some crimes are well catered for, others, who experienced crimes that are considered less severe, have limited support. Thus one representative of a community organisation stated:

There should be a one-stop-shop or a phone-line where all the diversity that you have just told me was pooled together, so that there is ONE place for a victim to go to instead of looking around. Some crimes appear to be better supported than others, for example sexual violence, whereas a burglar victim might be very traumatised but might not have the support needed.

(Policy and Campaign Officer)

This comment highlights once again the lack of recognition of the Crime Victims Helpline in providing this “one-stop-shop” role.

The idea that victims of some crimes are better provided for than others raises the question of whether general service providers have been less successful than more specialised organisations in raising their organisational profiles. There is, for example, a suite of services provided by many domestic violence support organisations from advocacy to helpline to court accompaniment. Moreover, many of these organisations are embedded in local communities. It is not surprising therefore that some organisations, such as domestic violence and sexual violence organisations, have probably been more effective at awareness raising, thus leading to a perception amongst some professional/community workers that less serious offences are not well provided for.

Whilst ‘run of the mill’ crimes are often considered to be under-supported, some victims also report that there can be a lack of more specialised support within organisations. Mary, a co-victim of homicide, went to support group sessions but felt that her case was different to other people and she preferred to talk to people whose family members were murdered several years ago:

They started this group...and I did go to that. It was a ten week thing going on and I went for the first night...I was with a friend of mine whose son was murdered 10 years ago...It was starting off with people whose family members had been murdered a year ago, eight months ago, two years ago, so there isn't anything for us as such...Maybe something like that for people like us that are a long way down the road...It doesn't mean that it's less painful, it's still the same pain and it never goes away...

(Mary)

Paul, also a co-victim of homicide, stated that he would like to see something particularly for fathers who have lost their children through murder.

I rang [support organisation] and went to two meetings around the country and introduced myself...[The organisation was] absolutely brilliant,...but I would

prefer to see more for fathers, for dads whose children have been murdered...They're more into women...very, very little for men...because it's a woman's thing...They're too shy to talk and stuff like that...but talk to them on their own and they're fine...If there was someone within that group who would talk directly to the men it would actually open a door...They don't talk but they're grieving as much...

(Paul)

Professionals/community organisation workers who responded to the Community Awareness Survey also raised the need for greater specialised services in relation to women and children:

I see many unreported crimes against children and women and there are many issues around this. We need more generic counsellors free of cost and tied in with [youth] centres. Most of the services are adult-based, so we need more for children. The stigma around domestic violence also prevents women from going to the guards, so if they could get free counselling through us would be helpful.

(Youth Worker)

[M]others of older sons (over 13) cannot access housing for domestic violence with these sons as they are not allowed in. It is hard to find suitable accommodation due to these rules and regulations. The Traveller community is also a very close knit community, and I've heard that the Kerry group model is working well for Travellers who are victims....

(Community Worker)

5.4. Conclusion

Overall, the findings from this research illustrate that there are significant problems in relation to awareness of and knowledge about victim support organisations. Key referral points for victims such as the Gardaí, relevant professionals and community organisation workers and the Crime Victims Helpline do not appear to be fully effective sources of information for victims. The Community Awareness Survey reinforces this point with significant numbers of respondents being unaware of many of the main victims' organisations and the majority identifying the need to improve awareness regarding support services.

The Community Awareness Survey findings suggest that key professionals and workers in the community do not have sufficient knowledge of victim support organisations which would allow them to provide an adequate referral system for

victims. This is significant given that many victims do not report their crimes to the Gardaí, leaving professionals/community organisation workers as key access points for these victims.

The Victim Postal Survey and interviews demonstrated the lack of a key source of general information on victim support services. Respondents relied to a large extent on family and friends (30.5%) to provide information or simply stumbled upon information sources such as leaflets.

Targeted provision of information to both the general public and professionals/community organisation workers is essential in ensuring that victim support groups maximise public knowledge and understanding of their role and services. This is particularly significant in relation to those individuals and groups that operate as referral points, allowing victims to be guided through the system. Victims report that when they are looking for information on victim support organisations they want easily accessible information that will tell them effectively what services are available to them.

In total, three quarters of respondents reported that they accessed support services immediately (13.8%), within days (32.1%) or weeks (29.9%) of experiencing a crime. Reasons for delayed access may be various and outside of the power of victims groups. However, in order to maximise the chances of quick access, the issue of awareness and information provision is essential.

Nearly a third of participants contacted the support organisation only one or two times while over half contacted it five or more times. Multiple contacts suggest that a victim is seeking more than one service, or more long term services such as emotional support/counselling.

The most common services availed of by victims were information, counselling and emotional support. Whilst these clearly are the most important types of services used, it is important to note that victims had multiple reasons for accessing a support organisation. An initial request for information may then lead to a support worker

providing emotional support, and later experience with court cases may require court accompaniment services.

In terms of the needs of victims of crime and their families, it would seem from the findings that clarification should be provided at the outset as to the distinction between the peer counselling and support on the one hand, and professional counselling on the other. The type of counselling on offer in many services (i.e. peer counselling and support) is not always sufficient and the victim may have a need for more specialised peer counselling or indeed for professional counselling. It is important that organisations are aware of the limits of their expertise and assist victims in identifying what type of counselling or support they need at any given time. Similarly appropriate referral to sources of legal information and advice should be provided.

The Victim Postal Survey highlighted the fact that participants were generally very happy with the speed of response provided by support organisations with over 93% reporting a rating of satisfied or very satisfied. Interviews with respondents highlighted the importance of a quick response rate. Victims reported that it provided them with guidance and support at a time when their ability to function and make decisions was seriously impaired by their trauma. Having a support worker available at the critical point shortly after help is sought can mean that victims have a better understanding of what is happening in relation to their experience, and better chance of accessing suitable services such as counselling and applying for court orders.

Over three quarters of respondents reported good levels of satisfaction with the helplines provided by organisations suggesting that these generally run well.

Respondents to the victim survey were also generally happy with the geographical proximity of support services, but it is important to note that the respondents were victims who accessed services. There may be victims who were unable to access services because of a lack of geographical proximity – they were not represented in the survey. One problem highlighted in this area is the fact that more specialised services may be less generally available geographically. Thus victims with particular needs or profiles may be forced to travel further in order to access these specialised

organisations. This issue is ultimately one of resources, both financial and expert. Full geographical coverage of all support services may be difficult to achieve.

In terms of judging the overall ability of organisations to meet their needs, over 90% of respondents to the victim survey gave a rating of satisfied or above. Thus victims are generally very happy with the way organisations are able to provide both general support and more specialised assistance. As some interviewees noted, the help that victims actually experienced, often went beyond their initial expectations.

Concerns were raised, however, in relation to victim's initial knowledge about organisations and the related question of information provision. Victims note the importance of gaining access to suitable services at an early stage, yet the problem of access continues to be a challenge.

Finally, issues were raised as to the types of services provided. Some professionals/community workers questioned whether less serious crimes are well-served by the current system. The general service providers have perhaps been less successful than domestic violence or sexual assault organisations at raising their organisational profiles, thus leading to a perception that less serious offences are not well provided for. At the same time, some victims of particularly serious offences, such as murder, raised very specific concerns relating to the nature of their experience as a victim. These included the failure of support organisations to cater for male victims' needs. As Paul, a co-victim of homicide suggested, 'they're more into women...very, very little for men...because it's a woman's thing...If there was someone within that group who could talk directly to the men it would actually open a door...'. Ultimately the ability of victims groups to respond to all victims needs will not be inexhaustible. It is likely that some groups or individuals will be less well provided for because of their small numbers or particular circumstances.

Some professionals/community organisation workers also noted the importance of the need for specialised and effective services to be made available to women and children. This is particularly the case in relation to crimes such as domestic violence and sexual assault where victims are less likely to turn to the Gardaí for assistance.

The possibility of confusion not only for victims but for doctors and those in the voluntary sector trying to assist victims was mentioned. This can arise because of the multiplicity of organisations providing assistance to victims of crime, giving an impression of a splintered and possibly ineffective sector. This would seem to underscore the need for greater co-operation between existing groups and a single point of reference for all victims groups.

As with the findings on the Crime Victims Helpline, the key issue in relation to victim support organisations generally is one of access to information. The organisations provide a good level of service once accessed but it is clear that many victims participating in this research found the process of accessing those services challenging. Referrals from the Gardaí and professionals/community organisation workers are also not operating effectively. In order to ensure that all those victims who wish to receive support services have the opportunity to access them, it is essential that information provision is radically improved.