



# VICTIM SUPPORT

NATIONAL HOMICIDE SERVICE

## Living with loss

Long-term needs of family members  
bereaved through homicide

**Summary of key findings**

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# Summary of key findings

There has been an upward trend in homicides since March 2014. There were 732 killings in the year ending December 2018, an increase of 6% from 655 recorded in 2017. This is the highest number of police recorded homicide offences since 2007.<sup>1</sup>

The Victim Support (VS) National Homicide Service provides free support to people bereaved by murder and manslaughter (also referred to as co-victims) in the UK and abroad who are resident in England and Wales. VS is commissioned by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) to provide the service and works closely with the police Family Liaison Officers (FLO).

Although the length of support can vary greatly, on average bereaved family members are supported by the VS National Homicide Service for eighteen months. Also, for various reasons, such as anniversaries or requiring assistance with housing matters, on average each year forty service users re-engage and come back into the service.

The unexpected death of a loved one by homicide can have a wide range of short and long-term emotional and psychological consequences on co-victims.<sup>2, 3, 4</sup> For example, a study conducted by Norris and colleagues found that 26% of family members bereaved by homicide could be considered clinically distressed.<sup>5</sup> Evidence also shows co-victims of homicide are at higher risk of developing long-term depression,<sup>6, 7</sup> long-term and life-time PTSD symptoms,<sup>8, 9, 10</sup> as well as long-lasting anxiety, panic syndromes, compulsive behaviour and obsessive revenge seeking.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, many family members bereaved by homicide report a major deterioration in their physical health following the crime. Previous research found that 83% of participants stated that their physical health was affected and 75% reported that the physical health of their family members was affected as well.<sup>12</sup> Many bereaved family members reported developing health conditions such as cancer, stroke, heart disease, high blood pressure as well as other family members dying shortly after the homicide took place.<sup>12</sup>

Due to the intensity and unrelenting nature of grief from the loss of a loved one through homicide, family relationships may suffer. Research stresses the effect of homicide on spousal relationships,

which are deeply affected and become strained as spouses often distance themselves from their partner.<sup>14</sup> Homicide tends also to have an effect on the relationship of younger members of the family with the others too.<sup>15</sup> It has been found that people who lost a sibling become distant and eventually estranged from their family.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, homicide can affect relationships with extended family and friends.<sup>17</sup>

As well as the emotional and physical impact and strains placed on relationships, homicide also impacts families financially. It has been estimated that the cost of homicide was £37,000 per family or £113,000 with loss of earnings included.<sup>18</sup>

The effect of homicide on co-victims is profound and can be long lasting.<sup>19, 20</sup> Yet, the research looking into long-term effect of homicide, needs and services to address those needs is sparse. The research conducted by VS adds to the existing evidence and fills in the gap in the existing knowledge on long-term impact, needs and services required by bereaved family members by homicide.

This document summarises key findings from research undertaken by VS. The study focused on exploring:

- The long-term impact of murder and manslaughter on bereaved families
- The needs and the services required to best meet these needs.

Twenty in-depth semi-structured interviews with former service users bereaved through murder and manslaughter were conducted. All participants were supported and had a managed – exit from VS National Homicide Service at least two years before the study was conducted.

## Key findings

### The long-term impact – Profound and extensive

The findings show that the long-term impact of the incident on co-victims was profound and extensive affecting several aspects of life. These range from emotions and behaviour change to a significant change in care responsibilities or home life. For instance, participants who took part in this research reported that due to the impact of the incident they have changed their place of living or work. Many reported becoming guardians to victims' children.

***“It [incident] affects every part of your life. Every relationship, every belief, it just dominates and takes over.”*** Female, N

While some of the effects changed over the time others endured and are expected to remain a part of bereaved family members' lives forever. For example, although the sadness receded over time anxiety and feelings of fear persist. Many participants reported that they will grieve for the rest of their life. Moreover, the majority of bereaved family members reported a change in their feelings and behaviour towards other people. They trust people less and become more isolated.

The research also highlights triggers at different points that affected their recovery. For some the emotional and psychological impact of the crime could worsen and come into force at certain moments such as birthdays, holidays or anniversaries of victims' death and at key points in the criminal justice process. These were seen to affect recovery long term, as they bring back negative emotions consistently every year.

Six main long-term effects were found:

## 1. Emotional and psychological impact

While, for some of the bereaved family members, the emotional and psychological impact appears to recede over the time, many others have been suffering from a long-term emotional and psychological effects. This long-term impact was the most prevalent among participants. Several emotional responses were found to have increased or persisted as time passed; bereaved family members told us about an increase in anger and aggression, persistent anxiety and fear, feeling more protective and strict with their children, viewing themselves as permanently changed and experiencing a long grieving process.

Increase in anger and aggression over time

***“I think the initial first year was like you were more emotional and more sad about it, whereas as time's gone on, we're [all family] more angry and bitter about it and it just winds you up but then it makes you sad at the same time.”*** Male, R

Persistent anxiety and fear

***“I guess I'm a lot more apprehensive and a lot more sort of scared about things than I used to be, fearful of things happening... Since it [incident] has happened to me and my family I think you know it just makes everything else so possible. I realise quite how fragile life can be now whereas before I didn't.”*** Female, AN

Feeling more protective and strict with the children

***“So protective. We're all protective and I'm certainly a lot more strict with both of the children. We're both sort of protective and snappy [towards children].”*** Male, R

Viewing themselves as permanently changed

***“Life will never be the same... There are some days where you're stronger than others. There's days of anger. You don't put the past to rest. It's always there. So definitely I don't think anyone is ever the same after a murder. No one is ever the same.”*** Female, AC

Long-term grieving process

***“There was some grief and [we] were able to start mourning, but we [family] were never able to fully do it.”*** Male, K

## 2. Physical wellbeing and health

The emotional effect, especially if it persists for years, takes a heavy toll on the co-victims' physical wellbeing and health. The participants reported developing several long-term physical symptoms, the most common have been acute pain, change in cognitive function, insomnia and occasional flashbacks, and alcohol and antidepressant dependency.

Acute pain

*"I have actually got arthritis now. It could have been the shock and the stress of it [incident] could have actually brought it on... They [doctors] think it could have been the stress or the trauma of what happened [incident]."* Female, J

Change in cognitive function

*"My memory isn't as good as it used to be. I don't recall things as sharply as I used to."* Male, NI

Insomnia and occasional flashbacks

*"For the first 12/18 months, you know, I struggled to sleep... I did used to get headaches quite a lot. I got quite stressed out and a bit of anxiety, but I sort of like I get it every now and again."* Male, A

Alcohol and antidepressant dependency

*"I drink a lot. I never used to drink, but now [after the incident] I do, I drink every day... You end up self-medicating, don't you, with drink or antidepressant herbs. I take a lot of over the counter kind of natural products to help you feel better. You fall into a pattern don't you and that becomes normal."* Female, S

### 3. Social relationships

Many bereaved family members reported that following the incident their social interaction and relationships were impacted long-term. They became more isolated from their family, friends and people in general. They also reported not trusting other people and being less tolerant towards others.

Reduced levels of social networks and interactions

*“I think I just closed myself away in a shell... and maybe isolated myself from people... I’m not the same person at all that I was before [the incident]. I don’t socialise with people, I don’t really have many friends. I can go out, but I intensely dislike it... I just avoid all of those normal things and I just feel like this is my life now, that is how I’m going to be forever.”* Female, S

Reduced tolerance and lack of trust towards other people

*“I am cautious around other people, where I go, how much I trust people. It’s [incident] made a big difference.”* Female, SA

### 4. Practical implications

There are a number of administrative tasks and procedures that bereaved family members often have to follow in the immediate aftermath of a homicide. However, some family members bereaved by murder and manslaughter will be faced with long-term responsibilities such as taking over the caring duties of other family members.

Many bereaved family members lost not only a loved one, but also a family member who provided day-to-day practical support and the companionship of doing every day cores together. They lost a person who would help them out when they needed them.

Taking over caring duties to other family members

*“The consequence of my sister being murdered... has had a real impact for my life because I have had to take over the caring duties, so I have got my mum living with us. I have had to give up work really which I didn’t particularly want to do.”* Female, J

Loss of day-to-day practical support

*“I’m disabled... it was [victim’s name] who carried shopping. I’d start wall papering and if we’ve been away on holiday, come back and find that she [victim] wallpapered the bathroom, or wallpapered the bedroom... We used to go out looking around second hand shops... I lost more than just [victim’s name]... If you’ve got somebody to help you it’s much easier on lots and lots of things. [Offender name] didn’t only destroy [victim name], and her kids, but it was us [parents] as well.”* Female, P

## 5. Financial impact

The loss of their loved one through homicide had a long-term impact on bereaved family members' financial situation as many of them had to give up work or started working part-time. This long-term effect was not only due to the costs resulting from giving up their work or reducing hours at work because of the impact of the crime, but also due to taking time off from work to attend court hearings or inquests. Many participants who took part in this research become also guardians to victims' children and started being responsible for them which has long-term implications on their financial situation. Some lost the loved one who provided free childcare while participants went to work.

Participants taking part in this study also reported worry and distress related to coping with day-to-day bills in the future as they lost loved one who they relied on for a financial support.

Giving up/  
reducing hours  
at work

*"I was able to get some time off for the trial, although that was unpaid by my work. I had a period of two months where I didn't get paid. And I also decided, because of everything that had gone on for a year, I think it was just before the trial started I dropped my hours at work down from full time to part time hours."* Female, J

Guardianship  
and childcare of  
victim's children

*"I had three kids [victim's children] to see to... So I've been supporting them, all our savings have gone on the boys... I'm in a lot of debt because I've been trying to help them [victim's children] get back out of debt."* Female, P

Difficulties with  
day-to-day bills

*"As well as thinking about my husband [victim] and the pressure, I just used to be so distressed about how I was going to pay the Council Tax, how I was going to get food, how I was going to run the vehicle... I might lose my house... having to pay for the logs because I've not been strong enough to chop the logs anymore... I've never felt as poorly in my life as I do now, what am I going to do when I'm an old lady, what am I going to do financially."* Female, JU

## 6. Impact on family, friends and colleagues

The impact of the crime devastated and broke families, with many participants reporting that families became fractured and strained following the death. For many, relationships and communication between family members suffered and family members became more distant from each other. In order not to get distressed or upset, participants reported that they avoid talking about the incident with their partners and other family members. Some distanced themselves from the family as they were struggling to cope with seeing the profound and long-lasting effect of homicide on their loved ones.

Victims' children were very much impacted. The crime not only had a long-lasting emotional and psychological impact but also affected their behaviour. Participants spoke of how children became a danger to themselves and others, with one participant having to go to the police about her younger brother's violent behaviour. Another reported that the victims' sons had attempted suicide in the aftermath of their mother's death.

The negative impact of the crime can also go beyond immediate family. Participants who took part in this research reported negative effects on victims' neighbours, friends as well as bereaved family members' friends and colleagues from work. This shows how extensive the impact of murder and manslaughter is. It also highlights the strains that the death can have on bereaved family members' relationships with others, with one participant describing how friends started avoiding conversations about fathers following the incident. Another participant reported for example, that due to the emotional impact of listening about the incident one of their colleagues, who has children themselves, left the company.

Lack of communication and feeling, distant between family members

***"My mum still seems to be struggling quite a bit. The relationship with other family members, it's probably broken down a little bit. We all, kind of, moved off and grieved in different ways, we probably don't speak as much as we used to. We've not fallen out, we just all went our separate ways."*** Female, SA

Emotional and psychological impact on victim's children and their behaviour

***"Both the boys [victim's sons] have both tried to take their own lives. One deep cut his wrists... Then it wasn't long after that that [victim's son name] took an overdose. It was just too much for them to take it all in... They would never have thought about that if their mother had been here... Their sister, she went through a bad patch... she was out with the wrong crowd."*** Female, P

Emotional and psychological impact on friends and colleagues

***"I think everyone around me has changed and not just my family but my friends as well."*** Male, ST

## Support needs

Due to the extensive and long-term impact of the homicide on family members, some co-victims need support to remain long after the death. Nevertheless, as the impact changed over the time, so does the support they require.

Three themes have been identified as long-term needs of bereaved family members:

**Figure 1: Long-term support needs.**



### 1. Support following the criminal justice process

Bereaved family members who took part in this research expressed the need to be supported not only during the criminal justice process but also after the trial has finished. They wanted to have an opportunity to look back and reflect on their emotions after the court case has finished as for many participants the trial brought back traumatic memories. Many felt that emotional support after the trial has finished will help them to get a closure.

*"After it [trial] was finished, people started to drift off, everyone just disappearing and you were on your own, you've got all the information in your head and it's just going round and round; you're angry, you're upset, you don't know what to do and that's when you need someone to talk to. I feel there needs to be more support, it's because the court case had ended for that situation it doesn't mean that situation ended for the person that's involved."*

Male, ST

### 2. Peer support groups

Participants expressed a need to share their experience with other people who have been through the same experience. They felt that no one else apart from people who lost a loved one through homicide can understand them emotionally. They also would welcome a possibility of learning from other people who went through the same experience and their coping strategies to deal with the impact of the crime.

*"I think there needs to be kind of more connection with people. I feel quite lonely. But I think if I knew somebody else, meeting other people that had been through a similar thing... It's nice to know that there are other people that are like you."*

Female, S

### 3. Follow-up contact

Participant also emphasised the need for a follow-up contact with support services, so they know that they are not alone, and support is there if needed regardless of how long ago the incident happened. Some would welcome a phone call from a homicide caseworker every six months perpetually, others would appreciate the reassurance that they can make contact at any point they feel they need someone to talk to in the future.

*"Be it only a conversation or a word at the end of the phone or to be able to contact them [Homicide Service] on a bad day. It's able to turn around and know that it doesn't matter if it's two, three, four, five, six years down the line and knowing that there's not a full stop [to occasional support]. This is such a good idea to come back to people after so many years to find out [if they need further support]."*

Female, AC



## Meeting long-term needs of bereaved family members by VS National Homicide Service

The long-term impact of murder and manslaughter on those left behind is significant and many bereaved family members suffer emotionally and psychologically for many years after the incident. For some their need for support remains long after the death, and their support requirements change over time.

In order to ensure that long-term needs of co-victims are addressed, based on the findings from this research project, several recommendations have been made about the services available to these families. Building on this knowledge the VS National Homicide Service has developed and incorporated additional services to best fulfil long-term needs of co-victims. These include:

- Ensuring that ongoing support is available to co-victims if needed after criminal justice process has finished.

VS National Homicide Service supports all service users at their pace and for as long as they need. The new VS Homicide Service will review their needs assessment and support plan following any criminal justice process.

- Ensuring that peer support groups are available across England and Wales and offer peer support in a range of ways to co-victims.

To fulfil a need expressed by co-victims to share their experience with other people who have been through the same experience the VS National Homicide service introduced a new Peer Support Team who will provide peer support. In addition, the VS National Homicide Service has a comprehensive peer support network where service users can share knowledge, emotional assistance and practical help with others who have been bereaved through murder or manslaughter. Peer support can be accessed in two ways: a secure online portal or through face-to-face group meetings.

### *Secure online peer support forum called The Support Room*

The Support Room is an online chat room where participants share support, information and reassurance with those who have been similarly bereaved. The VS National Homicide Service also provides information on key topics chosen by users of The Support Room to help them cope with trauma and bereavement. As well as restricting access to only those who are co-victims, the Service moderates the Support Room 24/7 to make sure it is a safe place for support.

### *Group meetings*

The VS National Homicide Service is developing a network of meetings where service users can meet those with similar experience across England and Wales. These meetings, supported by staff and Peer Supporters, cover key topics chosen by participants to help them cope with their bereavement. They also offer an opportunity to build friendships and support networks.

- Ensuring that support services are accessible to all co-victims at any point they feel they need someone to talk to in the future.

Former service users can re-enter the service at any time themselves by contacting and referring themselves to the VS National Homicide Service or through the two peer support routes.

Where service users would like to keep in touch, the VS National Homicide Service will refer co-victims to online peer support where trained Peer Supporters are available to offer them support, and peer support networks can be accessed to enable them to continue to build a support network.

It is vital that continuous improvements are made by victim services to ensure that they understand their service users' needs and adapt their offer accordingly. Hence, it is important that the interventions available within victim support services are not only effective but sufficiently comprehensive to meet the long-term needs of co-victims. By providing insight into the long-term impact of murder and manslaughter on bereaved families this research has helped inform enhancements to the new VS National Homicide Service and contributes to the wider understanding of co-victims' long-term needs.

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# VICTIM SUPPORT

NATIONAL HOMICIDE SERVICE

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- calling: Supportline **08 08 16 89 111**
- using Next Generation Text (add **18001** before any of our phone numbers)
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