

Victim Services Needs Assessments

Past Experiences and New Opportunities

Center for Victim Research

SEPTEMBER 2020



Acknowledgements

The authors of this document are CVR staff at the Justice Research and Statistics Association: Mark Myrent, Principal Investigator, Susan Howley, CVR Director, and Bailey Maryfield, Research Analyst.

CVR acknowledges with gratitude the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) Administrators, researchers, and stakeholders who candidly shared their experiences so that the lessons they learned in conducting needs assessments would benefit their peers.

CVR also acknowledges thoughtful contributions and insights from OVC/OJP Fellow Heather Warnken, as well as reviews and guidance of OVC staff members Kathrina Peterson, Deputy Director, State Victim Resource Division, and Kerry Lupher, Grants Management Specialist, State Victim Resource Division. Finally, CVR acknowledges OVC project monitor Sharron Fletcher, Lead Victim Justice Program Specialist, for her support and guidance throughout the project.

Victim Services Needs Assessments

Past Experiences and New Opportunities

Contents

Executive Summary	1
Introduction	6
Background	8
Project Scope	9
Initiating the Needs Assessment and Formulating Research Questions	11
Why states undertook the needs assessment	11
Framing of questions and objectives for victim services needs assessment	12
Organizational participation in needs assessments and collaboration dynamics	14
Review of existing needs assessments as preparation and other background work	16
Reviewing Existing Data Sources	17
Crime and victimization data	17
Victim service provider data	19
Collecting New Data	20
Surveys, interviews, and focus groups with victim service providers	21
Surveys, interviews, and focus groups with crime victims	26
Agency site visits	28
Presenting Data and Report Findings	29
Data presentation in written reports	29
Presentation of findings	30
Using Needs Assessment Findings	32
Conclusion	34
Appendix	35

Executive Summary

The Center for Victim Research (CVR) set out to capture lessons learned by those who had recently conducted state level victim services needs assessments. Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) Administrators, researchers, and stakeholders were interviewed regarding their experience. These conversations produced a number of tips and suggestions for those planning a needs assessment. Changes in available resources and data and new understandings of victimization since these assessments were conducted raise additional points for consideration and are included as reflections.

Planning

Respondents emphasized the importance of planning in conducting successful needs assessments. They recommended that states:

- **Clearly define the scope.** Needs assessments have the potential to become unwieldy if the scope is not clearly defined. Defining the scope should include identifying other planning efforts underway or recently concluded that may provide part of the information needed for the assessment. These may include implementation planning for STOP (Services, Training, Officers, and Prosecutors) funding, Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grants (Byrne JAG) strategic planning, or planning or assessments by other state agencies or associations.
- **Be realistic about time pressures,** such as an upcoming grant cycle, that may not allow for a full-scale needs assessment. Failure to allocate sufficient time may result in the release of recommendations that have not been fully vetted.
- **Consider limiting the scope** of the assessment to a specific set of concerns, such as identifying underserved areas of the state, underserved subpopulations (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning (LGBTQ)), immigrants, disabled crime victims) or perceived gaps in training.
- **Be clear about the goals of the needs assessment.** Is information only sought in order to guide VOCA spending? Or will it gather information about other victim needs that may require other funding sources? Will the sponsoring agency want the ability to continue to work with the data after the researcher completes the report?
- **Allocate sufficient funding and personnel** to carry out the needs assessment.

TIPS TO CONTROL COST

- Tap existing resources, such as existing survey and interview instruments, and resources on trauma-informed interviewing.
- Consider a phased approach or an examination focused on particular services.
- Identify related planning efforts by STOP Administrators, Byrne/JAG administrators, state mental health associations, state bar associations, or others.

Reflection

Investing in a thorough planning process on the front end, and strategic partnerships across disciplines that can marry the lenses of research, policy, and practice, can produce key benefits. These include greater inclusion of directly impacted perspectives and marginalized communities at the front end and throughout the project, capturing the voices of providers who are not currently VOCA grantees, and balancing and integrating both quantitative and qualitative sources of data in order to provide a richer narrative and picture of the jurisdiction's landscape and response.

Two important landmark publications produced by the federal Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) contain material that serve as excellent reference documents that articulate performance issues that potentially impact needs assessments. The first, which summarizes findings from OVC's Vision 21 project, provides a set of findings and broad recommendations, informed by stakeholders and literature reviews, that form a framework for strategic, transformative change. It outlines ways the victim services field can overcome the obstacles it faces and change how it meets victims' needs. The second publication contains model standards for victim services, providing guidelines and recommendations to help victim service providers and program administrators improve the quality and consistency of their response to crime victims. It also includes competency standards for providers' general attitudes, knowledge, and skills; and ethical standards for addressing a range of issues that may occur during daily service provision. Links to these references can be found in the Appendix.

Getting the right people on board

Having the right partners is key to the success of a needs assessment. In selecting a research partner, respondents offered the following:

- Select a researcher who understands the victim services or grant making context; the more complete an understanding the better.
- Ensure the researcher has documented experience producing the type of report desired.
- Leverage the relationship between the VOCA Administrator and state Statistical Analysis Center to build an effective partnership for the needs assessment or incorporate existing data.

Reflection

In selecting a contractual research partner, the host agency should strive to establish minimum requirements in the areas of expertise and understanding.

In assembling the other members of the team, respondents advised future teams to:

- Involve a range of practitioners, policymakers, funders, and other stakeholders starting with the planning and design phase, to ensure the project's success and to lay the foundation to use findings or implement recommendations.
- If targeting specific subpopulations or communities, involve key stakeholders with strong relationships within those communities to advise on outreach and promote trust and participation. These may be community leaders, government leaders, or a local or state official.

Reflection

Garnering support from recognized community leaders is particularly important for gaining the trust of neighborhood residents from whom victimization and help-seeking information is sought. Some residents may fear retaliation if details of their experiences are disclosed, particularly in conjunction with domestic violence and gang-related offenses. Other residents may simply have doubts as to whether their input will have much impact on improving personal or neighborhood safety. Engagement of community leaders can help ease or address those concerns.

Managing the team during the project

Nurturing the partnership is also key. Tips to ensure the partnership stays strong include:

- Hold frequent meetings with the research team throughout the project to ensure the project is on track and in accordance with expectations.
- Ensure multiple perspectives are considered throughout the project to determine what are the key and relevant issues.
- Keep other team members apprised of progress to prevent stakeholders from being caught off guard at the conclusion of the project. They will learn more organically from the information gathering activities, have a better understanding of the findings, and be better prepared to form or understand recommendations.

Reflection

Keeping oversight boards apprised of needs assessment activities throughout the project's lifespan can provide them with a sense of connectedness, reinforce perceptions of the project's legitimacy, and promote greater receptiveness to findings and recommendations.

Using existing data

Respondents found crime and victimization data to be particularly valuable. This included data from NIBRS, NCVS, or state victimization surveys; although each had its limitations, these sources helped illuminate gaps in services by crime or demographics.

Other sources of data included:

- Uniform Crime Reports
- Orders of Protection data from courts
- Child abuse and neglect data from state Department of Children and Family Services
- Elder Abuse data from state Department on Aging
- Alcohol-related traffic fatalities from state Department of Transportation

Reflection

In addition to these, new sources of data are now available, including information from the Office for Victims of Crime's Performance Measuring Tool (PMT) for collecting subgrantee data and information from the National Census of Victim Service Providers and the National Survey of Victim Service Providers.

Gathering new data

States have used surveys, interviews, and focus groups to gather new data. Respondents noted that:

- While surveys are important, interviews help flesh out what is behind the survey results. They are valuable in producing more nuanced information.
- Gathering information directly from victims and their families regarding their experiences and service needs provides an important counterpoint to the perspectives of service providers.
- For real insight, reach beyond the service providers already funded and the victims already being served.
- Broaden the information by seeking input from, or connecting to victims through:
 - Medical service providers
 - Mental health service providers
 - Community-based victim advocates
 - Faith leaders
 - Food banks
 - Homeless shelters
 - Education officials or schools
 - Law enforcement
 - Probation departments

- Refugee resettlement agencies
- Child advocacy centers
- Civil legal services
- Trauma recovery centers

Snowball contacts can be effective in identifying additional providers: asking victim service provider respondents to identify other community groups that should be included as information sources.

Reflection

It should also be noted that when asking service providers to aid in the selection of crime victims for interviews, surveys, or focus groups, the type of provider itself may create biases in the selection process (e.g., mainstream versus culturally specific program; geographic region; etc.). In addition, this mode of victim identification will inherently omit key respondents. To truly identify gaps, it is important for a needs assessment to reach beyond the victims and service providers that are already part of the system of response.

Increasing participation in the assessment

Survey response rates were reported to be a common challenge. Outreach methods used to reach service providers include:

- Word of mouth, including by partners such as coalitions and oversight council members, which can be important but will have limited reach.
- Emails, which are cost effective but may go to spam filters.
- Direct outreach to programs, which can be helpful to reach front line respondents but may be met with suspicion if staff are unclear about the purpose of the survey.
- Reaching out to victim service providers at regional conferences or related professional association meetings, to share the goals of the assessment and intended usage of the results.
- Setting a tiered follow-up protocol that is increasingly aggressive over time, with email reminders of deadlines followed by phone calls to re-emphasize the importance of participation.

Other recommendations to promote responses from both service providers and victims:

- Clearly guarantee anonymity for service providers and victims.
- Simplify the language.
- Pretest all surveys and interview protocols.
- Keep surveys and interviews as short as you can.
- Use skip patterns so respondents can easily avoid irrelevant questions.

- Consider fielding two or more versions of the instrument to gather broader information without overburdening respondents.
- Consider tailoring a survey to different groups of providers.

Promoting use of results

Needs assessment findings can be overwhelming, often addressing a wide range of victimizations, services, challenges, and proposed solutions. To help convey the findings of a needs assessment, states have used:

- Graphs, which can compare data across victimization types or service types;
- Ranking charts, which can illustrate critical needs or effective methods;
- Visual maps, which can illustrate gaps in services, the web of collaborations, or other information; and
- Breaking the results into more easily consumed packets – such as information by crime type, or information by need – and then tying common findings across the subgroups and integrating funding recommendations.

Post needs assessment work

Once sufficient time has passed following the release of needs assessment findings, some states found it useful to conduct a follow-up evaluation on the extent to which recommendations were transformed into action steps, and programs and program elements were funded and implemented in accordance with the recommendations. An additional step is to document the reason any recommendations were not implemented.

Introduction

This project was designed to capture insights and lessons learned from a diversity of needs assessments conducted by state Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) Administrators from 2013 -- 2018. Therefore, much of the information shared in this report may be viewed as a snapshot. Since that time, there have been significant developments in the expanding and changing landscape of victim services, such as the availability of new data sources, increases coupled with fluctuations in funding, greater funding flexibility, and more. Where possible, this report integrates reference to these resources in the report and appendix, which along with the insights and lessons learned, can further support similar assessments conducted today.

Some highlights of these developments include:

- VOCA subgrantees now regularly collect and report standard statistics on their clients and services through the Performance Measure Tool (PMT) of the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC). As subgrantees become accustomed to collecting and reporting data, the quality of the data will continue to improve. There is a great deal of untapped potential for deeper analysis of these data in many states.
- There have been significant advancements in the Victim Services Statistical Research Program (VSSRP) of the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS). Following the release of the report on the first-ever national census, *Victim Service Providers in the United States, 2017*, BJS made available for public use the underlying data collected from approximately 12,000 providers across the country in all 50 states. This data from the National Census of Victim Service Providers (NCVSP) brings unique benefits to enhancing understanding of the current victim services landscape in each jurisdiction, especially given that it includes all types of victim service providers, regardless of funding source, and therefore also a valuable source of comparison to the PMT. The NCVSP provides basic data about victim serving agencies, including the people they serve and the services provided. Participating VSP entities had the opportunity in the NCVSP to “opt in” to be a part of national listing of providers, and this document is expected to be released soon by OVC.
- Data from the National Survey of Victim Service Providers (NSVSP), a sample of service providers drawn from the NCVSP, will soon become available. The NSVSP provides more in-depth information about services as well as staffing, funding, and more.
- The number of jurisdictions using the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) continues to grow. NIBRS provides richer data on reported crimes than was available from Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), including across numerous topics of interest to enhance understanding of many forms of victimization and perpetration of harm.

Partnership opportunities also continue to expand, and are more needed than ever, given the fluctuations and disparities across funding sources within a given state. Strategic partnerships across state entities and diverse stakeholders can increase both the value and cost-effectiveness of assessments. VAWA and Byrne/JAG funding administrators, courts, social service agencies, school systems, health care entities, and others share an interest in gathering information about the needs of victims and survivors, and gaps, inefficiencies, and even harms found in the current responses among the systems these victims touch.

In addition, there is an understanding of the importance of inclusivity, to engage directly impacted perspectives and marginalized communities at the front end and throughout. There is an awareness that inclusion encompasses not only survey participation but shaping the goals of the assessment and its tools so they are capable of reaching and speaking to diverse participants.

Finally, the 2016 VOCA Rule expanded the type of services and activities that are fundable, expanding the range of potential recommendations that can be implemented by VOCA Administrators.¹ These include such activities as services to incarcerated victims, safety planning, broader forms of legal assistance, and staff activities that support a coordinated, multidisciplinary response to victims.

Background

State agencies that administer VOCA formula funding for victim assistance have long been encouraged to engage in strategic planning. The language of the current federal rules explicitly encourages states to develop a funding strategy, “which should consider the following:

- the range of direct services throughout the State and within communities;
- the sustainability of such services;
- the unmet needs of crime victims;
- the demographic profile of crime victims;
- the coordinated, cooperative response of community organizations in organizing direct services;
- the availability of direct services throughout the criminal justice process, as well as to victims who are not participating in criminal justice proceedings; and
- the extent to which other sources of funding are available for direct services.”²

The VOCA Rules also make clear that strategic planning, including conducting surveys and needs assessments, is an allowable administrative expense.³ This means that administering agencies are permitted to use a portion of the five percent of their state grant allocated to administrative expenses to support these activities.

OVC’s Final Report from its Vision 21 Initiative further emphasized planning, calling for continuous, rather than episodic, strategic planning, and encouraging greater gathering and use of data.⁴

¹ Information regarding changes to the VOCA Rule can be found at several sites:

- VOCA Rule: <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2016/07/08/2016-16085/victims-of-crime-act-victim-assistance-program>
- Side by Side Comparison Chart illustrating previous regulations (guidelines) and current provisions: <https://ovc.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh226/files/media/document/comparison-VOCA-victim-assistance-guidelines-and-final-rule.pdf>
- VOCApedia, a continually updated resource that addresses allowability questions related to the VOCA Formula Victim Assistance Grant Program Final Rule: <https://ovc.ojp.gov/program/victims-crime-act-voca-administrators/vocapedia>

²28 C.F.R. §94.103(d)

³ 28 C.F.R. §94.109(b)(9)

⁴ Final Report, page 37, https://ovc.ncjrs.gov/vision21/pdfs/Vision21_Report.pdf

Recent historic increases in VOCA funding to the states led to greater interest in needs assessments, as tools to guide the allocation of these resources. These funding surges also raised the amount of funding available for administrative expenses (still capped at five percent of the state grant), which increased the ability of states to support victim assistance projects.

The interest in strategic planning for VOCA funding dovetails with other related planning requirements that impact crime victims. State administrators of STOP (Services, Training, Officers, and Prosecutors) Formula Grant funding under the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) are required to develop an implementation plan as part of their application for funding. They must consult with VOCA Administrators, among others, in developing that funding.⁵ Similarly, state agencies administering the Byrne JAG state formula grant funding are required to include a statewide strategic plan that addresses resource allocation, use of data and implementation of evidence-based practices. That plan must be developed in consultation with certain stakeholders including victim services.⁶

Project Scope

In this project, the intent of the Center for Victim Research (CVR) was to mine the experience of state officials and other representatives who had conducted needs assessments for victim services. A set of questions drove this research inquiry:

- What worked well?
- What were the challenges?
- What would they change if they were to do it again?
- What would they caution someone else about?
- What would they encourage someone else to do?
- What strategies did they use to identify, engage, and receive meaningful participation from crime victims, service providers in various settings (criminal justice, health care, nonprofit agencies), community leaders, and other stakeholders?
- What strategies did they use to identify and incorporate existing data?
- How did they structure surveys, interviews, focus groups, or site visits?
- What types of analyses did they use, and why?
- How was the needs assessment integrated into strategic plans or other planning? If it was not useful for planning, why not? What would have made it helpful?

⁵ See the OVW STOP Formula Program Implementation Plan checklist, www.justice.gov/ovw/file/765431/download

⁶ 42 U.S.C. §3752 (2016)

The methodology for this project was based on informal interviews with VOCA Administrators and staff, researchers, and participating victim service providers and coalitions. The goals of these interviews were:

- To capture lessons learned to build the capacity of State VOCA Planning Agencies to conduct effective victim services needs assessments.
- To understand the practical uses of victim services needs assessments or limits on their usefulness.
- To identify needed tools, trainings, and resources for use by state VOCA administrators for conducting these assessments.

CVR staff identified 11 states that produced victim service needs assessments in the past five years through the auspices of the VOCA Administrator. Researchers initially reached out to the administrators via email to introduce the project, explain its purpose and scope, briefly describe the information being sought in the interviews, and request their participation in a telephone interview lasting approximately 45 minutes. The executive director or other chief official of the VOCA Administrator’s parent agency was also copied on the email.

Researchers subsequently placed a follow-up telephone call to the VOCA Administrator to review the information, answer questions, describe in general terms the voluntary participation, confidentiality provisions of the study and, with the respondent’s preliminary agreement to participate, schedule the interview. Researchers also described, generally, the informed consent and confidentiality provisions of the study and indicated that on the interview date, researchers would formally review each of the human subject protection provisions and seek their final consent prior to the start of the interview. VOCA Administrators were also asked to furnish names and contact information for any researchers who produced or participated in the production of the state’s needs assessment report, as well as the name of one or more victim service providers participating in the process and responding to its findings. A similar two-step contact process (e-mail and phone follow-up) was carried out with these individuals. Here again, the chief official for the researcher and victim service provider were copied on the email. Finally, the VOCA Administrators were asked to provide electronic copies of all published reports pertaining to their state’s needs assessment.

Interviews took place between May and July of 2019 and included 11 state VOCA Administrators (one from each subject state), two executive directors of the VOCA administering parent agency, four senior state VOCA staff members, 13 researchers who acted as lead coordinators of the state needs assessment, and six victim service providers who had primary participant roles in their state needs assessment. These assessments varied in scope and focus areas, including for example taking a broad look at issues that affected both assistance and compensation, through both the participating parties



“The importance of needs assessment is monumental. All VOCA funding decisions should be based on that given need for transparency. How can other states operate their victim service planning without it?”

interviewed and information collected. Most looked at a broad range of victims and victim services, while a few focused on specific crimes or service types—or even provider training needs. The participating jurisdictions also varied in size, from some of the largest to some of the smallest states.

The telephone interview began with the Informed Consent procedure before interview questions commenced. Specific questions for each state were tailored to address the methodologies described in their published needs assessment reports. Once the interviews were completed with all three groups of Needs Assessment participants – VOCA Administrators, research partners, and victim service provider partners (if all three did participate) – the information was compiled and, coupled with additional information from the state needs assessments, summarized for this report. Because of the confidentiality provisions of this study, the material derived from state reports cannot be identified as coming from specific states, authors, or even report titles. Instead, where narrative passages are attributable to a state report, they are cited as “State 1 Report,” “State 2 Report,” etc.⁷

Initiating the Needs Assessment and Formulating Research Questions

Why states undertook the needs assessment

There were several factors underlying states’ decisions to undertake this work.

For most states participating in this project, the recent steep increases in available VOCA funding brought about a heightened interest in developing an action plan for state use of those dollars. A number of those states reported that assumptions about what specific services and assistance were needed by crime victims had previously driven the funding strategy, and often resulted in continuation funding of the same service providers year after year. The needs assessments were seen as a way to test whether those assumptions were accurate.

Similarly, some VOCA Administrators indicated that prior to the needs assessment they were operating in the dark. Some also confided that this concern



“One way to think about a needs assessment is that it’s a type of gap analysis designed to explore the differences between what a service delivery system is currently doing and what it could be doing in an ‘ideal’ state.”

“It’s tough the first time (a needs assessment) is undertaken, starting from scratch. You don’t know what you don’t know.”

⁷ Note, many victim needs assessment reports are available in the CVR Library.

as at times also voiced by members of their victim service provider community.

One VOCA Administrator described their assessment as part of a much broader system change initiative. Their intent was to “completely pick apart the machinery of state VOCA funding, utilization, and evaluation.” They conducted an exhaustive literature review of previous work on systems change and set out to identify gaps in their service delivery model. Their analytical efforts began with a retrospective review of how money was spent in the previous five years and found significant geographic imbalance.

In some states, elected officials influenced the decision to conduct a needs assessment. In two states, new gubernatorial administrations were interested in promoting grant accountability and transparency in the state’s grant award process. In one of those, the new gubernatorial administration also produced leadership changes in the parent agency; and a new research division in the state Statistical Analysis Center (SAC) was initiated solely for victim research. There was an openness of the new administration, agency director, and SAC director to a needs assessment in accordance with the new philosophy and rules. In another state, the new governor had campaigned on the idea that there was overspending on programs without adequate planning. The state VOCA Administrator was charged with developing a victim services plan that meshed with the governor’s reform platform. A respondent in a third state reported a need to demonstrate to the state legislature that there was a transparent and judicious process in place to equitably allocate funds across communities amid competition among counties for various types of federal funding.

In another state, respondents reported that the impetus for an assessment was their determination that the needs of crime victims – especially those in underserved communities – outpaced the available resources. Many victim service programs there remained underfunded and “new strategies were needed to reach more crime victims and provide for their changing needs.”

From a somewhat more narrowly defined starting point, one state reported that their needs assessment was conducted to support the state’s Grants to Encourage Arrests Program (sexual and domestic violence related) and the work of its oversight committee. The mission of the committee grew broader as members recognized connections between promoting the safety of sexual and domestic violence victims and informing the VOCA-supported services that aid in their recovery.

Needs assessments were rarely reported to be part of a recurring process. While one participating state indicated that they conducted needs assessments in advance of all VOCA procurements, none of the others reported taking this ambitious path.

Framing of questions and objectives for victim services needs assessment

States identified a number of objectives in undertaking a victim services needs assessment. These included:

- Uncovering the nature and scope of victimization in the state (State 2 Report).
- Identifying the numbers and patterns of needs of victims.

- Identifying new needs related to changing demographics or populations (e.g., human trafficking, LGBTQ, non-English speaking populations, etc.) (State 5 Report).
- Identifying the type of agencies that have contact with victims of crime (State 2 Report).
- Assessing the current accessibility of services.
- Analyzing service usage as reported by VOCA-funded agencies in the state (State 2 Report).
- Identifying the types of services crime victims currently receive and assessing the effectiveness and efficiency of such services.
- Determining when and from whom victims learn about their rights and available services (State 1 Report).
- Identifying barriers victims face when accessing services.
- Identifying met and unmet needs of victims and family members.
- Identifying underserved crime victims in the state, their unmet needs, and the challenges faced in reaching the underserved.
- Developing an integrated and comprehensive delivery of victim services rather than a loose confederation of non-coordinated victim service providers.
- Developing new strategies to increase awareness and reach more crime victims.

In addition to these overarching objectives, some states reported having additional needs assessment questions that addressed concerns with service delivery systems. For example:

- Are victim services reaching everyone in need with the right services? How do service needs differ for different crime types?
- Are victim services reaching the right people?
- Is the current distribution of victim services across the state neglecting certain populations, such as crime victims in rural and “frontier” communities?
- What types of victim services are provided within the community and how accessible are these services (e.g., hours, location, language capacity, etc.)? (State 5 Report)
- Are non-traditional service providers and community members familiar with issues being addressed by the State? If so, how familiar are they? (State 5 Report)
- What can be done to help victims gain entry to victim services without reporting to law enforcement? (State 10 Report)
- What are some training needs that should occur for service providers in the State? (State 5 Report)



“Whatever the funding, don’t bite off more than you can chew.”

- What other needs do service providers have to efficiently serve victims?
- What are crime victims' and service providers' recommendations for action?
- Should capacity be built within the existing victim services programs to serve special populations or should services for victims be created within existing places/agencies dedicated to serving each specific population (e.g., Refugee Resettlement, etc.)? (State 10 Report)

While a majority of the assessments focused on the services needed by, and available to, victims of crime, some also discussed issues that arose for victim service professionals (State 2 Report), such as the need for more relevant training. These issues, in turn, became areas of interest in the needs assessments conducted by respondents in this study.

Organizational participation in needs assessments and collaboration dynamics

By and large, VOCA State Administering Agencies led the needs assessment efforts and, generally, in addition to reporting findings to funders in some cases, reported their findings to an oversight board or other body for implementation, including development of a victim services funding plan. A few states, however, shared ownership and responsibility with domestic violence and sexual assault coalitions, thanks to established, long-term relationships.

One of those states convened an Ad Hoc Victim Services Committee that defined priorities for VOCA funding, as well as the STOP Formula Grant and other VAWA funds. (State 3 Report). The criminal justice, juvenile justice, and victim services professionals who comprised these committees reviewed crime and victimization trend data, information on current efforts, and data from funded programs to ensure a minimum provision of basic services to victims of crime, and to prioritize funding. (State 3 Report).

States with strong, ongoing relationships with victim service provider coalitions shared needs assessment reports with those stakeholders and then held meetings to present findings and recommendations. One VOCA administrator indicated that this process had evolved with staff taking a stronger role in leading a structured discussion regarding the implications of findings and resulting recommendations.

In most cases, however, state domestic violence, sexual assault, and other victim service coalitions did not steer needs assessments or act as a true partner but assisted with support activities such as vetting data collection materials and distributing surveys to their member agencies. By the very nature of their function as coordinating bodies for sexual assault and domestic violence service providers, many of these coalitions were instrumental in identifying and facilitating contact with service providers in all locations such as criminal justice agencies as well as those that are community-based.

There were other entities that filled this type of support role. For example, state victim-witness services associations were frequently cited for helping to get the word out regarding the victim and service

provider surveys, and VINE (Victim Information and Notification Everyday) officials sometimes reviewed and vetted surveys.

For some needs assessments, assistance was received from other entities besides traditional victim service providers. For example, one state whose needs assessment was centered on civil legal needs of crime victims received assistance from a legal services advisory group, a pro bono association, and other attorneys to vet the crime victim survey instruments. (State 8 Report).

Respondents from two states indicated that while the stakeholder groups had not always collaborated well in the past, the needs assessment process served to unify their objectives and promote collaboration. Respondents from a smaller state shared that collaboration among criminal justice officials and service organizations was more tenable, perhaps, than in larger states, as their interactions were more frequent and they had fewer jurisdictions. Larger states were said to have a larger number of jurisdictions, each with their own network of practitioners, making relationship building and collaboration more arduous.

One respondent described a key collaboration between the state's VOCA Victim Assistance and Victim Compensation agencies, explaining that there was an important nexus in terms of knowing what programmatic needs are aided by compensation dollars. This overlap may be relevant for many jurisdictions, including others participating in this study, whether or not formally addressed and pursued at the time.

Reflection

Engaging additional partners along with existing subgrantees is essential to reaching additional victim populations and a greater diversity of service providers who play critical roles in meeting their needs. Identifying gaps in victim services requires reaching beyond the victims and service providers that are already part of the recognized or analyzed system of response, including those already funded by VOCA. An important strategy is to tap into trusted partners and credible messengers, who can engage members of marginalized communities in a way that assures them that participation is welcomed.

Another key collaboration in many needs assessments was that between the state VOCA Administering Agencies and external, contracted research partners. Some VOCA administrators reported the importance of ongoing monitoring of the contractor's performance. One state VOCA administrator stated that they would caution other states undertaking a needs assessment to exercise greater oversight of the contractor to ensure that all work prescribed in the contract is sufficiently completed – for example, not omitting the collection of data on client and provider needs from certain key communities.

In one state, the selection of the research contractor was subject to state procurement regulations that some stakeholders felt weighed budgetary considerations at a higher priority than applicant experience. The final assessment report was consequently underutilized for victim service planning due

to concerns that it contained significant errors, failed to recognize federal program funding requirements, and was generally produced inadequate program funding recommendations.

Reflection

The contractual relationship can also have implications for who owns the raw data, the public availability of the full scope of information gathered, and the messaging and presentation of final reports, especially given that the research partners interviewed for this study generally took a lead role in framing and coordinating the process. Partners may also differ regarding the timing of release of the data, with some arguing for the release of interim reports and others wanting to hold all reporting till the end. Thoughtful negotiation on the front end regarding the availability of information, data, and interim deliverables to the public or other partners involved can prevent such conflict.



“Don’t operate in a silo. Conducting a needs assessment without collaboration with outside agencies will result in missing key information.”

“It’s important to bridge the gap between researchers, practitioners, and policy makers at the project design phase. There are multiple perspectives to consider regarding which are the key and most relevant issues.”

Review of existing needs assessments as preparation and other background work

To more effectively inform the framing of objectives and research questions, several respondents discussed the importance of reviewing previous victim services needs assessments and conducting literature reviews of academic research on underserved victim communities.

One state described conducting a secondary literature review to explore existing data and research on clinical aspects of serving crime victims. After identifying specific underserved populations, it used national figures on the magnitude of these sub-populations, research documentation on the victimization types typically found within these groups, the reasons why the groups are vulnerable to various types of victimization, and issues in reporting victimization and accessing services. This information was used as context before compiling a summary of service providers in the state that served those specific subpopulations.

In a state that focused on the training needs of service providers, previous assessments were studied that identified issues victim service professionals had faced due to training deficiencies.

One other form of background work reported by a project participant was consulting with organizations that produced evaluations and other descriptive documents concerning organizations that were direct VOCA award recipients. (State 5 Report). Those organizations included state sexual assault and domestic violence service provider coalitions, academic researchers, and the state SAC.

Reflection

Conducting targeted and/or thorough reviews of existing literature to inform needs assessment work can be greatly enhanced by certain skillsets and experience in conducting such reviews. If the needs assessment involves a formal partnership with a third-party research entity or state partner agency with such a focus, this can be included within the responsibilities of those entities at the front-end of the process. It may also be done in-house. In either case, the CVR library can serve as a resource, with research articles and report, search tips, annotated bibliographies on many victim services topics, and more.

Reviewing Existing Data Sources

Crime and victimization data

Several key sources of longstanding data on crime and victimization were explored as part of the state needs assessment processes, and study participants shared a wealth of insights on putting them to use. For example, the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), state crime victimization surveys, when available, and National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) were all identified as potential sources of data.

Victim service planners used this data to help contextualize crime victimization in the state (e.g., the types, frequency, and characteristics of victimization); and, also, used it as a denominator to better understand what percent of persons in need were receiving various service types. Categories of victim data, when available, often included breakdowns by race, sex, age, and zip code; which could be compared to breakdowns of victim service recipients. If sufficiently detailed, victimization data was also used to identify the numbers of persons in underserved population categories.

Victimization data, in particular, was reported as having great value for needs assessments. VOCA Administrator staff in one state cited the value of the NCVS in shedding light on victimizations that are not reported to police – a topic of great importance in access to services work throughout the field. However, each of the sources of victimization data used had limitations. One challenge noted by some respondents in utilizing NCVS data for their state is that, at the time they used the NCVS data, the persons and households interviewed were selected to serve as a national rather than state sample. State victimization surveys, on the other hand, were reportedly not always current, and sometimes utilized methods that were not as vigorous as the NCVS. Additionally, respondents noted state

victimization data may lack validity (i.e., accuracy) if survey response rates were low, as was the case in several of the states included in this study.

Reflection

The NCVS is an ongoing survey conducted by the Census Bureau for BJS that measures the extent of personal and household victimization in the United States, and unlike the Uniform Crime Reports and other sources of statistical data on crime and violence from law enforcement agencies, the NCVS includes victimizations that go unreported to police. NCVS data also includes information regarding the offender in the incident, the context of the crime, and if there is a relationship between the victim and the person who caused harm in the case. Data from the NCVS, and its predecessor, the National Crime Survey (or NCS), have been used since 1973 to provide estimates of victimization, and beginning in 1993, the survey has also measured how often victims of violence report accessing victim assistance services in response to their victimization. These data are especially useful for providing information about the characteristics of victims and the nature of their experiences, for providing risk estimates for different groups in the population, and for learning more about the characteristics of victims who do and do not access help.

Notwithstanding these benefits, a consistent and overarching issue of limitation is that the NCVS data has had limited utility for a state- or jurisdiction-specific needs assessment. BJS is engaged in efforts to produce subnational estimates, which could be more useful to state needs assessments. More information about this is available in the Appendix.

State victimization surveys theoretically solve the limitations of trying to incorporate national level data into a state needs assessment, but have their own limitations as noted above. Low response rates may affect validity, because it is unknown in what ways those who did choose to respond are different from those who did not choose to respond. Thus, the data reflect the victimization experiences of those who responded, but may not be generalizable or representative of all crime victims in the state (State 2 Report), or provide sufficient nuance as it relates to key subcategories and populations of victims, including those most on the margins. There can also be other limitations related to inclusion of all affected populations.

NIBRS data was used in one state to illustrate trends in victimization that were useful in considering the provision of victim services. For example, in using NIBRS data to examine crimes reported to law enforcement it was found in that state/jurisdiction for the time period measured that: 1) the majority of victims were of non-violent property crimes; 2) the majority of victims knew their perpetrator; and 3) the percent decline in victimizations in recent years was lower in non-metropolitan counties than the percent decline in metropolitan counties. (State 2 Report). To align victim services with basic needs as identified by the data, state VOCA administrators: 1) incorporated into training curricula for victim service providers recognition of the role of victim-offender relationship and developing strategies for working with victims who know their offenders (State 2 Report); 2) adjusted the geographic balance of victim services to include greater representation from non-metropolitan counties in the funding plan; and 3) the relative number of property crimes prompted more attention to the needs of victims of

these crimes, which had previously been largely overlooked. A new programmatic emphasis was placed, for example, on the psychological harm that might result from a home burglary.

Some of the states participating in this study had not yet implemented NIBRS. Some VOCA administrators, however, were resourceful and cobbled together data from UCR and several other sources to create an expanded and in some cases complementary picture of victimization in their state. These included:

- Domestic violence Orders of Protection from the state Administrative Office of the Courts.
- Child abuse and neglect data from the state Department of Children and Family Services.
- Alcohol-related traffic fatality data from the state Department of Transportation.
- Elderly abuse data from the state Department on Aging.

Victim service provider data

Data victim service providers was also used in several needs assessment studies. Respondents described reviews of monthly or quarterly grantee and other victim service provider activity reports. In some instances, a state database overseen by the VOCA Administrator could be utilized. For others, the data was maintained by state sexual assault, domestic violence, and other victim service coalitions. Some respondents also found annual summary reports for each individual agency to be useful.

Besides overview information on numbers of staff and volunteers, the data generally centered on contacts with, and services received by crime victims. Data on victim demographics, such as sex, race, age, gender identity, income level, and education were common—though not always consistently reported at the service provider/subgrantee level and otherwise. Some of the utility from analyzing service provider data was derived from using it in conjunction with other data sources, such as comparing service provider data to victimization data, or service provider data to victim demographics.

Victim service provider data could, however, have limitations. For example, in one state, “the agency reports were not always in an exportable format.” (State 2 Report). In some instances, before conducting analysis, the information had to be “re-entered into a spreadsheet or database by hand, thus increasing the risk for error.” (State 2 Report). This short-term strategy was therefore only partly successful. To remedy this challenge in the future, the needs assessment report recommended that “agencies enter data into Excel or Access, which could then also be exported to a statistical analysis program such as SPSS” (State 2 Report) for more extensive analysis.

Another limitation was that some reporting systems had no data entry guidelines for end users, which could result in problematic interpretation. For example, in one state, the system did not differentiate between missing data and a true zero. (State 2 Report). This eliminated the ability of researchers to identify lapses in data collection at the agency level. In addition, mixing missing and zero value data did not allow for pinpointing services that were not being used on a regular basis, either due to barriers in accessibility or because they were not generally needed by crime victims. (State 2 Report). To address this deficiency moving forward, that state’s needs assessment report contained recommendations for a code book that specified the meaning of each value for that data point. (State 2 Report).

Another database issue discussed by a project respondent was the failure to distinguish initial contacts for service, follow-up contacts for service, and cases of repeat victimization, thus, making it difficult to establish a clear picture of victim characteristics among those receiving services. (State 2 Report).

These limitations precluded analyses that could have been instructive in determining the number of new crime victims that contact a victim service agency each year; the extent to which victim service agencies provide ongoing services to each victim; what proportion of victims being served are repeatedly victimized; the average number of services provided per victim; and an average length of time that a crime victim has contact with the agency to receive services. (State 2 Report).

A final challenge recognized by respondents in states analyzing program data was its limitation to only those victim service agencies receiving funding through the federal VOCA and sometimes VAWA funds. There were therefore omissions of information pertaining to others not supported by these funds.

These challenges were met, by and large, through the collection of new agency-level data from surveys, interviews, and focus groups. These efforts are described in the next section.

Reflection

As discussed throughout this document, those conducting needs assessments today will find more victim service provider and other relevant data available, as the knowledge base for the field continues to expand. Subgrantees are producing more consistent data through the PMT that can be mined for information on who is being served and what services are provided by VOCA-funded agencies within the state. Basic information on the victim service providers within the state—including basic information regarding their location, venue (e.g., within the criminal justice system, community, hospitals, campus, Tribal entities and more), victims served, and services offered—is available through the National Census of Victim Service Providers. Because the NCVSP sought information from all known entities through an inclusive definition of victim service providers, and regardless of funding source, these data expand the information available and provide new opportunities for analysis and comparison with the PMT. Additional insights into the workings of victim service providers, as revealed by a nationally-representative sample of VSPs through the National Survey of Victim Service Providers, will soon be released. The more detailed NSVSP data will provide insights into the types of challenges facing today's VSPs. More information can be found in the Appendix.

Collecting New Data

The new data collected by those conducting victim service needs assessments was derived primarily through five methods:

- Surveys of victim service providers.
- Interviews and/or focus groups conducted with victim service providers.

- Surveys of crime victims.
- Interviews and/or focus groups conducted with crime victims.
- Site visits to victim service facilities.

Several states employed both surveys and interviews to glean information from service providers or from crime victims. In many cases, the surveys were used initially to identify major issues that could be fleshed out in greater depth through subsequent interviews and discussion groups.

Surveys, interviews, and focus groups with victim service providers

Some states participating in this study strove to achieve statewide representation among respondents to their service provider surveys. Others, due to cost and time constraints, targeted certain regions of the state that were seen as representative of different population types. In one state, for example, agencies serving victims in three counties were selected to receive surveys based on size of the county and diversity of residents. One county was chosen because it was the most populous county in the state. Another was selected because it was a medium-sized county, with a high percentage of Latino residents and individuals speaking a language other than English. A third was chosen because it is a rural county and home to a number of tribal communities. Finally, there were some states that confined their outreach to specific areas of the state having the greatest perceived crime levels. This proved to be problematic for comprehensive victim services planning, since the service provider input was focused only on a small portion of the state.

Identifying victim service providers for inclusion in surveys, interviews and focus groups was itself a formidable task in the early stages of needs assessments. A common challenge to successfully conducting a survey of agencies and entities that come into contact with crime victims was the non-existence of a comprehensive updated database containing all such organizations. In response, one VOCA Administrator began by contacting members of domestic violence, sexual assault, and other victim service coalitions, and creating a list of their member agencies. They then separately merged in lists of providers located in police districts, prosecutors' offices, faith-based organizations, food banks, homeless shelters, schools, and hospitals. Even with this approach, the participants indicated that they knew that not all agencies were reached—particularly those in remote rural areas. Some states addressed this challenge by employing a “snowball” approach, asking respondents to pass on the survey to other service providers that may not have received it.

It was suggested by two project participants that having VOCA Administrator located in a state criminal justice planning agency was an advantage since their role in other non-VOCA fund administration (e.g., Byrne funds) afforded them comprehensive contact lists and existing relationships with these entities for easier access. In carrying out interviews and surveys, a number of project participants suggested that it was important to obtain an understanding of the different types of victim service providers and



“States shouldn’t limit themselves to ‘low hanging fruit.’ If input is sought only from traditional service providers, they may never learn of underserved populations. It may be difficult to identify the organizations that serve these populations without some thinking outside the box.”

advocates. Consequently, many expanded their outreach efforts to service providers that were not—at that time—funded through VOCA, such as trauma recovery centers and pro bono civil legal services.

For some states, a service provider survey served a very basic purpose – to build a census of all agencies and organizations that may come into contact with crime victims, and to describe a variety of agency characteristics. These characteristics included geographic location and coverage, types of crime victims served, underserved and vulnerable populations encountered, direct services provided and needed, barriers, other agency activities, and demographics. (State 2 Report).

To cross-check, and in some cases, to supplement their knowledge of VOCA-funded agencies, researchers in one state conducted an online review of national databases, listservs, and websites to capture a more complete picture of professionals providing services to victims of crime. That list included: the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) Directory of Crime Victim Services, the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) Directory of Organizations, the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) list of local resources by state, the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) directory of sexual assault service providers, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) list of local field offices by state (to identify victim service providers providing assistance in federal cases). In addition, the research team conducted online searches of district attorneys' office websites to identify local victim witness assistance programs, websites for local law enforcement, and GuideStar, an online database of nonprofit organizations by state. Researchers then removed duplicate entries, consolidated multiple programs and points of contact from a single organization, corrected outdated or invalid contact information, and obtained missing contact information. To capture agencies that had not previously received VOCA funds, the researchers in that state consulted with coalition members to identify common victim services providers such as community-based agencies, law enforcement, and prosecutors, as well as mental health professionals, Social Services, and homeless shelters. (State 1 Report).

A commonly reported challenge in conducting service provider surveys was a low response rate, at least initially. Those interviewed in one state also noted that high agency turnover made it challenging, at times, to get responses from frontline staff with substantial experience. These same respondents also noted that e-mails may go to spam folders or junk folders. Those conducting needs assessments may have to go through lines of authority to reach line staff, who often have offered the most valuable insights on victim service issues. There may also be some internal hedging or suspicion by service providers that there may be an unspoken reason for the survey – and wondering if their funding is endangered.

Study participants noted that to help mitigate some of the problems, some of these teams reached out to victim service providers at regional conferences as well as at professional association meetings for criminal justice agencies that house victim services such as police and prosecutors. At those venues, VOCA administrators were able to clarify the goals and intended usage of the survey.

Similarly, a general challenge was overall slowness in the return of surveys from service providers. Nearly all states that employed these surveys reported great difficulty in achieving a good return rate due at least in part to the often heavy client workload of service providers. Two participants suggested that having a good prior relationship with grantees was helpful in motivating those providers to take the time to respond.

Several states promoted survey participation through a tiered follow-up protocol that was increasingly aggressive over time; such that initial contacts would be sent e-mail reminders of the deadline, followed by phone calls re-emphasizing the importance of the survey for state planning.

Another challenge was keeping the survey to a reasonable length. For some, this meant they were unable to include what they considered “craft questions” – those that are scientifically valid but that get at information not necessarily critical to answering key research questions.

In a few states, the survey was determined to be too long and burdensome for service providers. Consequently, many providers did not finish the survey. Victim service planners in one state reported that they “went back to the drawing board” and designed a more sophisticated instrument with better skip patterns, so respondents would not be bothered with questions that might not be relevant to their circumstances. Another state addressed the problem by creating two versions of the instrument so as to ease the burden on participants. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of two versions of the instrument. This reduced the time needed for its completion considerably. In another state, the survey was tailored for three different types of service providers –sexual assault and domestic violence service providers, victim advocates working in prosecutorial offices and other criminal justice agencies, and providers of medical services.

Additional concerns were expressed beyond the burden of the survey and the numbers completed. In one state, it was discovered that in some instances not all respondents got the same instructions for survey completion. Another concern raised was that, since input was disproportionately received from service providers that were part of coalitions, the information received through surveys and interviews over-reflected their points of view; areas of need may have been overstated for those represented.



“Getting a good return rate of surveys is tough. The service providers are always overburdened.”

“Survey can only be so nuanced if they are designed for all different types of entities that provide assistance to victims—you don’t want to make the survey too onerous.”

Reflection

Compiling a roster of victim service providers should be helped by the new opt-in listing of providers derived from the NCVSP, the release of which is pending in OVC. Furthermore, the process used to compile the roster for the National Census of Victim Service Providers may provide guidance for similar efforts at the state level. More information can be found in the Appendix. Again, efforts to include non-VOCA-funded entities, including those serving victims in the public health or social services realms, can provide a more robust picture about victim response.

Strategies for achieving engagement of victim service providers will vary depending on the size of the state and other factors. For example, a smaller state, where the VOCA Administrator staff may have a direct and even personal relationship with each subgrantee, opens up certain strategies including targeted individual outreach. Whereas, in a larger state, Administrators may instead have a close working relationship with coalition leadership and/or an otherwise more narrow set of existing providers as a jumping off point. And in either case, engaging new providers with no relationship to Administrator staff requires other strategies.

Many of these expressed challenges to engaging service providers in state needs assessments were also present in the BJS Victim Services Statistical Research Program NCVSP and NSVSP efforts, much of which was subsequent to the assessments considered in this report. This large-scale and well-funded effort by the federal government to survey the field generated considerable lessons learned in addressing some of these challenges. For example, one shared theme is that the understandable priority of these providers is direct services; when capacity is limited, this means that even when they support assessment efforts or intend to participate, completing a survey will always take a backseat to meeting survivors' crisis-driven needs. These challenges can be addressed and overcome through a variety of efforts, such as building in appropriate timelines and reminder efforts to accommodate opportunities for participation. This tension can also be meaningfully addressed through marketing campaigns and other field outreach to help cultivate buy-in and greater awareness of the value of providers sharing their critical front-line expertise, and the role this can play in supporting appropriate funding and policy decisions impacting their work.

Utility of service provider surveys and interviews

Responses to needs assessment surveys and interviews of victim service providers were instrumental in either identifying or validating preexisting knowledge of which crime victim communities were underserved. The communities often included the following:

- People with disabilities
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer or questioning (LGBTQ)
- Victims of human trafficking
- American Indians and Tribal communities
- Communities affected by gang violence
- Elderly
- People with limited English proficiency

- Immigrants
- People who are homeless or have unstable housing (State 1 Report)
- People who suffer from mental illness
- Residents of rural communities
- Black victims
- Victims from other racial and ethnic groups
- Victims who are currently or formerly justice-system involved

Some project respondents reported that the surveys and interviews helped clarify the victimization types disproportionately found within these groups, reasons why the groups were vulnerable to these types of victimization, and issues in reporting victimization and accessing services. They were then able to match this information to their knowledge of organizations in the state that serve those specific subpopulations, or point to the absence of such organizations (or absence of knowledge of their existence), and corresponding need to support the development and capacity of that response

Several of the participating VOCA administrators indicated that the surveys and interviews helped them to understand the obstacles to service provision. Service providers frequently emphasized reasons why certain underserved groups do not report crimes to the police, confirmed or underscored by their assessment's efforts. They suggested, for example, that some people do not report crimes because they either believe based on past experience or otherwise that nothing will happen; do not know how or who to report to; are told not to report, are threatened, or otherwise too afraid. (State 3 Report).

While service providers as a whole provide a broad range of victim services, including advocacy, education, emotional support, case management, counseling and therapy, legal services, referrals to other providers and more, and serve a wide range of victim types (e.g., child abuse, domestic violence/intimate partner violence, elder abuse, hate crimes, homicide, gun violence, human trafficking, driving under the influence, internet crimes/cyber stalking, and rape/sexual assault), many participants in this study cited tremendous value from survey responses that pinpointed critical victim services that have previously been difficult to provide due to lack of resources. These services could then be potential targets for future VOCA funding, especially given the higher funding levels and greater flexibility provided by the 2016 VOCA Rule change. Some of the most commonly cited services within this category were housing, childcare, transportation, legal aid, language translation services, and orientation to the criminal justice process.

The utility of service provider surveys and interviews was reported as especially high for states that found areas of consensus among providers relative to victim needs and or agency support needs. A strong consensus in one state that focused on training needs, for example, simplified the process of creating and implementing a statewide training plan and curricula.

Surveys, interviews, and focus groups with crime victims

Crime victim surveys were conducted in only a handful of states among those participating in the study. In most instances, surveys were distributed by victim service providers within the participating states. Since service providers were the most common source of persons receiving surveys, responses were usually limited to those who had accessed services following their crime victimization experience. In many cases, the survey materials provided to providers for distribution included a cover letter or memo, informed consent document for participant sign-off, the survey, and a prepaid envelope to return the completed survey to the researchers.

Some participants utilized an online survey. In one such instance, e-mail invitations were sent to addresses registered for the victim notification system, VINE, and a link to the survey was posted on VINE's website. (State 2 Report.) Using VINE to identify crime victims for surveys was reported to be problematic. First, the sample was limited to those whose cases came to the attention of the criminal justice system. Second, victims were concerned with confidentiality. Those registering with VINE have expectations that their personal information will be kept confidential. Some were upset they had been contacted for the survey, so the survey was stopped for VINE registrants. For future needs assessments, researchers noted they will address this issue thoroughly with their Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Typically, victims were recruited to participate in surveys, interviews, or focus groups through their contacts with service providers participating in the needs assessment. Interviewees noted challenges associated with this mode of selecting crime victims for the survey. First, the sample of participants was potentially biased. Service providers may, intentionally or unintentionally, select clients that they believe had positive experiences with service provision. Second, even if clients who had unsatisfactory experiences with service provision were selected, the sample still excluded those who received no services, thus omitting valuable information concerning the reasons why some crime victims have been unable or chose not to access services.

A solution employed by several participants in this study was to recruit crime victims through other channels such as homeless shelters, hospitals, and mental health facilities. Researchers were sometimes referred to one or two organizations that primarily served the population of interest and existing networks in the area were leveraged based on input from community leaders. The challenge was more pronounced for culturally specific populations. Providers that served the culturally specific populations said that they frequently did not have clients that were available or interested in participating. One strategy to address this challenge was to identify key members of the community who had the trust of the community and could serve as a credible messenger and source of information on effective points of contact for those survivors/community members. A caution was offered however that a lot of patience is needed since these entities and victims/survivors may be understandably reluctant to participate and disclose details of certain persons' lives, or even to participate or cooperate with a government-led effort at all.

Another concern reported by study participants was fear by some crime victims that the details they disclosed could somehow fall into the hands of the perpetrator or others and pose a safety or privacy risk. To circumvent these issues, project participants emphasized ensuring confidentiality was in place for all conversations, with both crime victims and service providers, so that people could speak frankly

without reservation or fear. Each of the project participants indicated that they sought and obtained IRB approval for their project, which included provisions to guarantee anonymity of the survey responses, and that the victims' identities would be protected.

An additional challenge was the diversity of crime victims and the corresponding languages spoken by certain immigrant groups. These language barriers also posed a challenge to conducting surveys and interviews. In response, many of the victim services planners prepared versions of surveys and interview protocols in multiple languages. One state having a particularly diverse population reported preparing a survey in 11 languages.

Reflection

Resources to help reach and engage new communities can be found at the National Resource Center for Reaching Victims. Tip sheets, trainings and more can help projects think about how to reach and engage new partners and communities. See the Appendix for more.

Relatedly, needs assessments should recognize the need for inclusion of those with limited English proficiency and those who are Deaf or hard-of-hearing. There are strategies that can help ensure maximum access within the timelines and resources available. The Translating Justice Initiative out of the Vera Institute can be an important resource. More in the Appendix.

Typically, crime victims were questioned in surveys and interviews about:

- The type(s) of crimes for which they received victim services.
- Their relationship to the offender(s).
- Whether the crime was reported to law enforcement; and if not reported to police, the reason.
- The number of times services were received.
- The types of agencies from which they received services.
- The distance they traveled to receive services.
- Which services they needed and which they received.
- Whether they were aware of victim services in their community, and barriers they experienced in accessing those services.

After identifying which services they needed and received, respondents were usually asked to indicate which services were most helpful, least helpful, and which services they wish would have been offered to them. (State 2 Report).

Two states asked nearly identical questions on their



“One challenge is in getting sufficient detail from crime victims without retraumatizing them.”

service provider and crime victim surveys and interview questionnaires for the purpose of tracking different perspectives on service needs and obstacles to their receipt by victims. In one of those states, the differences were noteworthy. “The survey for victims of crime asked respondents to indicate the civil legal areas in which their victimization caused them problems.” (State 8 Report). Similarly, “the survey for service providers asked respondents to indicate the most unaddressed or under-addressed civil legal needs confronting victims in their catchment area. Victim service providers reported money/finances, family, housing and employment were the most common problems requiring civil legal services.” (State 8 Report). A very large portion of victim respondents, however, reported that “mental health, education, government benefits, and health insurance were the most pressing areas of civil legal assistance by a substantial portion of victims.” (State 8 Report).

In the other state, however, interesting similarities were found between service providers and crime victims regarding their greatest challenges following the victimization experience. Both groups stressed items such as the lack of affordable housing, lack of mental health and substance use disorder services, unprepared clergy, insufficient law enforcement response, and similar items.

Agency site visits

A less frequently employed data gathering activity was the use of site visits to victim services agencies. In one state where these did take place, the stated purpose was “to gather qualitative information regarding the provision of services in the specific locations, and to serve as a substitute venue for provider interviews. While the total number of visits was small due to time constraints, different community types – including metropolitan, rural, college town, and Native American reservations – were accounted for.” (State 2 Report.)

The site visits in that state were reported as being useful for gaining a more comprehensive, complete picture of victim services beyond what was conveyed through interviews and surveys. The site visits enabled victim service planners to more clearly see differences in operations between sites and better understand the diversity of victim needs. For example, in a college community, “there is a dramatic population shift between summer months and the academic year which can strain services and resources as well as create issues with funding decisions based on population size.” (State 2 Report).

The site visits also identified unique needs and obstacles in their communities. For example, a site visit to a Tribal court helped illustrate the different context of services in that system, “which operated on tribal land under separate laws and had no victim-witness coordinators. Close relationships among residents caused pressure on victims to recant; prosecution could not proceed without a victim statement or testimony; and witness intimidation was relatively common.” (State 2 Report)

One challenge of site visits reported by participants in that state was that verbal input at the sites came from a subset of victim service professionals who were willing to talk.

Presenting Data and Report Findings

Data presentation in written reports

The majority of the analyses contained in needs assessment reports were descriptive in nature with findings summarized in tables and graphs where appropriate. Graphs were stated to be particularly effective since data points could be compared across crime victim types or service provider types. For example, bar charts were used to illustrate:

- Percentages of victim service providers reporting unmet client service needs.
- Percentages of victim service providers reporting unmet language assistance needs.
- Frequency of services provided to underserved populations, by service type.
- Percentages of service providers who served victims of various crime types.
- The perceived effectiveness of various community outreach methods (either not very/somewhat/ or very effective) by type of outreach.

Another common display technique contained in needs assessment reports was rankings of various services needed by victims vs. those received:

- Top 10 victimization types by region.
- Most critical unmet service needs reported by service providers vs. those reported by crime victims.
- Most critical unmet language assistance needs reported by service providers vs. those reported by crime victims.
- Frequency of services provided to underserved populations as reported by service providers vs. those reported by crime victims.
- Effectiveness of outreach methods reported by service providers vs. crime victims, by type of outreach.

Visual maps

One state employed in its needs assessment report visual representations to illustrate the nature of collaboration between victim service providers and other community-based entities with whom they referred or received clients. (State 4 Report). That state used lines between a central node and the peripheral nodes to represent the average extent to which organizations exchange referrals. The thicker the line, the greater the extent of referral both to and from the pairs of organizations.

By showing both the size of the nodes as well as the thickness of the lines, the report preparers were able to illustrate patterns of referrals between the organizations. In one such map, the line between a culturally-specific organization and a refugee resettlement center was very thick, indicating a high level

of referrals between the organizations. However, the node for refugee resettlement was very small, indicating very few respondents speaking on behalf of refugee resettlement centers.

Another such network graph of organization types was used in a few states to illustrate how organizations interact with one another. (States 4, 5, and 6 Reports). The nodes represented different types of service organizations. The ties between the nodes represented the extent to which the organization types overlapped with one another regarding services provided. In one state report, the graph type showed “significant clustering among some organizations such as domestic abuse agencies, help lines, sexual assault agencies, education, human and social services, and domestic violence shelters. It also showed that courts, residing in the middle of the graph, acted as a broker between the large cluster of victim resources and the legal service-oriented organizations. The graph also showed that a number of organizations did not overlap in a meaningful way with other types.” (State 4 Report). For example, organizations such as those serving seniors, research organizations, and refugee assistance centers were unconnected to all others in the graph. Finally, another scatter diagram was presented to illustrate distances of incident clusters from service providers. (State 4 Report).

Presentation of findings

In addition to publishing a Needs Assessment Report, most participants presented their findings to an oversight board for the VOCA Administrator. These presentations served as the mechanism to approve and initiate implementation of program funding and other report findings. Efforts were often made to present findings to other stakeholders as well.

One study participant indicated that they conducted regional conferences for a wide range of professionals who come in contact with crime victims, including criminal justice system-based and community-based service providers, advocates, mental health professionals, and medical personnel. Topics centered around the implications of the needs assessment findings for the field, such as: innovative strategies for reaching marginalized victim populations; making the criminal justice system accessible to underserved victims; reaching underserved victims; vicarious trauma and self-care; and building collaboration and partnerships with providers of victim services. The same participant described a training conference they held for law enforcement personnel to help them better understand the communities they served and to close existing gaps between law enforcement and the community. (State 1 Report).

Related challenges encountered included that needs assessment findings could be overwhelming to board members, and also that they tended to address victim needs in overly broad terms. The response of the victim service planners was to present to the oversight board strategies for each crime specific section of the needs assessment, so that the information was in packets, and easily digestible. They then tied together common findings across the crime spectrum and presented more integrated funding strategy recommendations.

In one state that had conducted past needs assessments, the VOCA administrator described an evolving process of seeking board and coalition approval for recommendations. They reported that in the past victim services ad hoc committee/coalitions would have looked at the data derived from victim service statistical reports and crime and victimization data sets, compiled by in-house staff, and vetted its significance for funding considerations in open discussion, during all-day meetings. For the most current effort, data newly derived from surveys and focus groups was more attuned to identifying needs within VOCA eligible funding categories. The needs assessment findings were also more clearly suggestive of victim service needs that were specific to particular victimization types and particular regions of the state and fell with allowable VOCA spending categories. Consequently, VOCA administrators could introduce specific funding recommendations from an informed position, educate the ad hoc committee on those findings and present to the coalitions their implications for funding. The recommendations were sent out ahead of time to the coalition members to promote a more informed discussion.



“Some recommendations are useful not only for program funding decisions but for general program support and administration, such as identifying staff training needs.”

“Needs assessment recommendations can be difficult – some decision makers prefer the status quo, are reluctant to change direction, or to abandon existing programs.”

Using Needs Assessment Findings

VOCA administrators in most of the participating states indicated that needs assessment findings were key drivers in how victim services grants were restructured to serve underserved crime victims, supplementing the range of services offered and reaching communities in need. Project participants from a few states reported that findings concerning unmet needs of crime victims led to the introduction of legislation to increase state funding for specific victim services.

When VOCA funding increased almost five-fold in one state, a decision was made to set aside approximately one-third of the increased total to address service gaps uncovered by their needs assessment. Much of that newly purposed funding was used to provide services to previously underserved populations, including immigrants, rural residents, male victims of sexual assault, and elders.

Some recommendations for prioritization of state VOCA dollars were able to be put into effect. With the dramatic increases in federal VOCA dollars, many of the states participating in this project were still able to continue funding legacy programs while implementing recommendations derived from their state's needs assessment work. One state had previously employed three-year funding cycles for its grantees. Based on feedback from service providers about difficulty in managing funding uncertainty and its impact on staff retention, the state moved to a four-year cycle with two consecutive two-year contracts that allowed for mid-course adjustments in program requirements.

One strategy viewed as helpful for guiding funding decisions was to have service provider surveys include questions about additional funding streams, other than federal VOCA, VAWA, and other known federal and state sources of revenue. Several providers identified lesser known sources, such as charitable organizations, city or county operational budgets, private, corporate, and community donations, corporate sponsors, fundraisers, and other grants. Service providers in most states included in this study reported heavy reliance on state and federal funding to maintain their current victim service programs. One state asked in its survey how they would sustain their programs in the future should funding change. (State Report 6). Providers most commonly reported that "their organization would reduce programs and services or seek other grant funds, such as foundation or local government grants." (State Report 6). A few respondents also indicated that their organization would look to private donations, reduce staffing levels, or increase demands on staff to sustain their program. This information was highly valued by VOCA administrators and oversight boards in putting together a VOCA spending plan that provided equitable resource distribution across the state.

Another VOCA administrator cited the utility of their review of grantee data reports in pointing out funding imbalance in their state. The high population, high-crime area of this state had been well funded for years but there were a number of underserved populations. As a result, the state shifted major funding to address these underserved areas. Before the needs assessment, funding was allocated simply by assigning percentages to specific crime types – domestic violence, sexual assault, etc. Using this new strategy, funding was more balanced, based on ratios of service providers to specific crime levels. To ease the impact of this transition, the VOCA administrator reported that

instead of eliminating funding in areas that were previously overfunded compared to other areas of demonstrated need, certain programs were gradually weaned off funding over a period of time.

Some recommendations were useful not only for specific program funding decisions but for more general program support and administration. For example, one state, based on their needs assessment findings, instituted new mandatory on-line trainings on grant compliance, quality assurance for service provision, and updated grantee reporting toward including measurable results. Another state similarly proceeded to develop a robust train-the-trainer approach to be rolled out by victim service provider coalitions across the state. In response to another stated need, they developed a certification program for professionals in areas of service provision besides those already established for sexual assault and domestic violence victim advocates. A third state funded curriculum development at a victims' assistance academy, and incorporated skill development requested by service providers—including trauma informed practices, crisis intervention techniques, strengthening social supports for crime victims, and applying for victim compensation.

Besides training, other measures were put in place to provide umbrella support provisions for both victims and service providers. In one example, a civil legal needs assessment was used to develop a website to assist crime victims and locate appropriate legal services by category of need.

Among those states that reported shifting victim services funding priorities, the following were prominent themes:

- Prioritize the provision of services to victims of domestic violence, and especially intimate partner violence.
- Prioritize and enhance services to victims of sexual assault.
- Prioritize and enhance services to men who are crime victims.
- Prioritize and enhance services to underserved and marginalized groups, such as the elderly, racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQI population, and disabled persons.
- Initiate services to victims of non-violent crimes.
- Provide greater access to and types of services in rural areas of the state.

Another challenge cited by several of the project participants was that needs assessments in some instances contained recommendations for implementing victim services that were not within fundable categories under VOCA rules.

Reflection

While some of the reports identified needs that were not then fundable by VOCA, it is worth repeating that the 2016 VOCA Rule provides greater flexibility that may permit additional uses in response to these and future needs assessments. The fact that victim needs may be identified that fall outside the purview of VOCA funding also reinforces the need to include other agencies and stakeholders as part of the needs assessment process or at the very least sharing the results of the needs assessment. Those additional partners may be able to identify or direct different funding streams to meet certain needs.

Some project participants reported other reasons that needs assessment findings were not utilized for statewide service planning. One indicated that a previous VOCA administrator who oversaw the assessment simply did not mobilize implementation efforts after the findings were presented to their oversight board. Respondents in that state offered different opinions for the lack of implementation. For example, the state administrator reported that the state’s board members were involved only in the initial approval of the project and, following its completion, having its findings reported to them. They were not active stakeholders throughout the project. At the conclusion of the assessment, the board was not open to many of the recommendations derived from the report. In response, the state victim service planners stated that for future needs assessments, they would involve board members in a more hands-on fashion at the initial stages of the project so they could learn organically from the information gathering activities, and ultimately have a better understanding of the findings and buy-in regarding their utility in developing funding recommendations. Another opinion shared was that due to the length of the report and the sheer number of recommendations, oversight board members may have been overwhelmed and “didn’t know how to get their arms around it.” Still others concluded that some decision makers preferred the status quo, and were reluctant to change direction or to abandon existing programs.

In response, the participating victim service providers conveyed the findings in a report to other stakeholders for their benefit—including legislators, lobbyists, and victim advocacy groups.

Conclusion

While effective grant management is an important reason to conduct a needs assessment, the primary purpose should be understanding who victims are and getting to the heart of what they need, so that limited resources can be most effectively channeled to address those needs. The research conducted for this study has identified valuable lessons learned from those who have recently approached these challenges through a variety of planning objectives, collaborative arrangements, structural environments, time constraints, and available resources. At the same time, the relatively low number of states that had undertaken such efforts speaks to the need for greater attention.

Looking forward, a commitment to inclusive, transparent, and data-informed decision-making related to the assessment processes can pay dividends in the quality of information received and ultimate utility and impact of the work. The findings presented here, coupled with new resources and growing understanding of the breadth of victims and survivors, can support high quality needs assessments for today’s leaders.

Appendix: Resources for State Needs Assessments

Guides and Tools

The Guide to Conducting a Needs Assessment, part of OVC's Technical Assistance Guide Series, will help users formulate needs assessment questions, review existing data sources, collect new data, analyze data, report findings and use findings. It includes a sample needs assessment action plan and sample data collection instruments. Available at

www.ovcttac.gov/views/resources/dspConductingNeedsAssessment.cfm.

The Center for Victim Research has developed a webpage with guides and overviews regarding needs assessments. <https://victimresearch.org/tools-training/needs-assessment/>.

Research Instruments

The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) supported the creation of a Local-Area Crime Survey, which was adapted from the National Crime Victimization Survey. A National Crime Victimization Survey Local-Area Crime Survey Kit is available, which includes survey questionnaires, a template for a request for proposals from survey vendors, and sample supporting materials from the Field Test of the Local-Area Crime Survey. The kit also provides general guidance on how to use those materials to conduct the survey and analyze the results. Find it at www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/bjs/grants/252632.pdf.

A report by Westat on a field test of that survey tool is available at www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/bjs/grants/254519.pdf.

CVR has developed a collection of other survey instruments, interview guides, focus group protocols, and similar materials. Search or view the collection at <https://victimresearch.org/tools-training/collecting-data/>.

Victimization Data Sources

National Crime Victimization Survey

Redesign of the National Crime Victimization survey will support state-level estimates based on three years of data for the 22 largest states. Those 22 states account for 79 percent of the total U.S. population and approximately 80 percent of violent crime reported in the FBI's Part 1 Uniform Crime Reports. Analysis of the state level estimates for years 2016 to 2019 is currently underway and should be available in the future. More information about the BJS NCVS Redesign to support subnational estimates is available at www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=tp&tid=911.

National Domestic Violence Hotline Data

The National Domestic Violence Hotline publishes state and territory reports of contacts to its NDVH and dating violence hotlines. More at www.thehotline.org/about-the-hotline/state-reports/

Crime Data

More states and localities are instituting the National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS). NIBRS captures details on each single crime incident—as well as on separate offenses within the same incident—including information on victims, known offenders, relationships between victims and offenders, arrestees, and property involved in crimes. Unlike data reported through the UCR Program’s traditional Summary Reporting System (SRS)—an aggregate monthly tally of crimes—NIBRS goes much deeper because of its ability to provide circumstances and context for crimes like location, time of day, and whether the incident was cleared.

Find out more about the status of NIBRS implementation and the availability of summary and NIBRS data on the FBI’s Crime Data Explorer page. <https://crime-data-explorer.fr.cloud.gov>

Victim Service Provider Data

BJS Victim Service Statistics Research Program (VSSRP)

BJS Victim Services Statistics Research Program is producing a number of statistical reports related to victim services and providers. An overview of the VSSRP can be found in Lauritsen, J. and Warnken, H., *Who Experiences Violent Victimization and Who Accesses Services? Findings from the National Crime Victimization Survey for Expanding Our Reach*.

https://ncvc.dspacedirect.org/bitstream/item/1270/CVR%20Article_Who%20Experiences%20Violent%20Victimization%20and%20Who%20Accesses%20Services.pdf?sequence=1

National Census of Victim Service Providers (NCVSP)

The National Census of Victim Service Providers, funded by BJS in 2017, collected information that can be sorted by state to provide:

- Type of provider
- Types of services provided
- Types of crime victims served
- Staffing counts
- Key concerns about staffing, funding, grant reporting, and technology access

Resources related to the NCVSP include:

- *Victim Service Providers in the United States, 2017*, a brief of the findings from the first-ever NCVSP. www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=6729
- A webinar on the NCVSP held by CVR in March 2020, explaining more about the data from the census and how to access that data. www.youtube.com/watch?v=v94h_pLFKlg
- Slides from the webinar on the NCVSP. https://ncvc.dspacedirect.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11990/1733/Webinar%20Slides_NC_VSP%20Making%20the%20Most%20of%20the%20Data.pdf

- Information about the process of compiling the list of victim service providers can be found in Oudekerk, B., et al., *Building a National Data Collection on Victim Service Providers: A Pilot Test*, p. 21. <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/bjs/grants/251524.pdf>
- Data files from the NCVSP can be accessed through the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR). www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/NACJD/studies/37518
- A Webinar on National Census and Survey of Victim Service Providers in November 2019 provides additional information. <https://westat.webex.com/recording/service/sites/westat/recording/ce80405d19374c84a859cdb878cc575d>

National Survey of Victim Service Providers (NSVSP)

Using a subset of those service providers identified as part of the NCVSP, the [National Survey of Victim Service Providers](#) was conducted in 2019. Information from that survey should be available in the near future.

Learn more in this podcast: *Tell Us About It, Episode 14: Launching the First- Ever National Survey of Victim Service Providers (NSVSP)*. <https://victimresearch.org/podcast/tell-us-about-it-episode-14-releasing-the-national-survey-for-victim-service-providers-nsvsp>

Performance Measurement Tool (PMT)

OVC's Performance Measurement Tool (PMT) contains data from each VOCA-funded service provider regarding victims served and services provided. Data from each state's PMT can be found at <https://ovc.ojp.gov/states>

Note: On the state map, select the desired state, then expand the "State Performance Reports" bar to access the PMT reporting for the compensation and assistance awards.

Other Relevant Resources

The Final Report from OVC's Vision 21 initiative provides key recommendations for change. Office for Victims of Crime. (2013, May). Vision 21: Transforming Victim Services Final Report. https://ovc.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh226/files/media/document/Vision21_Report.pdf

OVC's Model Standards for victim services can provide guidance for assessing the state of victim service provision. Office for Victims of Crime. (2016, Aug.). Achieving Excellence: Model Standards for Serving Victims and Survivors of Crime. <https://ovc.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh226/files/model-standards/5/index.html>.

Research reports and articles regarding victimization and victim service can be found in the CVR Library. <https://victimresearch.org/library/>

For insights into data from the NCVS, particularly regarding underserved populations of victims, see *Who Experiences Violent Victimization and Who Accesses Services: Findings from the NCVS for Expanding Our Reach* (April 2019).

https://ncvc.dspacedirect.org/bitstream/item/1270/CVR%20Article_Who%20Experiences%20Violent%20Victimization%20and%20Who%20Accesses%20Services.pdf?sequence=1

The National Resource Center on Reaching Victims issued a report from their comprehensive needs assessment of the crime victims field and related fields. This assessment was undertaken to better understand the reasons why some victims are not receiving services and what resources and tools the field needs to reach more people. See Hope, C., and Smith, N., *Helping Those Who Help Others Needs Assessment Report: Key Findings from a Comprehensive Needs Assessment of the Crime Victims Field* (June 2020). <https://reachingvictims.org/resource/nareport/>

The Translating Justice Initiative works to improve access to the justice system for those who experience communication and cultural barriers. The initiative focuses on developing and providing resources, nationwide training, and support to increase language access for crime victims who are Limited English Proficient (LEP) and people who are Deaf or hard of hearing (D/HOH).

www.vera.org/projects/translating-justice