

## Victims' access to justice and satisfaction for victims of crime

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This briefing paper reports victims' access to justice and satisfaction for victims of crime in the UK. It will discuss victims' access to justice at different levels of the Criminal Justice System. The report will provide an overview of the Victims Code and Victim Personal statements and how these can impact victim satisfaction. It aims to highlight some of the issues that victims face throughout the Criminal Justice System.

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### **Policy and legislation covering victims' access to justice:**

The Victims code (Ministry of Justice, 2015) makes sure that victims of the most serious crimes, persistently targeted victims and all vulnerable and intimidated victims get access to vital services, like pre-trial therapy and counselling (Ministry of Justice, 2013).

Victim Support's 'Victim of the System' (2017) report found that a third of victims are not being offered the opportunity to make a Victim Personal Statement (VPS), special measures for vulnerable victims are not being adequately provided and victims are being left in the dark about the progress of their case.

### Victim Impact statements:

Victim impact statements are a means of protecting victim involvement and increasing victim satisfaction with the justice process.

Victim Support & ICPR's 'Out of the Shadow' (2013) study found that not all victim interviewees were aware of having been offered the opportunity to make a Victim Personal Statement or understood how the statement had been or could have been used in court.

### The Victims Code:

CJS is not routinely enforcing the code and therefore not meeting its obligations to victims. The Victims Code should be effectively monitored and enforced.

Victim Support's 'Victim of the System' (2017) found as many as six in ten victims are not receiving their rights under the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime and not being treated with the dignity and respect they deserve.

### Satisfaction with the service:

Victim Support (2017) found high levels of dissatisfaction among victims with how they were treated. 52.7% of victims were dissatisfied with how the police kept them updated on progress with the cases, almost 47.2% were dissatisfied with the way the police investigated the crime, and many reported distressing experiences at court.

Some improvements have however been made to improve victims' experiences. In August 2017 HM Courts & Tribunal Service has invested £80,000 in victim and witness waiting rooms in five courts

across the country (Ministry of Justice, 2017). These new waiting rooms aim to make their experience of going to court easier. Ministry of Justice research conducted with court users has shown that small changes such as these, can make the court experience less intimidating for some of the 156,000 victims and witnesses who give evidence (Ministry of Justice, 2017). Victim Commissioner Baroness Newlove has welcomed this initiative.

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### Key evaluations and policy papers on this subject:

#### 'Victim of the system' (Victim Support, 2017):

- Research revealed that **83.7% of victims were negatively** emotionally or psychologically affected by the crime, and almost **two-thirds (59.8%)** experienced negative health impacts. Victims also reported negative effects on their **housing situations (31.9%), relationships (41.4%)** and **employment (32.4%)**.
- **40% were satisfied** with the experience of reporting, **41% were satisfied** with the way the police investigated the crime, **30% satisfied** with the time it took for the case to reach trial, **22% satisfied** with the measures to prevent unwanted contact with the defendant or their supporters and **42% satisfied** with the explanation of the sentence.
- The study found that the **more entitlements a victim receives from the police, the more satisfied they are**. A positive correlation was found between victims receiving their entitlements under the Code and the likelihood of them being satisfied with their experience of the CJS.
- Their analysis found **high levels of dissatisfaction** among victims with how they were treated.

#### Victim and Witness Satisfaction survey (Wood, Lapanhurri and Paskell, 2015):

Interviewed 7,723 people. Overall satisfaction with the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) was **higher amongst witnesses than victims** (only 67% of victims 'very' or 'fairly' satisfied compared to 74% of witnesses).

- Victims were also **more likely to be dissatisfied** (11% of victims 'very dissatisfied' compared to 5% of witnesses.)
- **37%** of surveyed victims said that the CPS had **helped them recover**.
- Only **35% of victims gave a VPS**. 34% were not offered the chance to do this. Out of those who made a VPS, 56% of victims did not know whether their statement had been used in the case.
- **21% were 'dissatisfied'** and **11% were 'very dissatisfied'** with how the CPS kept them informed at every stage. 64% were however satisfied and 32% very satisfied.
- For victims, the **most important factors associated** with being more likely to be satisfied with the CPS ('very' or 'fairly') are set out below:
  - **Verdict and case outcome:** Perceiving the sentence to be 'fair' (or 'too severe'). Guilty conviction (either by plea or successful trial).
  - **Communication from CPS:** Where there was a trial, being given a contact name. Where charges were stopped, having helpful contact from the Victim Liaison Officer. Explanation of the sentence.

- **Characteristic of the case:** Not being emotionally affected by the case. Non-sensitive offences.
- **Services delivered by the CPS:** Being treated with respect. Where a needs assessment was carried out. Being referred to victim support third party. Having a Victim Personal Statement read out in court. Being offered ability to provide evidence via video-link.
- **Demographics:** Not being from a White ethnic background. Being aged 65 and over, compared with age 25-34 and age 45-54.
- This study found that **one in ten victims were 'very dissatisfied'** with their experience in the CPS.

'Out of the Shadows: Victims' and witnesses' experiences of the Crown Court' (Victim Support: Hunter, Jacobson and Kirby, 2013):

- "How victims and witnesses are treated **is likely to affect their confidence and trust** in that system as well as the **likelihood of their reporting crime or agreeing to attend court as witnesses in the future**"

'Left in the dark. Why victims of crime need to be kept informed' (Victim Support, 2011):

- Research found that **receiving a poor service** can make **victims disengage from the CJS** and negative experiences can make it **less likely that victims will report incidents in the future.**

'What works in supporting victims of crime: A rapid evidence assessment' (Wedlock and Tapley, 2016):

In supporting victims of crime, this paper stresses the importance of:

- **Procedural justice:** The quality of service that victims get from criminal justice professionals and associated agencies is often a more important factor in victim satisfaction than the final outcome of their case.
- **Perceptions of fair treatment,** including knowledge of and access to entitlements, increases victims' perceptions of legitimacy and aids compliance.
- **Information and communication:** Timely and accurate information and effective methods of communication with victims, both in delivering information and listening to their need
- **Professionalisation of victims' services:** A single point of contact or advocate is an effective way to provide victims with the combination of both information and support required to help them regain a sense of autonomy, which the crime has taken from them. Not all victims will require the same levels of information and support, so early identification of a victim's needs means that services can be targeted at those who most want and need them.

'Restorative Justice: The views of victims and offenders. The third report from the evaluation of three schemes' (Ministry of Justice: Shapland et al, 2007):

- Research commissioned by the Home Office found *that* **85% of victims participating in the Restorative Justice conference model were satisfied with their experience,** while **almost nine out of ten would recommend the process to other victims.**
- **Over half** of victims said that taking part had **given them a sense of closure.**

- Most said it had helped to **reduce the negative effects of the offence** and almost 40% said that they **felt more secure after taking part**.

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To conclude victims are important in ensuring that the Criminal Justice System operates effectively. Victims play a vital role. The evaluation of victim satisfaction must therefore be considered within the Criminal Justice System. If victims are more likely to be satisfied with the service they receive, it is more likely that they will seek help from the police and other agencies in the future. Their satisfaction will shape their experience. It is therefore vital that victims are given the support to minimise further upset and to not be re-victimised.

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