POLICY BRIEF

Capturing Victims’ Voices on Justice through Research

With support from the Office for Victims of Crime, on August 6, 2020, the Center for Victim Research (CVR) hosted a virtual research convening of victim-focused researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to explore how research has or could be used to capture victims’ voices on justice and inform policy and practice. This brief highlights the key takeaways and recommendations from the convening. Special acknowledgment goes to the three keynote panelists, Dr. Carolyn West from the University of Washington at Tacoma, Dr. Henrika McCoy from the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Dr. Jeanette Husseman from the Washington, DC-based Urban Institute.

INTRODUCTION

A primary goal of practitioners and victim researchers alike is for systems and responses to work for all crime victims – meaning to do no additional harm, meet their diverse needs, and contribute to their recovery and empowerment. As victims are not a monolithic group, this is a significant challenge, especially given the complexity of U.S. systems. Research plays an essential role in illuminating whether these systems and responses are working and for whom.

Victim research has long sought to give voice to victims’ experiences and needs. Many researchers have even worked to illuminate victims’ perspectives of the justice system and whether victims feel it provides justice. However, the traditional justice system is not the only approach to dealing with crime, harm, and accountability.

Alternative models of justice have existed for centuries and are increasingly practiced in the U.S. today. National protests have elevated conversations about the need to reform how justice is delivered and renewed focus on these alternatives. They may include procedural, restorative, and transformative or transitional justice. Whereas the traditional justice system is more perpetrator-focused and punitive, social justice alternatives like restorative justice focus on repairing harm caused by a crime as decided by the victim, offender, and community members. Transformative justice involves whole communities in large-scale changes to prevent future harms.

Victim researchers and practitioners can contribute substantially to these important debates by elevating victims’ voices and working to fill knowledge gaps that may exist on certain victimization types, populations, and models of justice. Rarely have victim researchers, service providers, policymakers, and other practitioners had the opportunity to gather across disciplines to identify those gaps, illuminate challenges to doing and sharing this type of research, and offer successful strategies.

CONVENING SURVEY RESULTS

99% of participants were somewhat or very satisfied with the content
99% were somewhat or very satisfied with their ability to interact with each other
59% found the event as relevant to their work as expected
53% learned something new
As a national resource center for victim researchers and practitioners to improve responses to victims, CVR is perfectly situated to facilitate these essential conversations among its diverse community and share the lessons learned. The convening featured three keynote panelists – Dr. Henrika McCoy, Dr. Carolyn West, and Dr. Jeanette Hussemann – who shared their work, advice for researchers, and insights on how research can inform policy. The nearly 200 attendees then participated in engaging and constructive discussions with the panelists and in breakout groups facilitated by additional research experts and CVR staff. CVR concluded the convening by sharing resources to support researchers and practitioners in this work.

**KEY THEMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. **It is essential for researchers to work with and within the community.**
   Such engagement should start when setting the research agenda and research questions by hearing the input of victims and practitioners. It is also important to consider what to give back to the community. At minimum, the research should be shared with those who contribute. Even though it takes time to get the results, those involved in the research want to know the outcomes so they can improve their communities.

   **Strong researcher-practitioner partnerships will improve the quality and success of victim-focused research** and are worth overcoming misconceptions that external stakeholders may have about this type of work. Well before a study opportunity, researchers can build and nurture relationships with providers in their community and make themselves known as someone who is invested in doing the work right. Researchers can start making connections by attending task force meetings or offering research skills pro-bono.

   On specific studies, the role of practitioners – victim service providers, community agencies, or other stakeholders – will depend on the project, but researchers can build them into their projects in an explicit and intentional way. This may include a community advisory board, task forces, and intentional outreach at community events. However, more avenues are needed for practitioner-initiated research.

   Similarly, victim/survivors can provide essential insight into the research itself, in addition to their victimization experiences. When including survivor voices, projects can at minimum include survivors on advisory panels that can drive the research questions but they may also be great at conceptualizing meaningful and feasible research designs and developing or administering instruments.

   Conducting community-based participatory research is one way to ensure that the voices of those most impacted are not only heard but included throughout the entire research process. Examples of participatory research include a study with victims of human trafficking in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, work with domestic violence survivors on barriers to receiving the services they need, and gang and drug prevention work in a Seattle neighborhood. Additionally, elder abuse researchers and practitioners successfully convened groups focused on developing a participatory research agenda (Pillemer et al, 2011).

**Research Highlight**

Dr. Henrika McCoy’s SURVIVE Project is a three-year study on victimization experiences of young Black males. Demonstrating a strength- and community- based approach, the team revised the instrument based on cognitive interviews and focus groups, prioritized Black men as the staff on the ground, met participants where they were, and expanded the scope to include Black women as key sources. They ultimately created instruments for research and practice as well as resources for other researchers.
2. **Researchers should fill the gaps they find and be prepared to defend their work.** It is important not to wait for anyone else to tackle the questions that need answering. As Dr. Carolyn West quoted of Toni Morrison, “If there’s a book that you want to read, but it hasn’t been written yet, then you must write it.” Researchers can think deeply and not just broadly about their research interests and areas on inquiry to find the many untold narratives. For example, the assumption of victimization in the military context is sexual violence against women, but there is much to explore about Black and Latinx men’s experiences of violence as well. Additionally, researchers will naturally bring their experience and interests to their work and this should be acknowledged and encouraged. Attendees argued that it is okay to bring your whole self to the work, be visible about experiences, and be verbal about what matters.

*When engaged in research on victims’ voices, it may be necessary to defend the work from funders, the public, or even Institutional Review Boards (IRB) who may challenge the approach or hold stereotypes about the participants.* Attendees cited common difficulties navigating IRBs, including misperceptions about victims’ fragility when many actually want to tell their stories and need that opportunity. There may also be complications when trying to fill research gaps with minors. For example, parental consent can be a major barrier to participation if researching sexual violence experiences. IRBs need training on victim-centered approaches to research and how to empower but still protect victims participating as research subjects.

Whether challenged by funders or an IRB, researchers may need to reassert the value of a study. For example, when only two participants showed up to a focus group on the coldest day of the year, the researcher had to reframe from the underlying question of “is this not an important enough study?” to highlight the fact that it was so important that those people overcame the elements to participate. **The priority should be accurately sharing the voices of people you want to capture and pointing out the positive value of what participating victims think about the issues at hand.**

3. **Research must be conducted in a victim-centered manner.** It is the responsibility of the researcher to create a safe space for survivors within the research context and to account for the risk of retraumatization. Researchers need to be honest about what they are looking for and ask victims exactly what they need. Especially within victimization research, it can be uncomfortable to ask individuals to participate in a study if they are not in a good place to participate. Therefore, it is advisable to create recruitment protocols and communication about recruitment to make sure an individual is in a place of healing and that participation will not be retraumatizing.

From a methodological perspective, the convening attendees recommended housing research in the community by meeting participants where and when they want and giving them what they need to get there. Researchers shared examples of focus groups conducted at Salvation Army, churches, and fraternity houses. Other common suggestions to make participants comfortable include offering food and not asking victims to retell their story multiple times unless it is necessary or they are interested in sharing.

**Researchers must be willing to listen to a victim’s whole story and not try to make someone fit a label or assumption.** If genuine, that demonstration of care by showing up, being consistent, and dependability is imperative.

**RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT**

Dr. Carlos Cuevos is conducting an ongoing three-city study on bias and hate crimes against Latinx youth and adults in the US. They successfully recruited participants and have them complete surveys by sending bilingual, diverse research staff to relevant cultural festivals and churches.
4. **Research methodologies and instruments must be designed intentionally.** While these goals can be integrated into more quantitative studies, research focused on capturing victims’ voices may require a different approach than traditional rigorous methods. Qualitative research has historically been undervalued in academia, but the storytelling that can be done through this research is often key to making policy change. Qualitative research not only tells a story to policymakers and the public, but also allows the victim to tell their own story about their experience. Unfortunately, there is a lack of longitudinal qualitative studies measuring victim experiences and needs over time. Trauma is not experienced linearly and feelings, goals, perceptions of justice, and needs change. However, these types of studies are very expensive and difficult to conduct.

Some challenges cited by the attendees are common to research in general, whereas other challenges are unique to researching victim experiences. Examples of the former include individuals interpreting survey and interview questions differently and how to maintain a personable interview when required to review informed consent or follow a script.

Victimization-specific research challenges include navigating how survivors are defined or classified – for example, someone who was trafficked versus someone who was involved in prostitution – and the potential for selection bias in research subjects, meaning those who had a good experience might be more willing and able to participate. Sampling approaches for representative, hard-to-reach populations are another important consideration. Snowball sampling is one approach that has some reported success, particularly with youth, but that could be done more effectively.

Of particular importance during the COVID-19 pandemic, attendees expressed concern about interviewing survivors over video and telephone. Because of the added difficulty of knowing when someone is uncomfortable, it is even more important to make sure survivors are in a safe place, are able to talk via technology, know they can opt out of certain questions, and identify signals that they are being triggered.

**When developing research instruments, the convening attendees emphasized the need to take time to get the questions right and that this process should include survivors.** It is important to always get their feedback and integrate it to the greatest extent possible. For example, the interviewer can take a step back to ask “How did that feel for you?” and, if it was upsetting, how it can be improved. This process can also reveal impactful disconnects in language and understanding between the researcher and participants. Moreover, the final question of any interview protocol can often be “Is there anything I should have asked you that I didn’t?” It is also helpful to think through what a research instrument was originally seeking to capture to consider whether it has applicability beyond the intended study and what its accessibility will be.

5. **Researchers should acknowledge and seek to understand the complexities of victim experiences.** This can include further exploration of structural barriers and structural racism facing victims and communities. One attendee cited a 2019 survey that found that nearly two-thirds of black adults (65%) say they’ve been in situations where people acted suspicious of them because of their race or ethnicity, while only a quarter of white adults and a third of both Asian and Hispanic adults report being in such situations (Horowitz, Brown & Cox, 2019). Research that centers the voices of survivors who are often overlooked or not believed can help us understand the social and historical forces that affect their experiences.

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**RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT**

Dr. Ingrid Johnson has spent the last two years studying sexual assault survivors’ experience reporting and pursuing cases with the Alaska State Policy, including asking about their perceptions of justice. The mixed-methods study relies on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with victims and system stakeholders combined with quantitative data from incident data and victim
One lens through which to capture victims’ voices is to take an intersectional approach to research and service provision. Intersectionality is a theory coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 to understand the connections between social identities like race, gender, and class that create unique advantages and disadvantages. Victims’ experiences of crime and their perceptions of justice invariably depend on their complex identities and life experiences, therefore it is essential to capture these nuanced perspectives within research.

Another way to fully understand victim experiences is by examining intergenerational harm or transgenerational trauma. Similarly, the families and informal networks of victims are a pool of mostly untapped knowledge.

6. **Accessibility and dissemination of findings is key.** Researchers and practitioners alike can be intentional and creative from the beginning about how to set up findings to be accessible. Researchers can make sure that research is disseminated in ways that are easy to utilize and understand, and empower practitioners to share their needs with researchers to ensure that happens.

Attendees recommended sharing information in many forms, but several suggested that in-person connections would have the most impact. Examples of dissemination strategies included the following:

- Fact sheets and short practitioner-friendly briefs versus longer research reports
- Systematic literature reviews
- Videos
- Presentations at practitioner-oriented conferences and events and academic settings
- Conversations with participating practitioners and community organizations about the results
- In-service trainings
- Report to the legislature

Attendees also highlighted the challenges with accessibility when funders’ priorities change — and therefore no longer house research products — or when resources are not available without access to university websites. One suggestion is to create a landing ground for materials. Researchers can carve out funds within project budgets to create a project website to house products and instruments using practitioner-friendly language or make products available through a personal website. Project staff can also print copies of reports and summaries to mail or provide at events. The attendees also referred to the difficulty of keeping up with literature that is constantly growing and changing, especially given the high cost of journal subscriptions. CVR’s research syntheses, bibliographies, and library are valuable tools for addressing those needs.

7. **Research plays an important role in illuminating perspectives of justice.** The convening made clear that defining justice is an individual experience. However, when victims are not asked good questions about their perception of justice, they often do not know how to answer them.

Survivor-defined justice may look different from the extant criminal justice system and may differ from the perspectives of other stakeholders. Several projects are finding that survivors prefer to think proactively and to invest
in social services and awareness programs to stop issues before they arise. It is clear that more education is needed with system stakeholders about what justice means for individual victims. For example, multiple researchers, including those in Dr. Husseman’s Perceptions of Justice project, identified differences between survivors’ and the systems’ perceptions of justice, which started a conversation between and among stakeholders that previously was not possible.

Researchers and practitioners raised questions about integrating victim-centered and trauma-informed practices into the current justice system. For example, how to be respectful of people who do not want to be involved in a court case and how to hold individuals accountable without needing a victim to be part of the criminal case. These challenges are particularly relevant to cases of intimate partner or elder abuse, where victims may be physically, emotionally, and financially dependent upon their perpetrators.

Many also felt that harm must be approached from a systemic lens, it cannot be solely understood as the result of individual problems. The limited research that exists on victims with an intersectional lens also indicates that creating systems to better serve victims who sit at the nexus of vulnerabilities – e.g., racism, sexism, transphobia, poverty – will ultimately better serve everyone. As one attendee stated, “transformative imaginations may help us think about how to open up new structures to address harm, foster accountability, and minimize the structures that contribute to or foster harm in of themselves.”

8. Research can contribute to meaningful change. Particularly for the intersection of victimization and justice, quantitative and qualitative data can help correct myths, educate system actors and policymakers, and begin dialogues for change. Similar to the previous point about the importance of intersectionality, there are many myths about who victims are; when research asks the right questions, it can get beyond surface-level answers and help uncover the many aspects that are missed.

Researchers can begin by sharing finding effectively and starting conversations with diverse stakeholders on what the research says about where the criminal justice system may be falling short. Research can also inform what next steps may look like. Effective ways to engage stakeholders and make victims’ voices resonate with policymakers include the following:

• Educating service providers, prosecutors, and public defenders about how the dynamics of domestic violence put victims in the criminal justice system
• Training and technical assistance in conjunction with service providers and victims to courts on human trafficking
• Participating in crime-specific task forces (e.g., domestic violence, sexual assault, human trafficking) that seek to improve criminal justice responses
• Using qualitative research to give legislators a story and not just numbers
• Inviting victims to give testimony at hearings and other ways to participate in the dissemination phases of research
• Building relationships and working with a “champion” within the systems of focus to help guide efforts to educate and create change

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT
Dr. Judith Herman’s Justice from the Victim’s Perspective study conducted in-depth interviews with 22 victims of violent crime and found a wide variety of experiences and visions of justice, but that largely do not fit into either retributive or restorative

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT
Dr. Kristin Anderson’s study of three criminal courts for intimate partner violence found that only one offered victims a voice and a degree of choice and that voice and choice are distinct aspects of empowerment. They identified several components that are needed within the system to empower victims.
AREAS FOR GROWTH

Researchers and practitioners discussed multiple types of gaps in knowledge and outstanding questions, including gaps related to certain populations, settings, victimization experiences, and research methods. Attendees expressed a need for more research on LGBTQ victims and older victims. Violence research among and against the Latinx community is reportedly lagging behind the growth of that community. Similarly, victimization experiences of rural populations, particularly of Black people, are understudied due to a tendency to see violence as an urban problem, a lack of available service providers, and limited understanding of victimization by rural law enforcement. Appalachia is one particularly understudied rural area.

Additional research is also needed on intersectionality as related to victimization and perceptions of justice, such as the intersection of racism, sexism, poverty, transphobia, and homelessness. For example, one of the most vulnerable but least studied groups is Trans-Black women.

Attendees highlighted a lack of studies focused on victimization experiences and perceptions of justice within different systems, including federal systems, military settings, elderly institutional care settings, and Native-directed justice systems on reservations. Some types of harms that warrant additional focus include labor trafficking and trafficking of men; false accusations as a form of victimization in both the historical and current context; intergeneration trauma, particularly for marginalized groups; and structural violence, such as victims of intimate partner violence face in the systems with which they interact.

Pressing methodological questions included how to get more practitioner-initiated research and how programs can include survivor voices when deciding a research agenda. There is also a desire to understand how to elevate survivors as researchers themselves, what the ethical considerations may be, and what community-based participatory research can tell us about doing so in an empowering way. Lastly, the convening attendees believed the field would benefit from more qualitative and longitudinal studies about victimization experiences and victim needs.

Attendees identified a clear need for funding to support both research and practice sides of these efforts. Many state and federal funding sources focus on traditional criminal justice research, so it may be valuable to identify non-federal sources to research non-traditional approaches. Additionally, as discussed above, participants should be included in discussions and decisions about funding so as to not fund something that does not match their experience or what is important to them.
CVR Resources

CVR shared a number of resources to help researchers and practitioners capture victims’ voices on their experiences and perceptions of justice. To support these partnerships, CVR recommends that researchers join and practitioners search the Researcher Directory and that both groups refer to quick reference guides on Finding a Research Partner and Memorandum of Understanding MOUs. The Protecting Victims in Research Quick Reference Guide and tools are also highly relevant for this topic. Additionally, CVR has a collection of instruments for research and evaluation data collection that are available for free as examples to the field. It includes logic models, surveys, and focus group guides. Lastly, CVR has a collection of instruments for research and evaluation data collection that are available for free as examples to the field. It includes logic models, surveys, and focus group guides. Lastly, CVR has completed four research syntheses that summarize the state of the field on specific victimization types – homicide co-victimization, fraud and identity theft, elder abuse, and mass violence and terrorism – from the best available research, practice, and contextual materials.

Research Cited


**Reference Resources**

Throughout the convening, attendees recommended resources to promote best practices in victim research and sites to find examples of research and accessible products. Those references include:

- "Why Am I Always Being Researched?" Guidebook
- Center for Health Equity Research Chicago
- VAWNet.org
- Urban Institute Gun Violence Initiative
- Appalachian Research Center
- Examples of research project websites for dissemination:
  - SURVIVE Project Website
  - 3/40 Blueprint Project Website
- Examples of researcher personal websites for dissemination:
  - http://www.henrikamccoy.com
  - http://drcarolynwest.com/

_Center for Victim Research: Convening Policy Brief | 9_