Victim-Centered, Trauma-Informed Practices

An Overview

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In Memoriam

His co-authors dedicate this publication to the memory of Jim Markey, whose dedication to highlighting the significance of a victim-centered and trauma-informed approach to supporting crime victims and solving cases has enhanced the law enforcement field.

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Multidimensional Impact of Trauma

Extensive research demonstrates the significant impact that crime victimization can have on individuals. Trauma resulting from victimization may be acute, such as in response to a single incident like an accident or assault, or chronic, in response to prolonged exposure to distressing circumstances like ongoing domestic violence (Haskell and Randall 2019). Trauma may also be described as complex when an individual endures severe, repetitive events over an extended period of time, such as in cases of child abuse or human trafficking (NCTSN 2022; Terr 2013). While the effects of trauma are more thoroughly documented for victims[1] of sexual assault and domestic violence than for other forms of victimization, it is important to recognize that all forms of victimization have the potential to cause trauma. This literature review will provide a research-based overview of the benefits of trauma-informed, victim-centered approaches in law enforcement response to crime victims. In addition, it will highlight evidence-based considerations for law enforcement personnel in the areas of evidence collection, investigations, interviews, and communication.

The impact of trauma differs widely among individuals and may permeate several aspects of a victim's life, including the physical, psychological, and psychosocial domains. Trauma response may vary such that symptoms fluctuate throughout a victim's lifespan (Lalor and McElvaney 2010; Zinzow et al. 2012). Physical symptoms may range from injuries sustained during an assault to long-term challenges such as chronic pain, sleep difficulties, gastrointestinal issues, cardiopulmonary problems, or neurological symptoms (Planty et al. 2013; Campbell and Townsend 2011). Psychological impacts may include conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), eating disorders, depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, cognitive difficulties, bipolar disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (Langton and Truman 2014; Dworkin et al. 2017; National Center for PTSD 2018; Bonomi et al. 2018; Zinzow et al. 2012). Psychosocial impacts may result in a victim's withdrawal from regular activities, increased aggression, difficulties at work or with family and friends, increased substance use, low self-esteem, or engagement in risky behaviors (Langton and Truman 2014; Lalor and McElvaney 2010; Ullman and Peter-Hagene 2014; Zinzow et al. 2012). Vulnerable individuals, such as children, adolescents, individuals with disabilities, or older persons, face unique

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1. This publication uses *victim* and *survivor* interchangeably to respect different people's preferences.

challenges and additional contributing factors that should be considered (Mastrocinque et al. 2015; Sumner et al. 2015; Terr 2013). For example, children who are victimized or witness a crime may not recognize trauma symptoms until adulthood (Herzog and Schmahl 2018; Schoedl et al. 2010).

The effects of trauma are unpredictable and vary based on numerous factors. For example, victims experiencing heightened arousal, fear, flashbacks, or anger may find it challenging to effectively communicate with law enforcement, appearing distracted or indifferent (Barrett and Hamilton-Giachritsis 2013; Maddox, Lee, and Barker 2012; Ask 2010). Others may be in shock, display flat affect, or show no visible signs of distress (Barrett and Hamilton-Giachritsis 2013; Ask 2010; Haskell and Randall 2019). A victim's response may also be influenced by past trauma or change in the hours or days following an incident. For some, the reported incident may not be the most pressing issue; rather, they may prioritize needs related to housing, food security, work, child care, or school. Some victims may be unable to report the crime immediately after it occurred because of safety concerns, denial, shock, embarrassment, or mistrust of law enforcement (Mason and Lodrick 2013; Haskell and Randall 2019). Delayed reports can be more challenging than immediate ones to investigate because key evidence, witnesses, and time may have been lost.

Neurobiology of Trauma

Understanding the neurobiology of trauma is essential for law enforcement personnel to effectively engage with victims. Research indicates that trauma can disrupt the brain's memory encoding process, leading to disjointed and fragmented recollections of an event (Howie and Ressler 2020; Cozolino 2017; Haskell and Randall 2019). During traumatic incidents, the brain does not encode memories in a linear, chronological order, which can result in gaps and a focus on some specific details over others. As a result, victims may have difficulty conveying their experiences coherently and may instead provide confusing, nonlinear, or inconsistent accounts of the incident (Howie and Ressler 2020; Wilson, Lonsway, and Archambault 2020). Law enforcement personnel unfamiliar with the neurobiology of trauma might misinterpret a victim's fragmented or inconsistent account as uncooperative behavior or even deception (Franklin et al. 2020; Maddox, Lee, and Barker 2012; Venema 2016). Such misinterpretations may result in victims being perceived as not credible, further exacerbating their trauma and potentially hindering the investigative process (Franklin et al. 2020; Greeson, Campbell, and Fehler-Cabral 2014).

Benefits of a Victim-Centered, Trauma-Informed Approach

To support individuals who have experienced trauma, it is essential to use a victim-centered, trauma-informed approach. A **victim-centered** approach puts the victims' priorities, needs, and interests at the center of the work with them, including by helping them to make informed decisions, by prioritizing restoring their feelings of safety and security, and by safeguarding against policies and practices that may inadvertently retraumatize victims (OVC 2020).

A **trauma-informed** approach is delivered with an understanding of the vulnerabilities and experiences of trauma survivors, including the prevalence and physical, social, and emotional impact of trauma; recognizes signs of trauma in victims, personnel, and others; and integrates knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, practices, and settings (OVC 2020).

It is also important to consider **culturally responsive** approaches, which involve understanding, learning from, and interacting effectively with people of varied cultures, including by drawing on culturally based values, traditions, spiritual beliefs, customs, languages, and behaviors to plan, implement, and evaluate programs and services (Center for Court Innovation 2016; Reyes and Curry-Stevens 2014).

Victim-centered, trauma-informed approaches in policing have numerous benefits. Law enforcement agencies can help mitigate the impact of trauma by responding in a trauma-informed manner and connecting victims and survivors to resources (Ekström 2015; Greeson, Campbell, and Fehler-Cabral 2014), thus enhancing the victims' healing processes (Campbell et al. 2015; Feeney, Campbell, and Cain 2018). In addition, victim-centered, trauma-informed policing may lead to better criminal justice outcomes. Victims are more likely to remain engaged and participate in investigative steps when they feel supported, resulting in more thorough and productive investigations (Kaiser, O'Neal, and Spohn 2017; Maddox, Lee, and Barker 2011). In contrast, law enforcement personnel who do not understand the impacts of trauma may misinterpret victims' responses, leading to concerns about the credibility of the victim's report (Barrett and Hamilton-Giachritsis 2013; Maddox, Lee, and Barker 2011; Ask 2010). Law enforcement personnel who receive

training on trauma-informed approaches can recognize and understand myths about crime victims, enhance victim engagement, engage in effective interviews, strengthen investigations, and facilitate improved outcomes.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) outlines six key principles for a trauma-informed approach that can be generalized and adapted to professionals in multiple settings, including law enforcement (SAMHSA 2014).

1. Prioritize the victim's physical and psychological safety. This prioritization may include referring the victim to support services and providing immediate resources. It may also include scheduling a victim interview at a time and location chosen by the victim and with support persons available.

2. Be open and transparent to build trust and rapport with victims. This transparency may include timely communication about investigative next steps, clear and empathetic discussions regarding case limitations, and consistent follow-up, such as returning property on time and maintaining regular communication.

3. Peer support recognizes that victims may benefit from receiving assistance from other individuals who have experienced trauma, their families, and those they consider their support systems. Law enforcement can facilitate this connection to peer support by referring to victim advocacy organizations and community resources.

4. Through collaboration and mutuality, stakeholders leverage their collective efforts to implement a comprehensive trauma-informed approach. This cooperation can include collaboration between patrol officers and investigators, between law enforcement personnel and prosecutors, among law enforcement agencies across jurisdictions or within the same or surrounding jurisdictions (e.g., university and local law enforcement), and among law enforcement and external organizations through multidisciplinary teams, victim advocacy, and other social services. This collaboration should also include victims, acknowledging the value of their opinions and views.

5. Those impacted by trauma deserve a voice. This voice can be supported through their involvement with the criminal justice system. This empowerment and choice can facilitate recovery. For example, if a victim says they are not ready to be interviewed or engage with the criminal justice process, respect this choice and collaborate with the victim to determine if or when they may desire to engage. Similarly, if a victim decides to proceed with a particular investigative step, make efforts to accommodate that decision.

6. Understand how cultural and historical contexts may influence a victim's reaction. For example, agencies should acknowledge how the cultural norms or historical injustices experienced by different communities may impact their engagement with the criminal justice system.

Research has documented how a victim's willingness to participate in the investigative process, trust in the criminal justice system, and motivation to proceed are affected by the initial treatment they receive from law enforcement, responders, and investigative personnel (Maddox, Lee, and Barker 2011). This literature review identifies current research-supported practices associated with those approaches and outlines how they can be integrated into each step of victim response, providing a solid foundation for law enforcement agencies to improve their victim-centered, trauma-informed policing. Programs like the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP)'s Enhancing Law Enforcement Response to Victims (ELERV) (https://www.theiacp.org/projects/enhancing-law-enforcement-response-to-victims-elerv) also introduce law enforcement leaders to these concepts and practices.

Victim Advocacy Integration

Victim advocacy integration into agency policies and practices is a critical component of victim-centered, trauma-informed policing. The research highlighted throughout this literature review emphasizes victim advocates' significant role in supporting victims during the investigative process, from offering immediate crisis intervention to ongoing long-term care (Brooks and Burman 2017; Patterson and Tringali 2015; SAKI 2019).

Victim advocates can be integrated in two primary ways: (1) community-based advocacy and (2) agency-based advocacy. Community-based advocacy refers to service providers who support victims of crime but are not directly affiliated with a law enforcement agency. These are typically nonprofit organizations that prioritize response to specific types of victimization, such as sexual assault, domestic violence, or human trafficking. Law enforcement benefits from collaborating and partnering with community-based advocates, especially when victims need assistance that extends beyond the scope of law enforcement's role, like shelter, social services, or housing assistance.

Agency-based advocacy programs, also known as law enforcement–based victim services, consist of advocates employed directly by law enforcement agencies or housed directly within an agency structure through a memorandum of understanding to provide agency-based services. The structure of such programs varies significantly. Some agency-based programs focus on supporting victims of specific types of crime, while others provide comprehensive support for all cases (IACP 2019). Programs like the IACP's Law Enforcement–Based Victim Services (LEV) (https://www.theiacp.org/projects/law-enforcement-based-victim-services-lev) are designed to support agencies in integrating these specialized programs.

Through the integration of community- and agency-based advocates, law enforcement can provide comprehensive, victim-centered, trauma-informed responses. This integration not only ensures victims and survivors have access to a broad network of resources and services, but also offers more options and flexibility while strengthening the relationship among law enforcement, victims, and the community. For instance, victims seeking long-term advocacy support may choose to discuss their cases and their

rights with an agency-based advocate while simultaneously receiving ongoing support from a community-based advocate. The consistent involvement of victim advocates, whether community- or agency-based, is instrumental in enhancing victims' engagement with law enforcement and improving their overall experience with the criminal justice system. By expanding and refining the integration of victim advocacy, law enforcement agencies can ensure that victims receive the compassionate and comprehensive support they need during what is often the most challenging time of their lives.

Law Enforcement's Role in Responding to Trauma

Law enforcement personnel, both sworn and professional, respond regularly to individuals who have experienced traumatic events. Upon responding, officers are often directed to initiate care for the victim's immediate medical needs, identify witnesses, and locate a crime scene or suspect. They are also responsible for securing relevant case evidence, identifying potential witnesses and suspects, and providing necessary transportation (DOJ 2016; HRW 2013). Their role as the initial point of contact positions them to treat victims and co-victims with empathy; provide critical information, resources, and support; and involve them in decision-making. The quality of interaction with first responders can affect an individual's willingness to seek further help and engage with the criminal justice system (Kaiser, O'Neal, and Spohn 2017; IACP 2017a; Maddox, Lee, and Barker 2011; Parsons and Bergin 2010).

Despite this important role, first responders may receive limited training on victim response practices, including approaches that prioritize the victim and consider the impact of trauma. Often, initial instruction on victim response and information gathering during the interview process occurs during academy training. These trainings are often limited in scope, with research indicating that some officers do not receive additional training to prepare them to respond to complex crimes and may be unfamiliar with trauma-related concepts such as the neurobiology of trauma (Blue et al. 2016). To optimize outcomes for the victim and investigation, it is essential to equip first responders with comprehensive tools and guidance to implement victim-centered, trauma-informed approaches effectively.

The IACP outlines several key practices for first responders:

1. **Immediate health and safety.** Address the victim's urgent medical needs, respect their privacy, listen attentively and without interruption, and take steps to ensure their safety.

2. **Empathy and support.** Offer empathetic responses and allow the victim space to process and express their emotions, reassuring them that their reactions are valid and not uncommon.

3. **Information and guidance.** Answer questions about the reporting process and the criminal justice system and inform the victim about the next steps. Address their concerns with clarity and compassion (IACP 2017b).

Providing victims with comprehensive information is crucial in supporting an effective victim-centered, trauma-informed response. Officers should inform victims of their rights verbally and through written materials (DOJ 2016). To minimize re-traumatization, officers should avoid conducting in-depth interviews during the initial contact to minimize the number of times a victim must recount their traumatic experiences (HRW 2013). If victims display signs of acute trauma, officers should conduct a brief interview to gather essential facts. Throughout this process, officers should reassure victims that their case will be handled with seriousness and that their well-being is a priority (HRW 2013).

Responding to community needs

Victim-centered, trauma-informed responses should be tailored to address the unique needs of the individual victim. Individuals with disabilities may need a support person present, especially during the initial victim statement (OVC 2010). A support person can play a vital role in ensuring that the victim's rights are upheld and their needs are met. Victims who rely on assistive devices such as glasses, hearing aids, or mobility aids should have access to these devices prior to an interview to ensure effective communication and participation (DOJ 2020). For those who are D/deaf or hard of hearing, it is important to provide access to a sign language interpreter or facilitate communication through written means, based on their preference. Similarly, individuals with limited English proficiency should have access to a professional interpreter to ensure accurate information—avoid using family, friends, or community members as substitutes. Information on victims' rights and support services should be readily available in multiple languages and formats to accommodate the needs of the community.

Law enforcement response in medical settings

When officers respond to victims receiving medical treatment in hospitals, it is imperative that their presence not intimidate the victim, cause discomfort, or inadvertently pressure the victim to rush their medical care, potentially compromising the quality of that care (SAKI 2018). Officers should collaborate with hospital staff to determine appropriate times for interaction with the victim. For example, for victims of sexual assault, it is recommended that law enforcement personnel conduct initial interviews

separately from medical interactions to avoid legal issues related to privacy and the admissibility of statements (Gillad 2012; SAKI 2018). While joint interviews may reduce the number of times a victim must recount their experience, they can raise legal concerns and may blur the roles of the health care provider and law enforcement personnel. Best practice suggests that interviewing the victim separately from their health care provider maintains the legal integrity of the investigation and ensures the victim receives optimal patient-centered medical care (SAKI 2018).

Crime scenes and victim property

Patrol officers and deputies play a crucial role as first responders in various emergency situations, including vehicular accidents, homicides, and other crime scenes. Their initial response and demeanor can impact those involved. Officers and deputies should approach each scene with sensitivity and awareness of the needs of all individuals present, including victims, witnesses, family members, and other loved ones. Officers and deputies should communicate with care and avoid statements that might inadvertently minimize the severity of the situation.

When conducting on-scene preliminary investigations, the immediate safety and medical needs of those involved should be the priority. This priority includes promptly securing the scene to ensure it is safe for medical personnel and other first responders. In addition, identifying and securing victims' personal items, regardless of monetary or evidentiary value, is key to effective victim response. By safeguarding and eventually returning personal items, law enforcement demonstrates a commitment to the well-being of victims, which can foster trust and rapport (IACP 2021).

Death or trauma notifications

Death notifications, which may also be known as trauma notifications, are often provided by law enforcement to a victim's legal next of kin and other family members or loved ones. It is recommended that such notifications occur in person and with an advocate present who can offer immediate support and referral to relevant services (De Leo, Anile, and Ziliotto 2015). Death or trauma notification should take place in a location where the victim's loved ones have privacy. Responders should be clear, concise, and sensitive in their language; phrases like "they expired" or "we did everything we could" have

been reported to leave family and loved ones of homicide victims feeling confused and unsure of their loved ones' status (Mastrocinque et al. 2015). Active listening skills should be used to ensure that families are not overwhelmed with the information provided to them. Observing loved ones for any reactions that might indicate the risk of self-harm or harm to others is a critical safety measure. First responders should also consider the potential for nontraditional family dynamics or cultural considerations; for example, the legal next of kin may not necessarily be the individual most affected by the loss. In such cases, responders should offer to provide additional notifications to other critical loved ones (NSA 2010). In addition, individuals may decline standard support services and request culturally specific support instead. First responders should be trained in the cultural preferences and customs of individuals in their community and consider these preferences and customs in tandem with relevant policies, particularly regarding communication requirements for legal next of kin. These same principles should also apply when law enforcement have to notify next of kin and loved ones about a survivor's traumatic experience, as appropriate.

All crime victims should have the opportunity to access additional support services such as medical care, victim advocacy services, and social services assistance, whether through informational materials or direct referrals (Haskell and Randall 2019). Victims' interactions with first responders should be supportive and should facilitate connections to ongoing assistance within and beyond the criminal justice system.

Considerations for Evidence Collection

Thorough investigations include the sensitive task of collecting and processing evidence (Ballou et al. 2013). While essential and a critical step in the criminal justice process, collecting and processing evidence can inadvertently activate trauma responses in victims, co-victims, and their family members. In cases of violent crimes such as sexual assault, domestic violence, elder abuse, homicide, or incidents resulting in injury such as vehicular accidents, the victim's body may be part of the crime scene.

It is important that law enforcement personnel balance the technical requirements of evidence gathering with a compassionate understanding of the victims' and co-victims' experiences. Observing and responding to their reactions during evidence collection is key to effective trauma-informed practice. Whenever possible, victim advocates should be involved during evidence collection and other procedures that may have unintended impacts on victims, such as violent crime scene processing, child death re-enactments, gunshot residue testing, or forensic examinations. Victim advocates can provide the necessary support and ensure that the victims' needs are being met (IACP 2017a).

When collecting personal property or evidence from a crime scene for investigative purposes, law enforcement personnel should work with victims to set realistic expectations regarding the collection, retention, and potential return of their property. This expectation setting includes discussing the duration for which the property will be held, the condition in which items will be returned, and the handling of property during court proceedings (Jordan 2008). Efforts should be made to return the property to the victim in the same condition in which it was collected and within the agreed time frame (DOJ 2016; SAMHSA 2014). In addition, efforts should be made to return property in neutral packaging and free from biohazards. When possible, law enforcement personnel should respect a victim's decision to decline property submission for evidence processing (DOJ 2016), particularly when it involves personal devices that contain sensitive information. While this exclusion may not always be possible, clear guidance and early communication about what information is being sought can help prevent misunderstandings and foster transparency and trust between law enforcement and the victim.

Documenting injuries

Documenting the injuries sustained by victims is crucial in crime investigations, particularly those involving visible injuries. However, the process of photographing injuries must be approached with care and sensitivity. In cases of sexual assault, research indicates that many victims prefer photographs to be taken by a medical forensic examiner or a forensic examiner accompanied by law enforcement (Nittis and Hughes 2021). Therefore, law enforcement personnel should limit instances where a victim is photographed without the presence of a forensic examiner or trained crime scene specialist. When taking photographs is necessary, officers should clearly communicate the photographs' purpose and obtain consent from the victim before proceeding. Agencies should involve victim advocates in this process if possible.

The photographer's role may have implications for how photographs are used and protected. Photographs taken by a medical forensic examiner are subject to Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) regulations. In contrast, those taken by law enforcement personnel become part of the official police record (Nittis and Hughes 2021). Regardless of who takes the photographs, the process should be clearly explained to the victim in a trauma-informed manner, helping them feel supported and less vulnerable (Nittis and Hughes 2021).

Medical forensic examinations

Law enforcement should inform victims of their rights to have a medical forensic examination, including forensic evidence collection, free of charge or reimbursed through crime victim compensation funds (DOJ 2016). These conversations should be facilitated by advocates if possible. If victims choose to have forensic evidence collected and processed, they should be clearly informed about the communication process for the results of the forensic tests, expected timelines for receiving the results, and outcomes that may be anticipated from the findings (SAMHSA 2014). Although some victims may choose not to have a forensic examination, they should still be provided with the necessary information to make an informed decision about evidence collection and testing. Regardless of the victim's choice, law enforcement personnel should respect their decision, regardless of when the crime occurred or the perceived investigative utility of the evidence at the time of collection (SAKI 2021). Law enforcement should fully commit to conducting a thorough investigation regardless of forensic testing outcomes (SAKI 2018). This approach ensures that all individuals are treated with dignity and that their legal rights are upheld throughout the investigative process.

Considerations for Investigations

Robust investigations are supported by physical evidence and do not rely solely on the victim's engagement or their perceived credibility. The overall intent of any investigation is to be fair, balanced, and thorough. Gathering all physical and testimonial evidence is crucial. Victim-centered, trauma-informed approaches, including prioritizing the victim's choices, should be implemented during all investigative stages, starting with case assignments (Wilson, Pence, and Conradi 2013). If possible, investigators should promptly follow up with victims—ideally, on the same day the crime is reported. The initial victim contact can allow the investigator to establish rapport, build trust, and explain the investigative process (Kaiser, O'Neal, and Spohn 2017; Maddox, Lee, and Barker 2011; Hershkowitz, Lamb, Katz, and Malloy 2015).

Victim interviews

Law enforcement's interaction with victims during interviews is crucial to the outcome of an investigation. Research suggests that trauma-informed interviewing is vital to victims' short-term safety and long-term stability (Reaves 2017). Before the interview, it is imperative that investigators determine if any accommodation is needed, such as physical accommodations or interpreters. Trauma-informed victim interviews are considered best practice because they (1) support a victim in recalling details of the event, (2) strive to minimize re-traumatization, (3) efficiently gather information necessary to thoroughly investigate the case, and (4) balance investigative needs with the psychological and physical health of the victim (HRW 2013; IACP 2017a; Rich 2019). A trauma-informed interview strategy increases trust and communication between the victim and the investigator. There are several components to a trauma-informed victim interview, including when, where, with whom, and how the interview is conducted.

When. The timing of the interview is an important consideration for investigators. Victims' readiness for an interview can vary significantly. While some victims may feel ready to discuss the incident shortly after it occurs, others may not be emotionally or physically prepared for the interview. In addition, those experiencing acute trauma reactions may find it challenging to process their experiences effectively in a way that can be communicated to an investigator. Trauma-informed approaches suggest conducting a comprehensive investigative interview after the victim has completed at least two full sleep cycles after the victimization (Haskell and Randall 2019). Research

indicates that delaying the interview allows the initial trauma effects to subside, enabling the brain to begin consolidating memories encoded during the traumatic event (Haskell and Randall 2019; McIntyre, McGaugh, and Williams 2012). Initiating a comprehensive victim interview too soon may be frustrating for both the victim and the investigator, as those who have recently experienced trauma may only be able to describe fragmented accounts of their victimization (Howie and Ressler 2020; Cozolino 2017). Having a victim describe their traumatic experience immediately after the event could potentially worsen symptoms by reinforcing the traumatic memory (Zohar et al. 2011).

By temporarily delaying the comprehensive interview, victims can seek additional support services, such as victim advocacy or connecting with loved ones. They can also receive essential medical care and address immediate priorities (HRW 2013). While these actions may affect an ongoing investigation, providing victims the opportunity to address immediate needs and prioritize their well-being may enhance their focus and engagement during the interview, supporting improved outcomes.

Where. A victim-centered approach encourages investigators to conduct interviews in a comfortable and safe setting chosen by the victim, such as their home or a safe public space. This can help facilitate a more open dialogue (HRW 2013). But even if law enforcement agencies require formal victim interviews to take place at agency facilities, proactive steps can still be taken to address potential barriers, such as the victim's access to transportation and the availability of suitable interview spaces within the facility. Personnel should try to alleviate these challenges before conducting interviews (SAMHSA 2014).

When choosing the space for an interview, law enforcement personnel should establish private and welcoming settings, which can include a designated space within agency facilities. For example, a "soft interview room," distinct from a standard interview or interrogation room, is a space with comfortable furnishings and complete privacy (no two-way mirror) designed to help a victim feel safe while at the agency. To further enhance the victim's comfort and increase their sense of agency, law enforcement personnel should consider offering the victim options, such as where to sit, offering appropriate refreshments, and ensuring tissues are readily available (Canaff, Lonsway, and Archambault 2020). These gestures can contribute to a supportive environment to ease the victim's discomfort and facilitate a more effective interview process. By being given choices, the victim may feel a greater sense of control and empowerment during the interaction.

Who. Law enforcement personnel conducting victim interviews should be trained in trauma-informed interviewing techniques (Rich and Seffrin 2012). Research shows that investigators without training may engage in questioning strategies that are not conducive to recalling traumatic events, such as linear questioning, or engage in confrontation or other aggressive techniques, which research suggests are ineffective (Milne, Shaw, and Bull 2007). In contrast, investigators equipped with specialized victim interview training can approach interviews with trauma-informed strategies (Tidmarsh, Sharman, and Hamilton 2021; Rich and Seffrin 2012) that support the victim and the investigation.

Victims should be informed of their right to have an interpreter, advocate, or support person present during their interview (Patterson and Tringali 2015; Brooks and Burman 2017; DOJ 2016). This support person may be a family member, friend, or member of a faith-based organization. The presence of a support person during an interview can significantly improve the victim's comfort level when recounting traumatic events. However, including the support individuals may raise investigative concerns. The investigator is responsible for clearly and impartially explaining the role, guidelines, and involvement of these support persons to the victim. They should also provide information about the legal and investigative implications of their presence. This allows the victim and their support person to make an informed decision. Providing the victim with this information and option is in line with victim-centered, trauma-informed strategies (SAMHSA 2014). For victims with limited English proficiency, a professional interpreter is strongly recommended. It is critical that law enforcement personnel provide a qualified interpreter and refrain from relying on the victim's relatives, friends, or other acquaintances (NSA 2010).

How. The way interviews are conducted is crucial. Interviews should create a dialogue that is respectful and empowering for the victim. This approach allows the victim to recall events at their own pace. Investigators should initiate the interview with expressions of gratitude and reassurance, such as, "Thank you for being here" and "You are safe here," while also validating victim reactions with phrases such as "There is no right or wrong way to express yourself" (HRW 2013). This approach establishes an encouraging, victim-centered atmosphere. Investigators can further enhance this atmosphere by asking open-ended questions such as "Where would you like to start?" or "What are you comfortable sharing with me?" These prompts encourage the victim to share their experiences in their own words and at their own pace (IACP 2017a). Investigators should also be cautious about making any promises to victims and survivors.

As the victim shares their experience, investigators should listen intently and refrain from interrupting, allowing the victim to express themselves before seeking clarification (Haskell and Randall 2019). Follow-up questions should be open-ended and reflect the language and expressions used by the victim to maintain a sense of familiarity and comfort (Haskell and Randall 2019). Investigators should refrain from asking questions that start with "why" or "explain to me" to avoid any perception of disbelief or blame (IACP 2017a). Because trauma may hinder the victim's ability to recount events of the crime in sequential order, investigators should be flexible when asking for a chronological recall of events (Wilson, Pence, and Conradi 2013; Haskell and Randall 2019). When victims need support recalling additional details, investigators should refrain from asking specific questions or filling in gaps, opting instead for open-ended questions. Investigators may use memory cues related to the victim's thoughts or feelings during the event (Canaff, Lonsway, and Archambault 2020; Wilson, Lonsway, and Archambault 2020; IACP 2017a). For example, instead of saying, "Tell me what happened next," an investigator might ask, "What, if anything, were you hearing at the time?" or "What were you feeling at that moment?" Asking questions in this format may elicit additional recollections about the event (Wilson, Pence, and Conradi 2013; Haskell and Randall 2019). During the interview, investigators should outline different options for the victim, allowing them to pause, reflect, or skip questions as needed. In addition, showing compassion and offering breaks can help maintain the victim's comfort and trust if the victim becomes distressed.

Nonverbal communication during the interview is as important as verbal interactions with the victim. Investigators should be welcoming and empathetic to the victim's experiences. This empathy can be demonstrated by maintaining a calm demeanor, using a nonjudgmental tone, making appropriate eye contact, and ensuring body language is nonthreatening (Haskell and Randall 2019). Investigators should allow silence while a victim processes their answers and avoid gestures that may imply rushing or questioning the victim (Canaff, Lonsway, and Archambault 2020). Addressing inconsistencies should be done carefully, framing them as opportunities for clarification rather than contradictions or intentional omissions (Howie and Ressler, 2020; Cozolino, 2017; Rich 2019; Wilson, Lonsway, and Archambault, 2020). After the interview, the investigator should provide the victim with information regarding the next steps and their contact information (IACP 2017a).

Recording interviews

Researchers' findings on recording victim interviews are mixed (Milne, Shaw, and Bull 2007; Archambault and Lonsway 2020b), with some noted advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages. Recording the interview may reduce the number of times a victim needs to recount their victimization. It allows the investigator to be more engaged and present with the victim because they do not need to focus on taking notes (Canaff, Lonsway, and Archambault 2020; Milne, Shaw, and Bull 2007). Recording can capture information that handwritten notes may not.

Disadvantages. Because of the trauma they have experienced, the victim's account may be inconsistent with information obtained or remembered later or may lack details, which can lead to their credibility being challenged. Recorded interviews leave little room for the victim to clarify inconsistencies in their narrative after the interview as they further piece together their traumatic memories (Archambault and Lonsway 2020b). Investigators may be more prone to using audio recordings as a substitute for a comprehensive report.

If victim interviews are recorded, obtaining the victim's consent and adhering to agency policies is imperative (Archambault and Lonsway 2020b). Regardless of whether the interview is recorded, investigators should comprehensively summarize the victim interview in their case files, including objectively describing the victim's physical condition (e.g., sustained injury, shaking, crying, startle responses to loud noises) and emotional state (e.g., stoic, cannot focus, distressed, fearful) (NIJ 2024).

Witnesses

Witnesses may hold valuable information about the crime or the circumstances surrounding it for some investigations. Witnesses identified by the victim should be pursued, regardless of whether the investigator understands their immediate relevance to the case. Trauma can also impact a victim's ability to recall and articulate the role of a witness (Howie and Ressler 2020). While not victims of a crime themselves, witnesses

may also experience trauma symptoms or other effects of secondary trauma (Patki et al. 2015). Law enforcement personnel should engage the previously described victim-centered, trauma-informed interview approaches with witnesses.

Victim communication

Ongoing communication, beyond the completion of the initial investigation and interview, is essential between law enforcement personnel and victims. Research shows that one of the primary sources of dissatisfaction for victims is the absence of consistent follow-up and their inability to obtain information about their cases from investigators (Jordan 2008; HRW 2013). SAMHSA's key principles for a trauma-informed approach highlight the importance of trustworthiness and transparency (2014). Consistent and reliable communication not only fosters trust but also encourages victims to stay engaged in the investigative process (Maddox, Lee, and Barker 2011; HRW 2013; Jordan 2008).

Law enforcement personnel are encouraged to maintain regular contact with victims about the status of their cases, even if there is no update to report (HRW 2013). Investigators should develop a communication plan that prioritizes responding to the victim's requests for information within the promised timeline and via the victim's preferred communication mode (e.g., call, text, email). Investigators should provide advance notice to victims regarding the next steps in the criminal justice process, such as processing evidence or engagement with the suspect (HRW 2013). Timely communication with the victim can help ensure their safety, privacy, and autonomy. In instances where a victim becomes unresponsive to communication attempts, investigators should explore alternative methods of contact while safeguarding the security and confidentiality of the communication to prevent unauthorized access or accidental disclosure (SAMHSA 2014). Engaging victim advocates can be instrumental in this process. Some agencies have established guidelines specifying the number of contact attempts that should be made before concluding the victim does not wish to further engage with law enforcement (SAKI 2022a). These measures are designed to respect the victim's autonomy while ensuring they receive the necessary support and information.

Communicating information about the suspect

When law enforcement identifies a suspect, it is important to inform the victim of any contact they attempt, including arresting, detaining, or interviewing the suspect. Law enforcement personnel must consider the potential ramifications of such contact for the victim. For instance, victims of domestic violence may be at increased risk of further harm when the suspect learns the crime has been reported (McFarlane et al. 2015). In cases involving sexual assault, child abuse, and similar crimes, known suspects may engage in intimidation, retaliation, or other harmful behaviors upon learning of law enforcement involvement. To mitigate these risks, victims should always be informed when law enforcement personnel plan to contact a suspect, and investigators should assess the victim's safety before and after the suspect's interaction with law enforcement (SAMHSA 2014; Lindhorst, Nurius, and Macy 2005). Involving victim advocates in the safety planning process can enhance the support provided to the victim. Victim advocates can work with the victim to assess their specific circumstances and needs and refer them to immediate or emergency resources.

Communicating about case resolution

Case clearance should be based on careful analysis of the evidence identified through an investigation. How cases are closed or resolved may impact how victims perceive their experience with the criminal justice system (Feeney, Campbell, and Cain 2018). It is important to set realistic expectations about case resolution from the start of the working relationship (USCRI-TVAP 2021) and to communicate case resolution options about the investigation. For example, law enforcement can inform victims of charging criteria (e.g., the crime will be charged as a misdemeanor instead of a felony) and limitations of the investigation (e.g., lack of suspect interview, challenges related to lack of evidence). Law enforcement should avoid attributing any limitations in the investigation to the victim. In addition, SAMHSA's (2014) trauma-informed principles suggest that all forms of case resolution should be clearly communicated to the victim.

Considerations for communication of case closure to victims may differ based on which clearance method is used (Archambault and Lonsway 2020a). For cases cleared by arrest, law enforcement personnel should explain the next steps of the criminal justice

process to the victim and provide a supportive transition to those taking over the case (i.e., prosecution). Investigators should make clear that arrests do not always lead to convictions and that the suspect may not be incarcerated at the time of case clearance. In circumstances where victim safety remains a concern, law enforcement should engage with victim advocates who can help assess victims' safety and support them in developing a safety plan if necessary (HRW 2013).

For cases cleared by exceptional means,[2] law enforcement personnel should inform the victim of the case closure decision and answer any follow-up questions. In addition, victims should be informed of their options, including information related to civil remedies, restorative justice approaches, and long-term support services (SAMHSA 2014).

For cases determined to be unfounded, law enforcement personnel should sensitively communicate the reasons with the victim, ensuring they do not diminish the victim's experience or suggest that the crime did not occur (HRW 2013; Canaff, Lonsway, Archambault 2020). Victims should be made aware of alternative support options, such as advocacy services. An investigative supervisor should review all cases closed as unfounded (SAKI 2022a).

In cases where the victim decides to withdraw from the investigative process, law enforcement personnel should provide the victim with relevant resources such as victim advocacy, support services, and shelter information. Victims should also be informed that they have the option to re-engage with law enforcement and discuss the possibility of reopening the case. Agencies should not use waivers or similar documents in which victims affirm their decision to cease participation in an investigation (IACP 2017b).

In cases categorized as pending or inactive, law enforcement personnel should inform the victim of the criteria, such as discovery of new evidence or leads, necessary to reopen the investigation. The investigator should describe their plan for contacting the victim if new information develops and verify the victim's contact information. In addition, law

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2. Four conditions must be met to qualify for exceptional clearance. Law enforcement must have (1) identified the offender; (2) gathered enough evidence to support an arrest, make a charge, and turn over the offender to the court for prosecution; (3) identified the offender's exact location so that the suspect could be taken into custody immediately; and (4) encountered a circumstance outside the control of law enforcement that prohibits the agency from arresting, charging, and prosecuting the offender.

enforcement should explain—and, if available, provide written information about—the statute of limitations applicable to the case and notify the victim of the anticipated timeline for indefinite closure.

Communicating about cold cases

In some circumstances, law enforcement personnel will communicate with victims and co-victims to encourage their re-engagement with the criminal justice process in previously closed or inactive cases. This re-engagement is most prevalent in incidents involving sexual assault and homicide. Victim notification, an essential step in the process, occurs when the notifier (i.e., a law enforcement officer, investigator, advocate, or combination of individuals) locates the victim, reviews the case history, discusses renewed case activity, and presents options for moving forward within the criminal justice system (Feeney, Campbell, and Cain 2018). Often, victim notification for cold case sexual assault ends with the notifier asking the victim if they would like to re-engage with the criminal justice system (Campbell, Shaw, and Fehler-Cabral 2018). Some notifications occur soon after the initial closure of the case (e.g., because of a CODIS [Combined DNA Index System] hit notification), while others occur years after the initial incident (e.g., because of case connectivity via new laboratory practices or investigative practices). Similarly, some victims may anticipate the notification, while others may be surprised by the development in their case. In some circumstances, such as previously unsubmitted sexual assault kits (SAK), victims may be learning for the first time during the notification that their case was closed or the rationale for the closure (Ritter 2016).

Law enforcement must delicately and skillfully navigate these notifications, as how victims are treated during the notification is critical to their re-engagement, healing, and overall satisfaction with the criminal justice system (Ahrens et al. 2016; Busch-Armendariz, Sulley, and Morris 2015; Campbell et al. 2017; Feeney, Campbell, and Cain 2018). Research on victim notification has been conducted in the context of previously untested SAKs, and these findings may be relevant to other cold case notifications.

Best practices for cold case notifications are similar to those for death or trauma notifications: For example, only highly trained personnel should conduct such notifications and whenever possible notifications should occur in person and with an advocate present (SAKI 2019). Notifiers should answer all questions posed by the victim or co-victim to the best of their ability. They should allow a victim in a cold case sexual assault time to consider whether they would like to re-engage with the criminal justice system. The notifier should remember that renewed communication may activate a trauma response and be prepared for various reactions (Feeney, Campbell, and Cain 2018). As previously described, investigators should develop communication plans and prioritize responding to requests for information from victims and co-victims. These responses should return communications within the promised timelines using preferred communication modes (e.g., call, text, email).

Agency Practice Considerations

Legislation and policies

Law enforcement practices for victim response are informed, in part, by legislative guidance. Federal legislation, like the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA), establishes fundamental rights for victims, such as the right to reasonable protection from the accused and the right to notification of any release of the accused (1984). Every state, the District of Columbia, and several U.S. territories have comprehensive frameworks for the rights and protections of victims of crime in their statutory codes (OJP 2022). In some states, additional legislation or amendments have encouraged victim-centered approaches to policing by upholding specific victims' rights. For example, California introduced the first Marsy's Law, which gives victims the rights to dignity and respect, due process, consultation with an attorney, prompt proceedings, freedom from intimidation, input on setting bail, and other similar rights (California Department of Justice 2022). Many states have subsequently added amendments similar to Marsy's Law to their constitutions (Cassell and Garvin 2020). Other state laws protect additional rights, such as access to information regarding the progress of evidence testing (Michigan Act 227 of 2014). Such laws are rooted in trauma-informed approaches aimed at enhancing victims' awareness of their cases and facilitating informed decision-making. Law enforcement agency leadership should ensure agency sworn and professional staff are aware of and prepared to uphold victims' rights.

Beyond the legislative requirements, law enforcement agencies can support victims by instilling and practicing victim-centered, trauma-informed strategies through policy, protocol, and culture. For example, agency leadership can develop policies on expectations and protocols for communicating with victims at each stage of the criminal justice process or practices for conducting trauma-informed interviews. When developing policies, consider special populations that may require additional support, such as victims of crimes on university campuses who require Title IX assistance (Busch-Armendariz, Sulley, and Hill 2016) or victims who require interpretation services.

Leadership's role

While clear direction and written agency policy are critical, it is also incumbent upon agency leadership and command staff to consistently communicate their commitment to victim-centered, trauma-informed responses through everyday words and actions. Research indicates that leadership, including supervisors at all levels, plays a critical role in shaping the organizational culture of an agency or unit (Hassan and Jiang 2021). Accordingly, they should model victim-centered, trauma-informed behavior through how they speak about victims, their guidance to staff regarding response and investigations, and the integration of victim advocacy into overall agency victim response. They should ensure all agency personnel are trained in victim-centered, trauma-informed responsive practices and include those practices in performance evaluations and promotion criteria.

Multiple studies have documented the efficacy of victim-centered, trauma-informed training in enhancing law enforcement personnel's understanding and application of such approaches (Maddox, Lee, and Barker 2011; Tidmarsh, Sharman, and Hamilton 2021). Often, this training is delivered in academy settings and, in some instances, directly to investigators assigned to specialized units. However, victim-centered, trauma-informed practices implemented by all agency personnel (e.g., property room personnel, crime scene personnel, front desk personnel, dispatchers) play a critical role in the victim's experience and contribute to their healing. Important components of such training include information on the neurobiology of trauma, trauma responses, and resources available for supporting victims and survivors.

Agency leadership can further support victims and agency staff by ensuring the necessary personnel are assigned to investigate reported crimes. While research on the impact of law enforcement caseloads and workloads is limited, one study noted that assigning insufficient investigative personnel for follow-up was related to various challenges, including the following (Motsepe 2017):

1. Difficulties securing convictions

2. Inadequate staff supervision

3. Court delays

4. Unmanageable caseloads

5. Reluctance of witnesses to participate in the criminal justice process

6. Discrepancies in investigations

7. Other management challenges

Investigators with high caseloads and without support had difficulty allocating sufficient time to conduct thorough investigations (Motsepe 2017). Ideally, the number of cases per detective should align with the nature of the crime and the level of victim support and engagement required. Identifying the resources needed and assigning them appropriately can ensure adequate victim-centered, trauma-informed support for all crime victims.

Areas for Future Research

While the effectiveness of victim-centered, trauma-informed approaches in law enforcement has been demonstrated through evidence-based research, there are still many areas where additional research will provide significant benefit to the field.

Comprehensive training

It is important for all law enforcement personnel, regardless of their rank or role, to be trained in the complexities of trauma. This training includes a comprehensive understanding of trauma, including its effects on individuals, its signs and symptoms, and its impact on the brain. A critical evaluation of existing trauma-informed, victim-centered training used by law enforcement agencies should be assessed to determine its effectiveness in shaping officer behavior, improving victim outcomes, and improving justice system outcomes. The importance of trauma-informed training extends beyond patrol officers to all responders. Although the literature on this subject is limited, the available research underscores the necessity for comprehensive training for all personnel interacting with victims (Wolkin and Everett 2018). It is not enough merely to connect victims with trauma-informed services; responders themselves must embody trauma-informed principles to effectively aid in victim response and recovery (IACP 2017a).

Effectiveness across crime types and investigative practices

The current literature shows that victim-centered, trauma-informed approaches have proven effective in addressing sexual assault and domestic violence; however, additional research is needed about their application to other crime types. Future research should evaluate the effectiveness of these approaches in response to property crimes (e.g., burglary, motor vehicle theft, arson), other types of crimes against persons (e.g., robbery, aggravated assault), and financial crimes (e.g., fraud, elder exploitation). Such research will help establish best practices for integrating victim-centered, trauma-informed approaches into practical investigative procedures for these crime types. Understanding the barriers law enforcement agencies encounter when implementing these practices will lend valuable insights on how to support agencies more effectively.

Adaptation to different law enforcement agencies

With support from the COPS Office, the IACP, in partnership with RTI, collaborated with law enforcement agencies across the United States to document the implementation of victim-centered and trauma-informed approaches. The resulting case studies highlight promising practices, successful approaches to institutionalizing these efforts in agency philosophy and culture, lessons learned, and strategies for achieving long-term sustainability. Further research should explore how victim-centered, trauma-informed practices may differ based on specific contextual factors, such as agency size, type, geographic setting or region, and specific populations served (e.g., tribal community, university community).

Enhancing response to varied populations

Research is needed on how to best adapt victim-centered, trauma-informed approaches to effectively serve the multifaceted needs of varied populations. This adaptation includes developing strategies to address the needs of individuals. Language barriers, accessibility issues, cultural sensitivities, and other specific challenges faced by individuals must be understood to develop productive approaches to providing effective support.

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About the IACP

The **International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP)** is the world's largest and most influential professional association for police leaders. With more than 30,000 members in more than 165 countries, the IACP is a recognized leader in global policing. Since 1893, the association has been speaking out on behalf of law enforcement and advancing leadership and professionalism in policing worldwide.

The IACP is known for its commitment to shaping the future of the police profession. Through timely research, programming, and unparalleled training opportunities, the IACP is preparing current and emerging police leaders—and the agencies and communities they serve—to succeed in addressing the most pressing issues, threats, and challenges of the day.

The IACP is a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) organization headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia. The IACP is the publisher of *Police Chief* magazine, the leading periodical for law enforcement executives, and the host of the IACP Annual Conference, the largest police educational and technology exposition in the world. IACP membership is open to law enforcement professionals of all ranks, as well as non-sworn leaders across the criminal justice system. Learn more about the IACP at www.theIACP.org.

About the COPS Office

The **Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office)** is the component of the U.S. Department of Justice responsible for advancing the practice of community policing by the nation's state, local, territorial, and tribal law enforcement agencies through information and grant resources.

Community policing begins with a commitment to building trust and mutual respect between police and communities. It supports public safety by encouraging all stakeholders to work together to address our nation's crime challenges. When law enforcement and communities collaborate, they more effectively address underlying issues, change negative behavioral patterns, and allocate resources.

Rather than simply responding to crime, community policing focuses on preventing it through strategic problem-solving approaches based on collaboration. The COPS Office awards grants to hire community policing officers and support the development and testing of innovative policing strategies. COPS Office funding also provides training and technical assistance to community members and local government leaders, as well as all levels of law enforcement.

Since 1994, the COPS Office has been appropriated more than $21 billion to add community policing officers to the nation's streets, enhance crime fighting technology, support crime prevention initiatives, and provide training and technical assistance to help advance community policing. Other achievements include the following:

* To date, the COPS Office has funded the hiring of approximately 140,000 additional officers by more than 13,000 of the nation's 18,000 law enforcement agencies in both small and large jurisdictions.

* More than 800,000 law enforcement personnel, community members, and government leaders have been trained through COPS Office–funded training organizations and the COPS Training Portal.

* More than 1,000 agencies have received customized advice and peer-led technical assistance through the COPS Office Collaborative Reform Initiative Technical Assistance Center.

* To date, the COPS Office has distributed more than nine million topic-specific publications, training curricula, white papers, and resource CDs and flash drives.

The COPS Office also sponsors conferences, roundtables, and other forums focused on issues critical to law enforcement. COPS Office information resources, covering a wide range of community policing topics such as school and campus safety, violent crime, and officer safety and wellness, can be downloaded via the COPS Office's home page, https://cops.usdoj.gov.

The impact of trauma on victims can present challenges for law enforcement investigations. However, victim-centered, trauma-informed approaches to crime can support victim recovery and engagement with the criminal justice system. These approaches enhance victim and community safety while helping law enforcement solve and prevent crime. This publication, *Victim-Centered, Trauma-Informed Practices: An Overview*, collects and summarizes considerations from the field of trauma research for law enforcement agencies seeking to integrate a trauma-informed approach. It includes best practices in areas such as investigations, evidence collection, and victim communication.