

Conscience and convenience: American victim work in organizational context

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Abstract

Recent years have witnessed the proliferation of victim-focused positions inside and outside the criminal justice system, yet little is known about the occupational characteristics and organizational context of this field in the United States. In this article, we draw on 42 semi-structured interviews with victim workers from a variety of settings and organizational affiliations in the midwestern USA to describe their pathways, activities, and challenges. The data reveal key differences among the experiences of those who were publicly employed, affiliated with the nonprofit sector and working independently. The findings underscore the significance of organizational affiliation in understanding victim work, the value of strong public/private partnerships, and the necessity of reforms to the organizational culture of criminal justice agencies to optimize victim experiences.

Keywords

Victim services, criminal justice system, victim advocacy, criminal justice reform

Introduction

The victim rights movement of the 1970s and 1980s spurred the integration of victims into justice proceedings in the United States and elsewhere (Booth and Carrington, 2007; van Dijk, 1988) and led to a growth of roles that provide victims with support, information, services, referrals, and advocacy in the criminal justice infrastructure and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Globokar et al., 2016). Despite the expansion and diverse manifestations of victim work in the

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USA, research about the field's occupational mosaic and the experiences of victim workers across organizational contexts has been relatively under-developed (Globokar et al., 2016). Scholarship in this area has instead largely focused on underlying ideologies (van Dijk, 1988), service organizations (e.g. Mawby, 2016; Simmonds, 2016), and the effectiveness of services provided (e.g. Zweig and Yahner, 2013).

The current study describes the activities and experiences of victim workers in the USA and documents how organizational affiliation affects their work, drawing upon interviews with 42 individuals in a variety of victim-focused positions from a number of agencies and jurisdictions. The article concludes with implications for research and policy.

Review of the literature

Growth in victim support infrastructures

In recent decades the informational, practical, and emotional needs prompted by victimization (e.g. Chelimsky, 1981; Maguire and Corbett, 1987) have been met with expanded assistance, services, legal rights (O'Hara, 2005), and opportunities for victim participation in justice processes (Belooif, 1999; Erez and Roberts, 2013). There has been a corresponding expansion of paid and volunteer positions focused on victim needs inside and outside the justice system (Globokar et al., 2016), spurring a new 'victim industry' (Best, 1997) reinforced by a growth in 'victim capital' (Hall, 2017).

The victim support infrastructure has been varied in its development across the globe. In the USA, jurisdictions have adopted legislation to advance victims' procedural rights, inclusion in legal proceedings, restitution, and dignified treatment,¹ but in contrast to mandates put into place elsewhere (e.g. the European Union, Directive 2012/29/EU), American law has remained largely silent on access to emotional support or referrals to other services, which are often provided by NGOs.² As new roles have been formed within criminal justice agencies to implement victim-focused legal reforms, victim services have become a patchwork that currently spans across the public and NGO sectors.

Public versus nonprofit placement of victim services

Victim support schemes vary in the extent to which they are embedded within the criminal justice system.³ The desirability of such placement is open to debate. Those who work in the system may have greater access to officials such as law enforcement officers or prosecutors who affect victims' experiences (Smith et al., 2000). Their placement also facilitates the accessibility of victim support to victims at the moments that they engage in (often-stressful) interactions with the criminal justice system (e.g. Englebrecht, 2011; Erez and Ibarra, 2007; Erez et al., 2011; Hartman and Belknap, 2003; Schuster and Propin, 2011). Research has documented, for instance, how support by criminal justice agents can help battered women overcome apprehension about testifying in court (e.g. Erez and Ibarra, 2007), assist victims with the preparation and submission of impact statements (e.g. Schuster and Propin, 2011), and ease the stress of attending high intensity trials such as those related to the murder of a loved one (e.g. Erez et al., 2011).

Yet, history suggests the need for caution when embedding services within the criminal justice system. It may risk the compromise of client needs in favor of institutional interests if the institutional 'convenience' of reforms overwhelms their 'conscience' (Rothman, 1980/2002).⁴ In countries such as the USA where the criminal justice system is rooted in a largely retributive ideology (van Dijk, 1988), victim reforms may be motivated by interest in victims' cooperation

with investigation and prosecution (Hall, 2010). Elected sheriffs, prosecutors, judges, legislators, and other criminal justice actors may speak to victim rights in pursuit of votes rather than a genuine concern for victim needs and wellbeing.

Embedding victim services within the criminal justice system may be further complicated where friction exists between victims' interests and the procedural rights of the accused (e.g. Kool and Verhage, 2014). Tensions have been noted in the USA between NGO-based victim workers and criminal justice personnel (Globokar et al., 2016) in instances of victim-blaming cultures among police (Payne et al., 2008; Payne and Thompson, 2008; Sudderth, 2006) and court personnel (Hartman and Belknap, 2003; Johnson et al., 2014). Criminal justice personnel may perceive victim workers as naïve or 'bleeding hearts' (Globokar et al., 2016). Working relationships may be further strained by victim workers' power and status deficits relative to criminal justice professionals such as police (Long, 2017; Payne and Thompson, 2008), credentialed legal and mental health professionals (Kolb, 2014), and other public administrators (Moylan, 2017).

Characteristics of American victim work

Victim services in the USA emerged in the 1970s following the feminist movement's raising of awareness about inadequate responses to domestic violence and sexual assault (Nichols, 2013). A parallel victims' movement generated grassroots efforts to provide support and assistance to crime victims generally. Subsequent legislation (e.g. Victims of Crime Act, 1984; Violence Against Women Act, 1994) channeled public funds into victim services. In criminal justice agencies these funds were primarily applied to investigation and prosecution, e.g. victim-witness assistance programs, whereas the NGO sector tailored services to victims' needs and welfare, often focusing on female victims of intimate partner violence and sexual assault. The bulk of American victim services and related research continues to reflect these feminist concerns (e.g. Campbell, 2006; Kolb, 2014; Maier, 2008, 2012a, 2012b; Ullman, 2010; Ullman and Townsend, 2007; see Erez and Britz, 2006 for battered immigrant women).

In recent years, many US states and the federal system have passed victims' rights bills that have bolstered the presence of victim-focused positions within criminal justice agencies. Victim advocacy and service roles now span a multitude of settings that include NGOs, prosecutors' offices, police departments, probation departments, and hospitals. Descriptive accounts of the current victim industry remain scant relative to other Western countries (such as Canada, Allen, 2014; England and Wales, Hall, 2018; Mawby, 2016), possibly due to the relative variation by jurisdiction and lack of a standardized national structure for services. The first nationwide census of providers in the USA is still in progress (RAND, 2017).

Clarity regarding the victim service field is further muddled by the inconsistent use of terminology. In the USA, volunteers or staff who tend to victims' needs are typically labeled 'advocates', but the term applies to a wide variety of roles that may not center on advocacy in its traditional meaning. Those with such varied roles as answering hotlines, accompanying victims to court, providing referrals to other agencies, or notifying victims of case updates are all often titled 'advocates'.⁵ 'Victim worker' has been offered as an alternative term to more adequately reflect the significant variation in duties and loyalties among those in this population, acknowledging for example that some 'advocates' serve the interests of, and are primarily accountable to, prosecutors (Globokar et al., 2016).

Much of the research to date has focused on the services provided, with less attention to the experiences of victim advocates and other workers. Extant research on those who do advocacy and

Table 1. Organizational affiliation and title.¹⁴

Sector affiliation	Agency type	Title
Nonprofit (<i>n</i> = 18)	Services for violence against women	Victim advocate (<i>n</i> = 5) Executive director (<i>n</i> = 2)
	General victim services	Victim advocate (<i>n</i> = 11)
Public (<i>n</i> = 18)	Prosecutor's office	Victim advocate (<i>n</i> = 12)
	Probation department	Victim specialist (<i>n</i> = 4) Supervisor of victim specialists (<i>n</i> = 2)
Unaffiliated (<i>n</i> = 6)	N/A	Victim activists (<i>n</i> = 6)

victim work has documented a high risk for vicarious trauma and burnout (Maier, 2008; McCann and Pearlman, 1990; McDermott and Garofalo, 2004; Powell-Williams et al., 2013). Stressors include victims' lack of commitment to utilizing services (Davis and Ullman, 2013) or failure to leave abusive relationships (Dunn and Powell-Williams, 2007; Powell-Williams et al., 2013), the limited resources of victim service agencies (Globokar et al., 2016; Payne et al., 2008), and distrust and other barriers to cooperation from both victims and criminal justice professionals (Globokar et al., 2016; Powell-Williams et al., 2013). The current study advances our knowledge of victim workers' activities and experiences in the USA, highlighting the impact of organizational affiliations on their work.

Methodology and sample

The data used for this analysis were culled from three studies of victim services. Although the studies had different aims, all incorporated in-depth semi-structured interviews with victim workers that touched upon their occupational backgrounds, experiences, and activities. One study evaluated technologies for victim protection utilized by probation departments, a second study examined the effects of participation in the justice system on victims' health/welfare, and a third study examined the pathways and experiences of victim advocates and activists, primarily from nonprofit organizations. From these broader studies, we drew all interviews with those whose primary duties entailed service to victims.⁶ The resulting sample (*N* = 42) included those holding the title of nonprofit advocates (*n* = 16), nonprofit executive directors (*n* = 2), prosecutor-employed advocates (*n* = 12), victim activists who were without an institutional affiliation (*n* = 6), and victim specialists in probation departments (*n* = 4) and their supervisors (*n* = 2) (see Table 1). There were blurred lines between organizational affiliation and physical work location; some nonprofit advocates maintained offices in the courthouse, sheriff's department, or police department, and victim workers across the board often spent substantial time outside their offices, visiting with victims at their homes or other locations. The sample was mostly white (91%), female (93%), salaried (81%), and spanned a total of 10 agencies across three midwestern states.

Participants for all three studies were recruited via the administrators of organizations known by the researchers to employ workers who were assigned to attend to victims.⁷ The administrators put the research team in contact with employees and volunteers whose duties involved contact with victims, referred them to victim activists of whom they knew within their state,⁸ and, if they had directly provided services to victims, were interviewed themselves. Interviews varied in the amount of detail they contained about the workers' views, activities, and experiences; yet

collectively they provide a textured glimpse into the nature of victim work and the impact of organizational context on the work and workers.

The interviews were conducted individually ($n = 10$) or within groups of two to four interviewees based on participant preference. They ranged from two to five hours in length (mean = 2.5 h). Directors or supervisors were interviewed individually whereas employees who engaged in similar work were interviewed in groups, unless they requested to be interviewed individually. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Two researchers independently open-coded interview data relevant to workers' pathways to, and experiences within, victim work using the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967/2008). For example, specific details about the costs and benefits of a particular victim protection technology were excluded from this analysis, whereas information such as the workers' length of experience in the agency, daily activities, and interactions with victims as they carried out the responsibilities associated with the technology were included. The themes emerging from the comparative analysis of victim workers' experiences are presented below.

Findings

Pathways into victim work

The majority of interviewees were unaware of victim service opportunities until shortly before assuming their current position. They learned of opportunities through their social and professional networks (friends, relatives, or professors), assignment to an internship, volunteer opportunities, or exposure to an advertisement encountered in a broader job search, often for a position in criminal justice. One nonprofit advocate shared: 'I didn't plan on anything. I was just looking for a place to go for an internship, so it was just one of those things where you just fall into it'. Another conveyed: 'Honestly part of what led me here was frustration finding work'. Victim specialists within probation departments most often came to their current positions when they were reassigned to victim work from offender supervision when new positions were created within their department, expressing satisfaction with a diversion that allowed them to interact with persons other than offenders. Of the nonprofit directors, one had started as an advocate and risen through the ranks. The second was hired due to experience in the nonprofit sector.⁹

Although many interviewees had 'fallen into' their current role, a small number of advocates and all activists described actively pursuing victim service opportunities out of a desire to help, often motivated by personal histories of victimization. One NGO advocate who had been the victim of assault decided to pursue this line of work 'because I . . . didn't feel that I had anybody to help me and I wanted to change that'. The volunteer activists who had begun their work subsequent to the murder of a loved one stated that their experiences had left them feeling alone, angry, or overwhelmed and had instilled in them a desire to assist other victims. While there was some concern that a personal history of victimization could result in emotional over-involvement on the job, former victims believed that their experiences contributed to their patience with, and ability to relate to, their clients. One nonprofit domestic violence advocate who had previously been abused noted: 'I know where they are coming from, I know why they drop charges, I know why they get angry. I mean, I know why'.

While data were unavailable on the specific education and training of many participants,¹⁰ they voiced broad consensus about the importance of a college education in criminal justice and

familiarity with legal terminology. Activists and those in both public and NGO positions were alarmed to observe new hires without this background, as with an activist who shared in frustration: 'not all of them have degrees, not all of them understand the system'. They identified beneficial attributes and soft skills such as resilience, patience, compassion, good listening, the ability to remain nonjudgmental, and, for those who responded to crime scenes or hospitals, 'not being squeamish'. As victim workers traversed the potentially conflicting needs and perspectives of the criminal justice professionals and traumatized victims, they valued 'the strength to stand up to prosecutors' on one hand, and the ability 'to maintain healthy boundaries with victims' on the other.

Going through the process: Stages of victim work

Collectively, the workers described interactions with victims from the moments immediately following the crime through the court process and beyond. NGO-based workers typically connected with victims early in the process, were versatile in their work, and in some instances remained in contact with clients long after the case concluded. Prosecutor-employed advocates were most heavily involved during the court process. Their contact with victims revolved mostly around court and trial issues, and rarely extended beyond sentencing. Unaffiliated activists listened or offered advice to victims who contacted them on personal and criminal-justice-related issues but were primarily engaged in activities to promote and expand the collective benefit of victims. Workers' activities at different stages of the victim experience are detailed below.

Crisis response. NGO advocates sometimes engaged with victims as part of a crisis response team in the immediate aftermath of a crime. This work was heavily dependent upon partnerships with criminal justice agencies and other organizations. These nonprofit advocates would be called to the crime scene or hospital by patrol officers, detectives, children's services, or social workers, or would partner directly with law enforcement to ride along to crime scenes. Responding officers referred victims to crisis hotlines or dropped them off at domestic violence shelters run by the nonprofit agencies.

Crisis response entailed making death notifications, speaking with affected parties to calm their emotions, providing company in moments of grief or trauma, supporting sexual assault victims through their forensic examination, and offering advice, input, or referrals for services such as counseling and bio-cleanup. They worked with victims who had been robbed, carjacked, physically or sexually assaulted, or otherwise traumatized, including survivors who had lost parents, children, or other loved ones to murder or other causes. In the words of one nonprofit advocate: 'In situations where [someone] found their loved one dead . . . suicide, sudden death, homicide, or whatever, you really shouldn't leave that person by themselves'. One unaffiliated victim activist lamented that her family did not have an advocate until the start of the court process after their own loved one's murder, recalling the trauma of those early moments: 'Seriously, there needs to be some type of advocate that comes from the moment of the crime'.

Akin to other first responders, interviewees who engaged in crisis response incurred exposure to emotional and physical trauma and coming to terms with 'seeing what . . . people can do or will do to another human being'. They struggled emotionally with cases of random violence, those in which they could personally relate to the victim or their family, and those with child victims. The self-described effects of crisis response included acute awareness of their surroundings and taking safety precautions for themselves and their family that even they viewed as potentially excessive.

One nonprofit advocate shared her experience with exposure to gruesome and horrific crime scenes:

[Working with victims] has definitely changed my life, some for the better, some for the worse. I already had a problem trusting people, but now that I have taken this job it takes me a long time for me to be able to trust someone. I think a lot of the crime scenes that I have seen have been pretty disturbing . . . seeing some guy's head blown off, his teeth are on the dashboard and his brains are in the back, you know, that kind of hangs around with you for a couple of days.

Those who engaged in crisis response also incurred the stress of unpredictable work hours, as they often had to work on call.

The NGO interviewees generally found law enforcement partners supportive, concerned for victims' wellbeing, and appreciative that the advocates' presence freed them to focus on investigation, crime scene processing, or forensic examinations. Some of the workers formed close bonds with the officers alongside whom they worked, coming to view them 'like my brothers'. Still, organizational partnerships were vulnerable to lapses in communication that could interrupt advocates' access to victims in crisis, such as when one nonprofit executive director's team was not consistently called by area hospitals because of staff turnover. Interviewees also encountered resistance from partnering agencies, particularly within police departments, that could be strong enough to necessitate that they 'advocate for ourselves, actually as much as we are advocating for victims, to make sure that we are called in crisis situations'. Interviewees struggled with law enforcement officers who were distrustful and skeptical of their work. A nonprofit advocate explained: 'They don't want [an advocate] in there . . . who is creating issues because they believe everything that this victim is telling them and they are almost arguing with the detectives'. Interviewees were sometimes frustrated to see what they perceived as victim-insensitive practices among law enforcement, as with officers who had threatened that domestic violence victims would lose child custody if they called the police again and those who failed to make arrests due to their belief that domestic violence is a private matter, or out of frustration for having been called to this address numerous times in the past.

Victims were not always welcoming of advocates while in crisis. Interviewees reported that some victims feared that speaking with them could result in legal implications or that advocates would be insensitive to their plight. Those whose victimization experiences stemmed from their own criminal involvement (termed 'viminals' by advocates at one agency)—for example, drug dealers injured in disputes related to their illicit activities—typically rejected the label of 'victim' and could be particularly hostile to workers, as a nonprofit advocate described:

They are just angry . . . like 'I am going to hunt this [aggressor] down and I am going to take care of it myself, I don't want to talk to the police,' and . . . I have had some situations where they have said to me, you know, 'I don't need to talk to you. I ain't no damn victim.'

The interviewees' sentiments ranged between compassion and reluctance to serve those whom they perceived as manipulative or hostile, in part out of concern for their own safety.

Crisis aftermath. Only NGO workers consistently described providing generalized support to victims that extended beyond the confines of criminal justice proceedings in the days, months, and even years following the crime. When prosecutor-employed advocates were contacted by victims who were not actively involved in court cases (but who might have learned of them via word-of-

mouth), they would refer them to other service providers. The interviewed NGO workers listened to clients, counseled them, hosted support groups, connected them to sources of financial assistance, and helped them navigate the legal system as they became aware of actions against their assailants and considered legal options such as orders of protection. In domestic violence cases they assisted with victims' relocation or shelter, provided supervision for abusers' visitation with children, and helped with safety planning. Several interviewees emphasized that their role was to inform victims of their options and empower their decision making, not to pressure or coerce victims into any specific course of action. NGO advocates who had not initially connected with victims in crisis response contacted them using information gleaned from police records, court arraignment hearings, referrals from police or prosecutors, newspaper articles about local crimes, and calls from victims themselves.

This work was challenging in a number of ways: The nonprofit workers described victims who were uncooperative, exaggerated their suffering in an effort to manipulate the system, had delusions about their victimization due to mental illness, or exposed themselves to what the workers believed to be unnecessary risk through reckless behavior or failure to follow through with security measures. Such behaviors at times forced interviewees to take a stand against their clients' manipulation, exaggerations, or misinformation.

In other instances they felt frustrated with the systemic burdens faced by victims, as with restitution programs that did not adequately cover victims' expenses:

You have this person sitting there crying because their lights are about to be shut off and they don't have any medical insurance [after an assault]. If your car is stolen, when the police find it, they are going to tow it to impound and you have to pay as a victim . . . to get your car . . . There is nothing to reimburse anyone for that type of thing.

They also encountered criminal justice agents who were insensitive or unresponsive to victims' needs, or those whom they felt prioritized career interests over victims' wellbeing, as with prosecutors who failed to press charges in what they perceived as evidentiary weak cases or non-credible victim complainants, out of a concern for sustaining high conviction rates.

The workers assisted victims who experienced anger, pain, and frustration resulting from their interactions with police, prosecutor's offices, or other parties. One nonprofit advocate explained that restraining orders are 'up to the courts' but that victims who are misinformed 'get really angry at us and think that we are lying and that we have these protection orders stacked behind our desk and we just hand out with a piece of candy or something'. Frustration peaked when victims received the run-around from multiple agencies:

The police officers will tell [victims], 'well, go see the prosecutor and they will file the charges'. Well, the prosecutors don't file charges and so [victims] get frustrated and [the prosecutor's office will] send them up to see us and the police department and then [victims] come out mad at us because we can't do anything for them either. And then I take them back down to the prosecutors and it is really just a big mess.

For all of their 'emotion work', only one nonprofit victim worker held a master's degree in counseling, which made others cautious not to overstep professional boundaries that would make them vulnerable to accusations of providing therapy without the appropriate license. One interviewee who ran a support group, when asked if she provides counseling, responded: 'I choose

words carefully because we're not licensed therapists. . . . Social services, crisis intervention is sort of safe'.

Court processing: Charging through sentencing. The activities of nonprofit and prosecutor-based advocates most closely converged during the court process: they both explained court procedures, legal terminology, and legal options to victims; prepared them to give testimony or victim impact statements; coached them on how to best present themselves in court; informed victims about what to expect at each stage of the court process; and described their role as 'just being there' for victims by answering questions, providing court accompaniment, and listening to their concerns.¹¹ Both prosecutor-employed and nonprofit advocates tried to prepare victims for a variety of contingencies such as exposure to disturbing evidence, defendants' denials of culpability, witness testimonies, the sometimes 'blunt . . . rude' demeanor of judges or other members of the courtroom workgroup, repeated continuances, undesired case outcomes, and having to recount their own trauma on the stand.

Still, prosecutor-employed advocates were more centrally focused on administrative duties such as victim notification of legal developments and upcoming court dates by mail or phone, referrals to victim resources, managing victims' role as witnesses, and serving as a go-between for the victims and prosecution. They typically initiated contact with victims post-arraignment by mailing notification letters about upcoming court dates. Some prosecutor-based advocates expressed disappointment in their limited interactions with victims, as with a worker who only sent such notification letters but would have liked to engage in support activities such as court accompaniment. While some of these advocates framed their priorities primarily around the fulfillment of victim needs, it was made clear that their 'loyalty is with the [prosecutor]'. One prosecutor-based advocate contrasted her role to those in the nonprofit sector:

We're trying to help the victim through the legal aspect of it and throw in a couple hugs if needed . . . their roles are really different. They do more like social work [that extends further outside of the courtroom] . . . really our job is strictly to inform the victim of what is going to happen in [the] case.

Prosecutor-based advocates generally faced greater time constraints in their interactions with clients and shared information with the prosecution when it could benefit the prosecutor's strategy, in contrast to the rigorous confidentiality maintained by members of NGOs. They also encountered distrust from victims who suspected them of providing assistance only to retain cooperation. In the words of one interviewee, victims sometimes believe that '[advocates]' only desire is to get the person convicted and they are just pretending, holding the victim's hand, until they get them done as a witness and then they will just throw them away'.

Nonprofit advocates' greater independence from the criminal justice system freed them to more readily challenge prosecutors on victims' behalf, although this freedom came at the cost of more limited access to information about the case. Nonprofit workers also reported resistance from defense attorneys, who at times threatened them with legal action for presumably practicing law without a license when they provided victims with explanations about mundane issues such as 'joint accounts' or other financial, familial, or parental arrangements and options.

Victim workers who were employed by probation departments also first came into contact with victims during the court process. In some jurisdictions they were involved at the point of defendants' pretrial release to administer electronic monitoring technologies that alerted domestic violence victims to the proximity of their abusers. More commonly, they interacted with victims later in the court process as part of the presentence investigation, preparation of victim impact

statements, or implementation of post-sentence supervision. While the duties of probation-employed specialists were relatively administrative in nature, some endeavored to provide general victim support in a manner that was akin to nonprofit advocates. One probation-employed specialist who worked with the electronic monitoring program for domestic violence cases was under no obligation to attend court, yet would tell victims:

I will show up to court for you. And I will stand over to the side. As you testify, you look at me—don't look at [the abuser]. I'm trying to come up with ways to help [the victim] follow through with this, because she's been in this relationship for four years, and he totally dominates her . . . she's just scared.

Of all aspects of victim work, supporting individuals through the court process demanded the most specialized knowledge of criminal justice system terminology, procedures, and practices. It also carried emotional costs for victim workers of any organizational affiliation or role as they internalized their clients' stress and navigated environments that were often hostile to victims. While some courtroom workgroups would 'bend over backwards' to help victims, others gave the impression of victim-blaming or taking the defendant's side. One nonprofit advocate had assisted a family through the trials of multiple defendants in their loved one's brutal murder: 'Just watching [the family] go through reactions and stages of grief and loss and still trying to cope with what has happened . . . it is a lot to take in, you know'.

Post-disposition. Workers' interactions with victims did not always cease after the conclusion of their violator's court case. Prosecutor-based advocates provided victims with notification of prison transfers and parole hearing dates during offenders' incarceration and responded to victims' requests for updates on their assailants' status or when they asked for support in preventing an early release. Some of the probation specialists implemented the electronic monitoring program for domestic violence cases after conviction and attempted to quell victims' concerns about being tracked down by their offender—post victimization fears common in cases of domestic violence and burglary.

With rare exception, non-profit workers described more ongoing and dynamic engagement with victim needs. They helped victims develop and implement safety plans and secure orders of protection in anticipation of an offender's release from prison. In cases of domestic violence, they provided shelter and supervised parental visits or custody exchanges.

Victims expressed gratitude for the victim workers' support in forms that included phone calls and cards. Interviewees reported that emotional connections were often strongest with the families of murder victims. One activist described a picnic held in remembrance of her murdered daughter one year after her death: 'It was the family, friends and these support groups, [the probation-employed specialists] were there, it was a support group of people who helped us get through that first year'.

Interviewees' primary frustration at this stage was rooted in legal outcomes that they believed to conflict with victims' best interests. A case might have proceeded differently than the victim had hoped (or not at all), or the sentence might have been longer or shorter than desired. A nonprofit executive director reported a case in which an abuser was placed on electronic monitoring in the same residence as their victim and the frustration it caused to the victim as well as the victim worker who was assigned the case:

[T]he victim's calling, saying tension is building, something bad is going to happen. 'I want the person out of here now', and . . . the court doesn't really feel like they're able to do something, or even ask him to leave [until he violates the terms of his release].

Interviewees described how they would mollify, explain, or console victims regarding unsatisfactory outcomes, or share the happiness of victims when their wishes materialized or they were satisfied with the outcome.

Victim work on behalf of the victim community. Some workers engaged in activities unrelated to individual cases. Activists, nonprofit advocates, and nonprofit administrators were particularly involved with community and organizational functions that collectively benefited crime victims. Nonprofit workers served on task forces; gave public speeches, workshops, and presentations; gathered data to assess gaps in services; explored innovative practices for improving localized victim response; and lobbied for laws and policy changes such as enhanced anti-stalking protocols, better funding for victim services, and legal representation of victims to enforce their rights. One interviewee assisted police with community mediation and helped plan community outreach activities such as social gatherings and picnics. Advocates and administrators engaged in grant-writing and other forms of fundraising to sustain their services.

Activists spoke at advocate training events and worked toward legislative and departmental reforms. For example, one activist felt blind-sided when she found out that her daughter's murderer could be eligible for early release for 'good time'; she subsequently approached the prosecutor's office to advocate for a change in practice:

We can't turn back the hands of time [to change how our case was handled]. What I would like for you all to do is that in the future to avoid any other families going through what we're going through... [you need] a document that you hand to the families that states everything... what the charges are, list the maximum, list the minimum, whatever could possibly happen... information on the truth in sentencing law so we can go back and decipher this as a family.

Common challenges in victim activism included a dearth of resources, progress, or resistance from those whose interests conflicted with the sought reforms. For example, an executive director who served on a domestic violence and sexual assault task force complained of fellow task force members who failed to take such crimes seriously. An activist who lobbied for a law that would allow victims to draw from a state victims' fund for the legal costs associated with exercising their rights had encountered opposition from those within victim organizations who feared the law would deplete the pool of money available to support their operational costs.

Discussion

This study documents the multiple forms and varied activities subsumed in victim work within the USA, including crisis response, follow-up care, informational and emotional support (particularly during criminal cases), and general activism. In capturing workers' activities and experiences, a distinction emerged by organizational affiliation. Although victim workers within the NGO and public sectors often shared the title of 'advocate', NGO workers described more versatile and prolonged involvement with victims, a broader span of services consistent with a 'care ideology' (see van Dijk, 1988), and greater continuity of care, whereas publicly employed workers had relatively more circumscribed duties pertaining to the progression of legal cases. Continuity of care has been recognized as beneficial to victim groups including children (Ko et al., 2008; Lyden, 2009); victims of sexual assault (Jones and Whitworth, 2002), and domestic violence victims (Adler, 2002). There is a risk that using the common term 'advocate' for such variant positions may mislead victims about the type of support that can be expected. Proper management of

expectations can minimize victims' stress (Erez, Globokar and Ibarra, 2014) and may be particularly important in providing services to those who are already distrustful of public agencies.

Dedicated and concerned workers in a variety of roles and in both the public and private sectors described genuine care for victims and providing assistance and advice that sometimes extended beyond their job duties. However, publicly employed workers were constrained in the support they could offer as they balanced concern for victims with conflicting needs of their home agencies, such as the obligation to share confidentially provided victim information or statements with the prosecutors¹² (Globokar et al., 2016) and other limitations of their position. This paradox in allegiance underscores concerns about unintended effects of the professionalization and 'institutionalization' of human services with their incorporation into the criminal justice system, documented elsewhere in regard to victim advocacy (McDermott and Garofalo, 2004; Moylan, 2017), probation (Globokar and Toro, 2017; Rothman, 1980/2002), and restorative justice mediation (Christie, 2009). A deeper shift in organizational culture and the enhancement of public trust might facilitate meaningful service to victims by those employed within the justice system (Bibas, 2012; Erez et al., 2014), but regardless, conflicting organizational priorities are likely to persist, underscoring the importance of independent advocacy organizations (see also, Brooks and Burman, 2017).

Still, strong working partnerships between the NGO and public sectors are essential (see also, Allen, 2014; Office for Victims of Crime, n.d.). Those within public systems play an important role in channeling referrals and useful case and legal information to NGO workers (e.g. Mawby, 2016; see also Long, 2017). Victim workers embedded within public agencies are particularly well situated to enhance the level of responsiveness and compassion that victims encounter when they interface with the legal system. Conversely, a lack of cooperation and partnership from police and prosecutors' offices adds to the stress of advocacy (Payne and Thompson, 2008).

The data also suggest that despite the proliferation of victim rights (Cassell, 2017) and related roles (e.g. Globokar et al., 2016), many workers lacked awareness of victim service opportunities until they happened into their current position.¹³ This is consistent with observed underrepresentation of victim issues in the curricula of criminal justice programs (Growette Bostaph et al., 2014) and law schools (e.g. Cassell, 1999, pp. 534–536). Collectively, these observations may reflect the relative status deficit of victims within adversarial legal systems such as that of the USA. A lack of public awareness has been identified as a significant barrier to the utilization of victim services (Davis and Ullman, 2013; Houston-Kolnik and Vasquez, 2017; Newmark, 2004; Peterson and Underwood, 2000; Sims et al., 2005) and may interfere with the recruitment of workers.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

With the increased incorporation of victims into criminal justice systems and victims' status approaching that of 'insiders' (Erez et al., 2014), the status of those who help them should be likewise elevated. Still, the inherent tensions with traditionally adversarial systems and apprehensions regarding victims' expanded presence in justice processes affect not only victims themselves, but also those who work on victims' behalf.

The proliferation of victim services is a promising development, but much remains to be learned about the optimization of victim work. Ideally, a victim-responsive criminal justice system would incorporate in-house victim services, elevate compassion as an organizational value, and embrace victim sensitivity as a goal beyond their value as witnesses or contribution to criminal justice organizational goals. Still, NGOs remain vital as they appear situated to provide the most holistic

approach and greatest continuity of care. An understanding and appreciation of the complementary contributions of victim activists and workers in NGOs and public agencies, together with a probing assessment of the limitations faced by each, can optimize cross-sector partnerships in the pursuit of a seamless, supportive, and empowering victim experience.

Victim work in the USA is currently quite decentralized, localized, varied, and lacking in field-specific credentials. Victim services in the USA and other countries (e.g. England and Wales, Mawby, 2016), have generally been heavily dependent upon volunteers. Consideration should be given to whether enhanced training and credentialing might facilitate victim workers' recognition and acceptance as legitimate and needed professionals in criminal justice agencies and proceedings and ease their concerns about overstepping professional boundaries (see discussion in Smith et al., 2014). The field could benefit from research on the potential benefits or detriments of centralization, standardization, credentialing, professionalization, and optimal placement across the non-profit and public sectors.

Retitling publicly employed victim advocates as 'liaisons' may help better manage victims' expectations (Erez et al., 2014) and enhance transparency about their limited services and dual loyalties (Globokar et al., 2016). Police and prosecutors' offices should be informed about and equipped to refer victims to NGO agencies. Recent research supports embedding victim services in sites such as hospitals that are likely to encounter victims (Houston-Kolnik and Vasquez, 2017).

This study presents a starting point that should be followed with a more comprehensive portrait of victim work inclusive of restorative justice providers, the police-employed advocates now legally mandated in some jurisdictions (e.g. Texas Constitution and Statutes, 2015), and victim-focused employees of departments of correction, hospitals, educational institutions, and private industry. Future studies would benefit from larger and more diverse samples and international comparative work to better illuminate the nuances, tensions, and contributions of victim work across organizational and socio-cultural contexts, and how to optimally address victim needs amid competing organizational goals and institutional demands.

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Notes

1. These rights are consistent with the guidelines presented in the United Nations (1985) Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power.
2. 'Nonprofit' is the standard terminology used in the USA to reference agencies in the private sector that are recognized by the Internal Revenue Service as operating on a not-for-profit basis on behalf of the public good. We use 'nonprofit' and 'NGO' interchangeably in this paper to refer to private-sector organizations managed on behalf of the public good.
3. In the USA and elsewhere, victim support is spread across the nonprofit and public sectors. In Canada more than a third of victim services (36%) are provided by police departments (Allen, 2014). Support in the United Kingdom has historically been provided through a government-funded national charity, with funding decisions more recently transitioning to localized Police and Crime Commissioners (Hall, 2018; Mawby, 2016).
4. For example, the roots of probation trace to volunteer efforts to provide a 'friend to the offender' (Probation System, 1921: 15; see also Augustus, 1852/1972), but within the criminal justice system

this vision has largely been reshaped and overwhelmed by organizational priorities and bureaucratic demands (see discussion in Globokar and Toro, 2017).

5. In this paper the term 'advocate' will be used consistently with past American research and the agencies in the study, although the authors find 'victim worker' to be the more appropriate term (see Globokar et al., 2016).
6. Other parties interviewed for these studies included prosecutors, judges, and defense attorneys. These interviews were excluded from analysis as victim work was not reflective of the primary duties of these positions.
7. In the study of technologies for victim protection, a consultant was utilized to assist with the identification of agencies that had made substantial use of the tools being evaluated.
8. Activists were interviewed as part of the study on the pathways and experiences.
9. There is no standardized education for working with victims in the USA, although some American private or public organizations (e.g. National Organization for Victim Assistance, 2018) offer advocacy training.
10. All participants had at least a high school degree. Information was not available on all participants' further education, but many referenced being in criminal justice programs in college, and two nonprofit administrators held graduate degrees.
11. These activities were akin to those of the Witness Services in England and Wales (see Mawby, 2016).
12. A similar limitation has been observed with Victim Support's quasi-governmental status in the UK, which may make Victim Service workers less likely to challenge the government (Rock, 2004 as cited in Hall, 2018).
13. Awareness seems to be higher in other nations, e.g. England and Wales (see Bryce et al., 2016).
14. The titles reflect those that were used by the workers themselves, with the exception of 'victim specialist', which was a generalized term we utilized for those who were not titled 'advocates'. 'Advocate' is a common title for victim workers in the USA but can refer to highly varying responsibilities and activities held by both volunteers and paid employees. Our findings suggest that advocates within prosecutors' offices are often focused on administrative tasks, whereas advocates in NGOs provide more generalized victim support.

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