

A person is seen from behind, looking out a window with horizontal blinds. The scene is dimly lit, with light coming from the window, creating a contemplative atmosphere. The person is wearing a dark t-shirt.

VS VICTIM SUPPORT

**“I needed someone
who is interested
in helping me”**

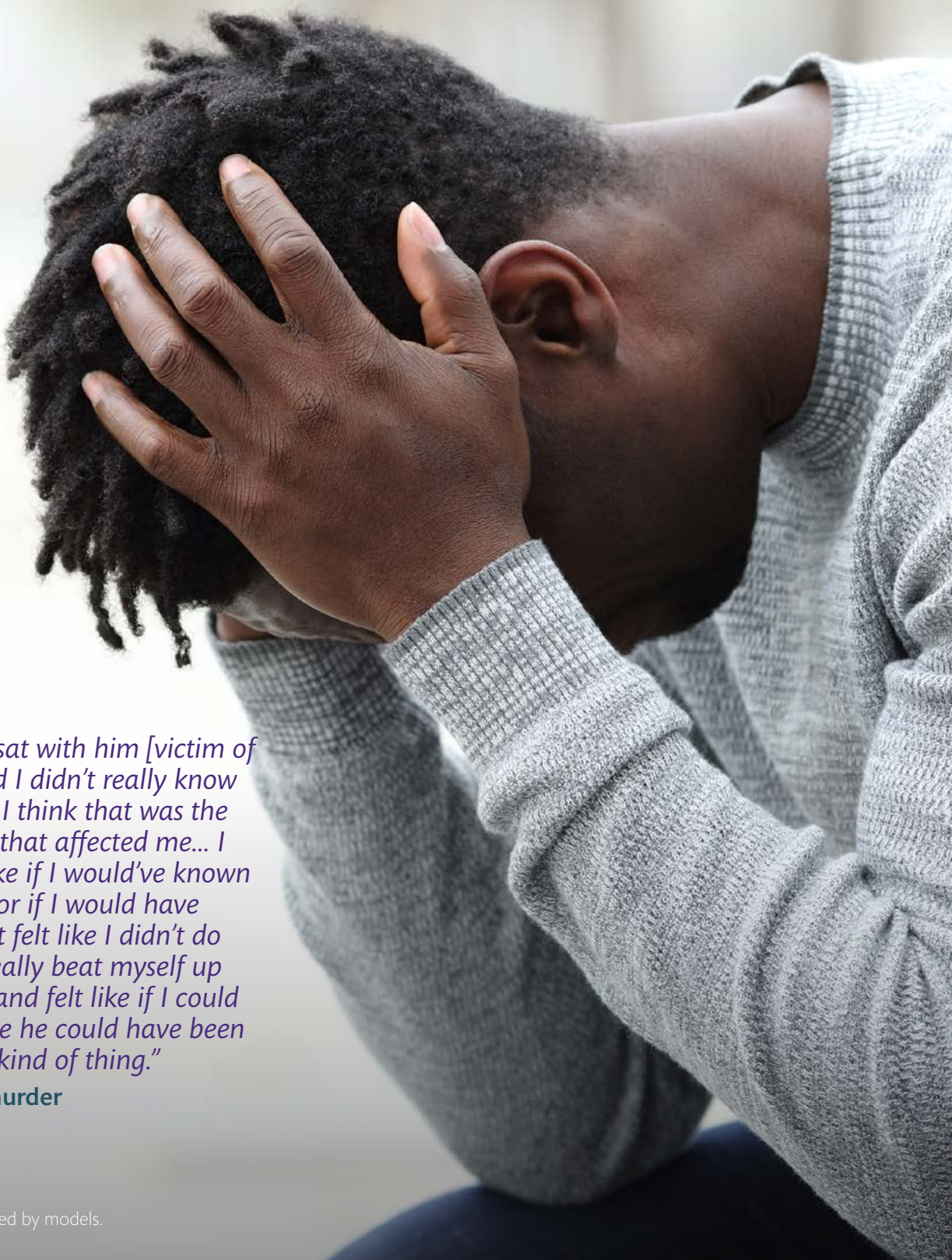
The impact of murder on witnesses
and their journey to recovery

Tamar Dinisman and Ania Moroz
November 2023

www.victimsupport.org.uk

Acknowledgements

We are particularly grateful to the witnesses who generously gave up their time to share their experiences with us and to the specialist caseworkers from the London region of the National Homicide Service who shared their knowledge and expertise. We would also like to thank a number of people for their valuable contributions to this report: Rachel Almeida, Chris Davies, Dr Anna Lynall, Ellen Milazzo and Diane Newton.



"I basically sat with him [victim of murder] and I didn't really know what to do, I think that was the main thing that affected me... I really felt like if I would've known what to do or if I would have done – I just felt like I didn't do enough. I really beat myself up about that and felt like if I could have, maybe he could have been saved, that kind of thing."

Witness to murder

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Introduction

Witnessing a murder or manslaughter can be devastating. While the number of witnesses is unknown, 696 murders were recorded by the police in England and Wales in the year ending March 2022.¹ This gives some indication of the potential number of witnesses.

Existing research on witnesses to murder is quite limited; however, a few studies provide evidence of the negative impact murder has on those who witness it.² Similarly, numerous studies have indicated a range of detrimental psychological and mental health effects of terrorism on witnesses.³ The negative impacts identified include adverse psychological outcomes such as depression, anxiety, acute stress and fears, and a decline in perceived safety,⁴ as well as symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a common reaction to traumatic events; symptoms include repeated and unwanted re-experiencing of the event, hyperarousal, emotional numbing, and avoidance of places, activities and thoughts that could serve as reminders of the event. Many people experience at least some of these symptoms in the immediate aftermath of the traumatic event. A considerable number of people recover in the following few weeks or months, but for a significant proportion the symptoms persist for years.⁵

Victim Support

Victim Support is the leading independent charity in England and Wales for people who have been affected by crime and traumatic incidents. We are committed to providing free and confidential support for people affected by all types of crime regardless of whether they have reported the crime to the police or when it occurred, and do so through our local teams.

In addition, we provide a range of specialist services for violence; sexual violence; domestic abuse; non-recent sexual abuse; fraud; hate crime; antisocial behaviour; and for family members bereaved by murder and manslaughter.

The National Homicide Service provides free, independent support to people bereaved by murder and manslaughter in the UK and abroad who are resident in England and Wales. Victim Support is commissioned by the Ministry of Justice to provide this service. The London region of the National Homicide Service also provides support to non-related witnesses to murder or manslaughter who are resident in London through a new Witness to Homicide Service (WHS).



The research

The aim

The purpose of this research is to increase understanding of the impact of murder on witnesses. Furthermore, by discussing this impact, it also provides learning on the ways in which the service can support witnesses in their recovery.

Service focus

This research focused on, and was undertaken in partnership with, the new WHS. Between its launch in September 2019 and until the time of the data collection, 144 witnesses have been referred to the service, including 20 witnesses to the terrorist attack at Fishmongers' Hall and on London Bridge on 29 November 2019.

Methodology

To meet the aims of the research and to gain in-depth and detailed knowledge, a qualitative research method was used. Data was collected through two activities conducted in April and May 2020:

1. Interviews with witnesses to murder. We conducted five in-depth semi-structured interviews with witnesses to murder who were supported by the service. Four women and a man took part. Three were witnesses to murder and two to murder and violence through terrorist attacks.

2. Interviews with staff members. We interviewed seven WHS caseworkers using in-depth semi-structured interviews.

All quotes presented in this report are from the witnesses and caseworkers who were interviewed. The quotes were anonymised and any detail that may lead to the identification of the participant or the incident was omitted to maintain the interviewees' anonymity.



The impact on witnesses to murder and their support needs

Each of the caseworkers and witnesses who took part in the research described the horrific and extensive effects of murder on those who have witnessed it. An example is described by one of the caseworkers:

"He was suffering extreme trauma, shock, and it massively impacted on his life, both physically and mentally, his sleeping pattern, his eating pattern, his confidence, horrendous flashbacks, awful dreams, nightmares, fear of going out, fear of talking to people. As I say, his bodily functions were extremely affected, so he was on medication. That affected his relationship and he couldn't work... Undoubtedly, it's probably something that will never leave him ever in his life, ever, and probably change him as a person."

Caseworker

While effects on witnesses may differ depending on their personal circumstances and the incident they have witnessed, we identified six shared impacts. It is important to note that, while the witnesses who took part in this project were very much affected by the incident, the sample size was very small and other witnesses might not be affected in the same way.

The six shared impacts were:

- 1 Emotional trauma
- 2 Feeling scared and unsafe
- 3 Change of perceptions on life and society
- 4 Impairment of daily functioning
- 5 A strain on relationships with family and partners
- 6 Nervousness about the criminal justice process.

Emotional trauma

The first and most important impact described by the caseworkers and witnesses related to the symptoms of emotional trauma. The witnesses described how witnessing a murder was a traumatic event in their lives that had an immense emotional impact. The initial period – the two to three months immediately after the incident – is particularly challenging, and emotional difficulties were largely manifested during this time. The effect was described by some of the witnesses as a loss of control over their brain and body. Previous studies have also shown that most trauma survivors display a range of emotional trauma symptoms in the initial weeks after the event.⁶ Similarly, the caseworkers and witnesses told us about a range of such symptoms during this initial period, including shock, confusion and difficulty concentrating, anger, anxiety, flashbacks, problems sleeping and insomnia.

“In the first month, I was beside myself. I wasn’t myself. My girlfriend and I call it the ‘bunker mode’. I went into this dark hole and it was just a horrible, horrible place to be... There were so many things going on and I was under this cloud of despair, depression, anger, frustration, sorrow, guilt – every kind of emotion just thrown into a pot and jumbled up. I would just break out crying randomly. I would not want to see people. I couldn’t contemplate why these actions had happened. I was just in the lowest of low places I could ever have been... It’s been a bumpy ride, somewhat of a rollercoaster since then, and frustrating because I don’t necessarily have full control of my brain the way that I used to, or myself as a person and the way that I react... my brain was so focused on the events of that day that it was so consuming that I would have forgotten to eat and all that sort of thing.”

Witness to murder

“They’re in shock and they’re constantly thinking about the incident, certainly in the first couple of months.”

Caseworker

“The brain is so scattered at that time, so emotive, so up and down, and lacking so much sleep because the insomnia was horrendous and it just keeps playing through your mind like a video.”

Witness to murder

Another set of negative emotions expressed by the witnesses was guilt, shame and self-blame. The witnesses shared how they blame themselves for failing to save the victim or how they think endlessly about what would have happened if they had got there sooner. Negative thoughts about one's role in traumatic events can lead to trauma-related guilt. This guilt has been documented in trauma survivors and has been found to be associated with a higher risk of developing depression and PTSD.⁷

"I blame myself for not being able to help him the way I should have. So people go, 'It's not your fault. There could have been a doctor there, and they couldn't have helped him.' But that's not the same. But I was there when it happened. Not when it happened, but he ran to us for help, and I couldn't help him. So yes, that plays on my mind a lot."

Witness to murder

Extensive emotional support is needed to cope with this immense emotional impact. The witnesses appreciated being able to talk about how they felt to someone who has expertise and is independent. This emotional support, which is independent and profound, helps create a trusting relationship with a caseworker; this was highlighted as being very beneficial to the witnesses' recovery.

"My experience was really good. I liked how, kind of, conversational it was... I get on with [Caseworker name] really, really well. I fully trust him. I have definitely told him things I have never told anyone else. You know, he created such an open and honest place for conversations."

Witness to murder

"I think the best thing about this pilot is being able to support them to understand that it wasn't on them. And that, also, all the emotional support that we are able to provide... My role would then be to ensure that they understand why they're feeling that way and not blaming it on who they are... The fact that it's okay to feel that way."

Caseworker

The WHS caseworkers also provided psycho-educational support; this mainly includes providing information and educating the witness about trauma and its effects, and normalising the impact of trauma. Witnesses also valued being provided with strategies and techniques to cope with the emotional effects and anxiety caused by the trauma, to calm and gain control over their thoughts. The service also offers techniques that can help alleviate sleep difficulties.

"There was one thing I realised, well, after being a witness of such a horrific incident, is that many people think that we are not okay to feel awful about it because we only witnessed it, and because we were not directly impacted. You know, like I was not stabbed, or I was not hurt physically. So, a lot of support that I needed in the beginning was, kind of, understanding, you know, the way you are feeling is absolutely fine... why I reacted the way I reacted... I think, for me, it was so helpful to speak to someone who can literally tell me, 'This is what happens in the brain when this happened.'"

Witness to murder

“The support I needed in the beginning was very imminent. A lot of what I needed was, kind of, a quick way of feeling safe. You know, I needed to learn lots of strategies to bring my mind back to the here and now, to not go back to all the flashbacks, to not go back and think, ‘What if I would have done this?’ or, ‘What if I would have done that?’ ‘What if’ was actually a very big thing that I had to deal with. So, in the beginning, I needed lots of coping mechanisms to, kind of, realise, ‘Okay, first of all, I am safe now. This has happened, but I am safe now, and, secondly, how can I bring myself back from all these negative thoughts and just at least try and be neutral.”

Witness to murder

“All of them are having a problem with sleep. It might be, ‘Okay, what I can do is I can send you lots of materials such as our Victim Support Sleep Workbook.’ We’ve also got quite a few materials on the Calm app and sleep meditation, that sort of thing.”

Caseworker

Since the emotional impact was largely manifested during the first few months, this extensive emotional support was needed mainly during this period. Due to the quick referral pathway between the police and the WHS, the caseworkers were able to contact the witnesses within a couple of days of receiving a referral from the police. This swift access to support and the way in which witnesses were contacted by the service were valued by both caseworkers and witnesses.

“Yes, it was very good, like, as soon as the police gave me the option and I told them, yes, I want to speak to someone, and they could put someone in contact. And then, yes, pretty soon after I got a call, I got a phone call and then two ladies came to see me at home to talk about it.”

Witness to murder

The ability to respond at an early stage is significant and provided the witnesses with important support. Previous research found that providing comfort, information and support, and meeting people’s immediate practical and emotional needs play useful roles in their ability to cope with a highly stressful event.⁸ Further research is needed to fully understand the impact early intervention may have on witnesses to murder and its contribution to their recovery and to the prevention of the development of more complex mental health needs.

“I don’t think any therapy or anything would have worked in those first two weeks, because my brain was so scattered, but just having met someone like [Caseworker name] was really helpful because it let me know that things are coming. I’ve not fallen through the net. I’ve not been forgotten. There is support available, and it will become available. [Caseworker name]’s approach was really great because it was really soft and gentle... That was really helpful because I don’t think I would have had the capacity at that time to be dealing with more in-depth discussions, but it was nice to know that help was there. It was available. I had a contact, and things will progress, and it is going to be progressed. That was really comforting in those first two weeks.”

Witness to murder

While most of the emotional effects experienced by the witnesses manifested in the first few months, witnesses and caseworkers emphasised the change over time in the impact of the incident on the witnesses. Thanks to the support they received, the negative emotional impact eased over time. Accordingly, the witnesses' support needs also shifted, from extensive emotional support to practical support, overcoming the barriers that prevented them from returning to their routine and supporting them through the criminal justice process, as will be detailed in the next sections.

"I think that was the initial shock, and my behaviours changed quite a lot, and then now, I feel like I am entering a different phase of that, where, thanks to Victim Support's help and also to, kind of, time passing and you are getting used to things, I feel like I am getting back to normal life really, but still, those things will stay with me."

Witness to murder

Furthermore, the caseworkers perceived that the service has the potential to prevent the witnesses from developing long-term needs, such as complex or persistent PTSD, which would require much more extensive and profound support to overcome.

"If witnesses are able to access this service it might prevent them from developing more complex mental health needs, for example post-traumatic stress disorder, or having to go into long-term therapy because they have not addressed it in the initial stages."

Caseworker

"Through Victim Support we do commission counselling. But in my experience I have not had to do that, because I have been able to work with them to try and stop them from needing that long-term support and get them back to functioning quicker. So I think that immediate support is what is really good about the service."

Caseworker

The WHS can also provide quick and direct referrals to specialist trauma counselling for those who need additional support. This service is commissioned by the WHS and provided by external therapists. Previous research has reported on the long waiting times faced by victims and witnesses for counselling services through the NHS and the negative implications this may have for their recovery.⁹ Therefore, quick access to counselling was highly appreciated by both the caseworkers and the witnesses. The caseworkers liaise with the therapists to arrange the support and make sure that it will not impair the court case.

"After the first month, I think it was good that [Caseworker name] quite quickly arranged a therapist for me. He still checked in at least weekly with me, as well as the therapist, just checking in, and seeing how things are going, and making sure that the sessions with the therapist are working and that I'm comfortable with them. That was really useful."

Witness to murder

Feeling scared and unsafe

The second common impact on witnesses was feeling scared, unsafe and afraid for their lives and for their relatives. This was mostly expressed by witnesses who feared that the perpetrator might identify or find them.

"I've still got that fear that he saw me, but I can't remember what he looked like. Even though I know he's in prison."

Witness to murder

"If they are witnesses, if they are in any way involved, then there is the worry that the perpetrators know who they are and where they live, and then they need to move... And she [the client] tells me that, even in their new place when there is no reason to believe the perpetrators know where they are, she runs with the kids from the car to the flat, in case someone is hiding in the corridors."

Caseworker

Feelings of fear and a sense of being in danger were also experienced by some of the witnesses in cases where the perpetrator was dead; this can be linked to the emotional trauma. Irrational beliefs and fears have long been documented in trauma survivors: because the event is so traumatic, survivors often have difficulty integrating it successfully with prior beliefs and experiences, which leads to a change in perceptions and appraisals (eg "Nowhere is safe") and can exacerbate feelings of fear and produce a sense of current threat.¹⁰ Identifying irrational beliefs and fears that appear to have originated following the traumatic experience and then examining and challenging them is part of the therapeutic process for people affected by trauma.

"I did not sleep a lot in my house. I do not know why, but I felt very unsafe in my own place. Since all of this happened, I have probably slept in my house like a week or three days or something [stayed somewhere else most of the time]."

Witness to murder

The witnesses needed a variety of strategies to increase their personal safety. To help them cope with the negative impact on their sense of security and safety, some needed someone to accompany them to places where they felt unsafe. Others needed security measures such as alarms or a higher fence around their garden.

"Wanting people around me, not wanting to go places on my own. Like, my friends coming to the gym with me and that kind of made it easier."

Witness to murder

"I didn't really ask for much, I just asked my local council... I've got a little low fence and all my neighbours got high ones... a fence that just makes them feel that little bit safer while they're going through this period."

Witness to murder

Change of perceptions on life and society

The third impact involves a change of perceptions on life and society. Witnessing a horrifically tragic event such as a murder turned the lives of the witnesses upside down; it changed their perceptions and revealed the negative and unpleasant aspects of life, society and people. As previously mentioned, changes in perceptions and beliefs are a common reaction to traumatic events. Past evidence has highlighted that survivors may overgeneralise from the event and, as a consequence, perceive a range of normal activities as being more dangerous, or they may exaggerate the probability of further catastrophic events in general.¹¹ The witnesses told us how it made them more suspicious and less trusting of people.

"I've had some witnesses say to me, 'Murder actually does happen – it happens anywhere and everywhere,' 'We live on a quiet road,' 'We work in a place where it's all risk-assessed, and it still happened.' I think it's that initial shock. It's the realisation, unfortunately, that [this] is what happens in this world and it happens everywhere and anywhere."

Caseworker

"A realisation that things can happen – even though you hear about it a lot, you don't really expect to see anything. Yes, it became very real for me and, yes, it definitely made me more aware and a bit paranoid."

Witness to murder

"I don't think my life will ever be the same again, if I'm honest. Things affect me differently. I think I look at things differently. I've got some strange anger at certain things, an unrest with society that I didn't really have [before]."

Witness to murder

"I feel angry at people; that they can actually do things like that... I judge people a lot now. I just think everyone's the same."

Witness to murder

To deal with a change of perception, witnesses need to restore their trust in society and people. Rebuilding confidence in society, community and people can be assisted by the WHS.

"It's mainly building up confidence to go back into society, building trust. You know, taking baby steps towards trusting not only officials, but people in general in society, the fact that they've lost that."

Caseworker

Impairment of daily functioning

The emotional consequences highlighted in this report are demonstrated in the fourth impact: impaired daily functioning. Every one of the caseworkers and witnesses described a range of day-to-day functions that were compromised due to the witnesses' high levels of negative emotions and their associations. This manifested itself in a difficulty to return to their lives as they were before the incident and in changes to their daily routines. 'Normal' everyday activities became challenging. Some witnesses experienced an inability to leave the house or would avoid certain places that triggered negative emotions, such as public transport, parks and the gym.

"I couldn't even walk outside. If someone was behind me, I was freaking out, so to try and expect someone to go and buy their own food, or go to the doctor's or do anything is unreasonable."

Witness to murder

"Right after the incident happened, I did not leave my house because I was just terrified and scared of everything, not just going out. I did not want to be in big groups, I did not take the Tube, I did not take public transport at all."

Witness to murder

"I used to go to the gym... after that event, because it's quite a male-dominated thing, I found it really hard to allow myself to go. And I just felt the men looking at me, I found that really more threatening, I guess, than I did before. And it took me a long time to be able to go in an environment like that again... it just made me feel really panicky and unsafe."

Witness to murder

Another part of the witnesses' lives that was negatively affected was their ability to go back to work. This was either because of their emotional trauma or their inability to travel to work or because the incident had taken place in the workplace. This can have an impact on their financial situation.

"They're either not working because they've been diagnosed with PTSD or they're out of work because of their anxiety and not wanting to go outside. They've been out of pocket in some way, shape or form. There's normally some sort of financial aspect."

Caseworker

"It affected me at work. I didn't want to be around people, so I quit my job."

Witness to murder

"It's hard because it was obviously my workplace... I did take a bit of time off work. And then it was just a constant reminder... I just really didn't like being there every day."

Witness to murder

Some of the witnesses needed to move house because of the incident, either because it had taken place near their house or to protect their safety. This has many implications for their emotional wellbeing as well as for their day-to-day lives, including work, education, social networks and daily routines, not only for the witnesses but also for those who live with them.

"There is this one particular client that I can think of who had practical needs from day one... He had to move from his permanent home. And that obviously caused further stress, further anxiety... He didn't have a fixed abode, so moving from one place to the other. So, initially, dealing with trauma, as well as dealing with all the practical things like that was quite tough."

Caseworker

"But there were risks to her son, so she needed to move. So, there is all the kind of practical impacts on her, in terms of it's harder for her to get to her job. She's driving really far to drop her children at school."

Caseworker

As many of the witnesses' day-to-day functioning was impeded as a result of the incident, they needed help in getting back to their normal routines and habits. The WHS provided them with a range of practical support. As some witnesses experience difficulty in returning to work, they need to be able to take some time off; the caseworkers liaise with their workplace, primarily to explain the impact of such an incident on witnesses. Some witnesses also need to access financial aid as a result of losing their job, so caseworkers assist with navigating the benefits system and other funding sources. When witnesses need to move home, the caseworkers try to facilitate this by liaising with the police and other agencies.

"I truly received so much support. Like, with work, it was incredible. [Caseworker name] always said, 'If you need to talk to your manager, I can do it, or we can draft what you are going to say.' It really helped me have a conversation at work. I am only working two days a week still now, which is really helpful."

Witness to murder

"We were helping her to find accommodation through Shelter, which she did. Then she needed to move. She didn't have enough money to find a removal van. That is something that we can do."

Caseworker

"There are different things that we can refer people to. There's financial help and there's, on a very basic level, if the impact has been that there's been no money coming in and they've lost their job, they're struggling on benefits, when they come through we can actually do things like food bank goods and food vouchers... We can get really absolute basic needs for people if needed."

Caseworker



Some incidents and witnesses receive a great deal of media coverage. Of the witnesses we spoke to, some had a very negative experience with the media and some felt harassed by journalists. This usually happens in the early days after the incident when the witnesses are most vulnerable, and it can cause them stress and anxiety. The WHS, with support from Victim Support's external communications team, can help witnesses respond to the media and to approaches from journalists and understand their options around whether or not to share information about their experience.

"There was a point where I released the press release and the press statement, and my story was told. It stopped people coming to me and asking for the story. It was a huge weight off my shoulders to get that out... Now, if anyone came to me and wanted to know what happened, I could just send them the link. It just relieved a whole lot of that kind of pressure on me."

Witness to murder

"Suddenly you are now dealing with the media, who want to ask your client a question, turning up at their home or ringing them at work, for example. Then you are having to get the media team involved from Victim Support to support that."

Caseworker

While the WHS is a separate service inside Victim Support, it also benefits from other expertise within Victim Support, such as children and young people's teams and domestic abuse teams. The caseworkers were able to seek advice from other teams or refer swiftly to their services when needed. This adds to the variety of support that can be used as part of the witness recovery plan.

"This particular client disclosed that her daughter was experiencing domestic abuse but wasn't ready to access support. We gave the client all of the tools and all of the information about where her daughter can access support, and told her the best ways for how to have these conversations with her, what to do, what not to do, and how she can support her to get help... You can't argue that that isn't in the client's support plan and the client's needs because that's a big concern, that's a big thing that's going to prevent her from being able to work on everything that's going on for herself."

Caseworker

A strain on relationships with family and partners

The fifth negative impact on the witnesses' lives touches on their relationships with loved ones. The witnesses and caseworkers described how the profound emotional impact on the witnesses and the changes in their daily routines had placed a huge strain on their relationships with loved ones, especially those within the same household. Some family members and partners struggle to understand the severity of the trauma and the time needed for recovery; they expect the witness to be able to carry on as normal. This can cause tensions in the relationship.

"That particular client, she's not leaving the house, she's unable to work... Her husband is not really understanding why she's not able to work and why their finances are being affected. It's causing a lot of tension within the house."

Caseworker

"They say people don't understand what they're going through, and that includes the family as well. When you've got a trauma, people tend to put a time, a deadline, on that – 'By this time, you are supposed to be getting better.' But there are a lot of things that trigger [trauma]."

Caseworker

Others felt uncomfortable sharing with their families what they were facing, or they felt overly worried about how it might affect their loved ones, which made them feel lonely and anxious.

"Their idea is that it would affect their loved ones, that is the reason why they don't necessarily express. Also, they think it would jeopardise the investigation... They don't want to put what they've experienced onto their family members or onto their loved ones, their sufferings, they don't want them to suffer."

Caseworker

Witnesses need help to ease the stress and difficulties in their relationships that are caused by the profound emotional impact on the witnesses. Educating family members on the effect of trauma and the recovery process was described as a method that helped witnesses to deal with the lack of understanding from family and partners. Although they did not communicate with family members directly, the caseworkers provided the witnesses with information and materials that could be shared with family members.

"I provided this client with lots of small video clips from YouTube about how her diagnosis, which is complex PTSD, manifests... I said to her, 'Maybe you should share this with your husband so that he has a bit of an understanding that this isn't you, this is your body.' She did share it with him, he seems to have understood it a bit better now. He still gets annoyed but I think he's accepted that it's not her choice, it's something that's happening to her body."

Caseworker

Nervousness about the criminal justice process

The final impact is related to the criminal justice process. Past research has shown that contributing to a police investigation and giving evidence in court can be a stressful experience.¹² Similarly, we heard from the caseworkers and witnesses how involvement in the criminal justice process can be a difficult and emotional experience. The witnesses expressed feelings of nervousness about dealing with the police and had concerns about giving evidence in court. Witnesses to murder can play a pivotal role in prosecuting the case, which can increase the pressure and worry they feel when giving evidence to the police and in court.

“I was very anxious, more anxious that if they did get away with it, are they going to come and look for me, [that] sort of thing.”

Witness to murder

“Especially when you have to give a statement or when you have to appear in court, that would be one of the most traumatic [times]. Because they think, ‘What is going to happen? Is this person going to have justice? Am I going to be the one for the justice to take place?’ – that could be quite stressful for them.”

Caseworker

Additionally, participants told us how some witnesses struggled to get information from the police about the case. Sometimes they were not updated about the trial or their role. Due to the small sample size, more research is needed to better understand the prevalence of this issue, and while this research focused on the experiences of witnesses and caseworkers, future research should also include the perspective of other practitioners, such as the police, in order to obtain a fuller picture.

“They [the police] gave me the number of my contact, but they were terrible. They changed my contact person after a few weeks and I was so pleased. Even though I only spoke to them twice, at least they could answer questions that I asked. The other person just didn’t care. He just gave me non-answers and stuff to get rid of me. That was frustrating.”

Witness to murder

“I don’t know when the inquest is, really, because I’ve only heard it through other people. I don’t know if I’ll be needed or not, because I haven’t been told I’m not needed, so I’m just assuming. The information is probably something that is missing, being in the know of what’s happening with the case.”

Witness to murder

“I haven’t heard anything, I’m not sure. I guess it should be going to court quite soon, in the next month or so, but I haven’t heard anything. I’m not really sure how that process works.”

Witness to murder

A few witnesses also told us about difficult experiences when giving evidence to the police and during the trial, a situation that left them in distress.

"I was harassed by the police for nearly two months. Constant phone calls, knocking on my door at 1 o'clock in the morning to give a statement. Really questioning me and I totally refused and I got really scared because I was told, 'Well, they've got you on video. If you don't come to court we can subpoena you and everyone's going to see your face in court. Or you work with us and we work with you.'"

Witness to murder

"I gave evidence to the police, and it was awful. It took five hours, which is a very long time, non-stop."

Witness to murder

"One of the court ushers took me the wrong way and I walked past the defendant's sister, they knew that I was in court then. So that was a bit scary because they all live very close. So it was kind of scary that if they said, 'Oh, I saw that woman,' to the wrong person and is it going to get back to that person?"

Witness to murder

To ease the nervousness relating to their role as witnesses in the criminal justice process and to be able to support the criminal justice process in the best possible way, the witnesses and caseworkers expressed a need for witnesses to have information and support throughout the investigation, trial and inquests. This includes easy access to consistent and comprehensive information about the trial and the witness's expected role in it. The WHS provides support to witnesses by serving as a link between them and the criminal justice system (CJS), mainly by liaising with different CJS agencies on behalf of their witnesses and making sure that they are well informed and updated. We heard that this is a valuable function of the service, as it eases the feelings of anxiety and fear that can develop from having to deal with the police and from giving evidence in court or at inquests. As such, it also helps witnesses in supporting the prosecution. Witnesses and caseworkers told us how the caseworkers acted as the main point of contact for updates from the police. They also made sure that the police were aware of the witnesses' circumstances and took them into account.

"It is a lot of not knowing and uncertainty about: 'Do I need to attend trial? Do I need to attend the inquest? Do I need to give any more information?' And it is constantly questioning that. I think, in terms of the support that I provide, there is a lot of just reassurance. Making sure they can access information, get answers to these questions that they have by facilitating conversations with the police."

Caseworker

"He offered a bit of support – and this was really good – between chasing up the police, because the number that they gave me, the person was absolutely terrible at getting back to me. Then [Caseworker name] contacted the police and they got back to me after that, which was much better. I thought that was really useful, being the liaison between the police when things fell through the gaps."

Witness to murder

“They [the police] did not answer the messages. So I called them and explained to them, ‘This is crucial for this person, he is distressed, so you need to be very careful, and be aware that he needs to be informed as well.’”

Caseworker

Witnesses to murder who are asked to give evidence in court need support before, during and after the trial. On average, serious crime cases take 363 days from the offence to completion.¹³ The support provided before the trial, in addition to emotional and practical support, included information and explanations about the courtroom and a pre-trial visit. The pre-trial visit was regarded as one of the most appreciated services provided by the WHS. A pre-trial visit is a visit to court before the trial, which helps the witness prepare for giving evidence in court. In the past, this was done by Citizens Advice, but in London the pre-trial visit service is now run by Victim Support and conducted by the same caseworker who has been supporting the witness from the outset. The witnesses who gave evidence in court and the caseworkers were very positive about this approach and the ability to provide continuity of support before, during and after the trial. Support was also provided by the caseworkers on the day of the court appearance or inquest, when needed.

“I think a lot of explanation about how it works, so showing them the court... Introducing them to the Witness Service and just letting them know all the information in terms of ‘This is what it will look like. This is where the defendants will be. This is where you’ll have to stand up. You may have to take an oath, what is your preference? The family of the deceased may be there, the defendant’s family may be here.’ Explaining the whole process from start to finish and saying, ‘You won’t be involved throughout the whole of it.’ Also, giving them a timeline. They may just be called the day before, and they have to go in the day after to give the evidence. So just making it clear as much as possible, because it’s quite an uncertain process anyway and it can be quite last minute, so making them aware of that.”

Caseworker

“I will probably reach out to Victim Support for some help with that [the inquest], simply because I do not know how all of this goes and the inquest is obviously so late after it happened. So, you know, I have days where I am absolutely fine and I do not think about it. So, the sort of, like, having to go through all of it again in detail, I find it really scary. So, I think having someone there to even just go with me or just, like, sit with me or make me understand that this is normal and it is time, I think this will be very helpful.”

Witness to murder

We heard from the witnesses that during the trial they can benefit from the use of special measures. These are certain measures that the court can provide to assist vulnerable or intimidated witnesses in giving evidence. Such measures include allowing them to pre-record evidence or give it via video link to avoid being cross-examined in front of the defendant. They can also give evidence from behind a screen in the courtroom, out of sight of the defendant.¹⁴ Applications for special measures are made by the Crown Prosecution Service and ordered by the court. The Witness Care Unit can assess the needs of the witnesses and inform the Crown Prosecution Service of any need for such measures. The WHS caseworkers liaise with the Witness Care Unit to make sure that the support and special measures witnesses are entitled to are in place.

"The whole experience was terrifying. It was all done very well, because I had anonymity. So I had a closed court and was behind a screen and my voice was obscured."

Witness to murder

"With regards to the witness care units, yes, we liaise with them, especially at the moment, around when the court [date] is to make sure the special measures are in place... The client doesn't have to try to work out, to find out, if they're going to court or not. We just have the conversation and liaise with them about what's happened with their court date."

Caseworker

One witness also expressed a need to be supported while giving a statement to the police, as they found the experience to be stressful and they felt that they could benefit from someone who could make sure that their emotional needs were taken into account. Victim Support recommends that the police ensure that witnesses are comfortable and feeling supported during the investigations.

"If I do need to give more police evidence, I probably think I will reach out to Victim Support, just because my first experience was not the best. It was not awful, but I was not able to tell the police officer that I needed a break because I was too scared and I was too much into the flashback and I was too much into recalling what I had experienced."

Witness to murder



Conclusions

Every year more than 600 murders take place in England and Wales. These devastating events affect not only the lives of the families and friends who have lost loved ones, but also those who witness them. The current research explores the impact of being a witness to murder, and, by doing so, it sheds light on the difference that a support service can make for the witnesses' recovery.

This research focused on, and was undertaken in partnership with, the new WHS. This was a pilot service funded by the Ministry of Justice and delivered by the London region of the National Homicide Service. In total, 12 interviews were conducted with witnesses and caseworkers.

The research emphasises the horrific and extensive impact of murder on those who have witnessed it. While effects on witnesses may differ depending on their personal circumstances and the incident they have witnessed, **we identified six shared impacts:**

- 1 Emotional trauma
- 2 Feeling scared and unsafe
- 3 Change of perceptions on life and society
- 4 Impairment of daily functioning
- 5 A strain on relationships with family and partners
- 6 Nervousness about the criminal justice process.

The caseworkers and witnesses were unanimous about the importance of the new WHS. The witnesses found the service effective in meeting their needs. They highlighted its ability to help them deal with the detrimental impacts of the incident on their lives and to assist them in moving beyond it. This was mostly due to the strong and stable relationship with the caseworker and the expert information and practical support they provided. Similarly, the caseworkers also recognised a change in the wellbeing and lives of their clients thanks to the support they provided.

"I don't think I'd, when it happened, I didn't think I'd ever, ever be able to deal with it. But through the support - I have."

Witness to murder

"In the beginning, it was difficult to open up with [Caseworker name], but I realised it was just what I needed, someone who is interested in helping me."

Witness to murder

"The client was in a really bad place, so their recovery has been nothing short of remarkable, in my opinion. We're four months down the line, and that might seem a long time, but I actually think where they've come from, from where they were at, is completely remarkable. The client looks [like] a different person, sounds [like] a different person. Their outlook has completely changed and improved."

Caseworker

One of the most notable and distinctive features of the service is that it is the only service that puts the witness, their needs and recovery at its centre. The witnesses described how, while other services may have good intentions, they also have other agendas; the WHS caseworker was the only person who had an unconditional interest in their wellbeing.

"From everyone that I've engaged with, that's the only individual [the caseworker] who has only had a vested interest in my wellbeing. Everyone else... The police, while they were concerned about my wellbeing, they were concerned about the evidence... With work they were concerned about my wellbeing, but it seemed like their primary concern was the media, the outlook on the public... With [Caseworker name] it just felt like someone who was really experienced within the field. [Caseworker name] was gentle, soft, kind and reassuring. It was really nice to have just a dedicated person who cared about me, rather than trying to get something out of me, like everyone else."

Witness to murder

This new service addresses the needs of people who would otherwise struggle to access the support they need to move beyond the incident and address trauma that, if left unmanaged, could have wider implications for their health, finances and relationships. The gap in service provision for witnesses of terrorist attacks and murder has been highlighted by Victim Support in previous research.¹⁵ The current research builds on this existing evidence that other services and agencies are not adequately meeting this need.

"I think someone at work suggested I just go to my GP and I went, and it was an awful experience because he took it very... he cried basically, which was the last thing I needed from a medical professional... I was expecting something more supportive... and then he prescribed me codeine, which I never took because I just do not think it would have helped me to just numb my brain."

Witness to murder

"I tried to talk to my doctor, but they just wanted to give me tablets and I didn't want to go down the tablet route. I would have rather have had some counselling, but that obviously wasn't possible because there's such a waiting list."

Witness to murder

"I think it was good that the police told me about it [the WHS] because otherwise I wouldn't have known. And I think if you weren't told that, then, yes, there's not really any support that you could get... So if he [police officer] hadn't have referred me, then yes I wouldn't have spoken to anyone."

Witness to murder

"The only person that's even spoken to me since the trial is [Caseworker name]."

Witness to murder

This research portrays a picture of the vast needs of those who were witnesses to murder and the positive impact a service dedicated to them could have on their wellbeing.

We therefore welcome the recent decision by the Ministry of Justice to extend this service. The new service will provide the same level of support to all witnesses to murder in England and Wales.

This research brings out the voice and experience of witnesses to murder and contributes to the scarce knowledge available on the impact of such an event on their lives. Due to the small sample size and the qualitative nature of this research, more research is needed with witnesses to murder to better understand both their experiences and the help that could assist them in their recovery.

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Victim Support, Ground Floor, Building 3, Eastern Business Park,
Wern Fawr Lane, Old St Mellons, Cardiff CF3 5EA

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