# So How Helpful Was I?

**Lesley Simmonds** evaluates Victim Support volunteers' perceptions of their contribution to helping victims.

Whilst the notion of voluntarism within criminal justice can be traced back to Anglo-Saxon times (Gill and Mawby 1990) it was in nineteenth century Britain that both the theory and practice of the use of voluntary labour as we know it became established. Indeed within this era Britain was viewed as a 'pioneer' (Davies 1997). In more modern times however voluntarism has been driven by political shifts to the right. Thus the incoming Conservative government of 1979 saw the retraction of the welfare state as necessary in order to pursue both its neo-liberal and neo-conservative economic and social policies. This movement away from the state provision of services was then accompanied by the expansion of the voluntary sector (Mawby and Walklate 1994) as one means of meeting continuing welfare needs. Indeed the Labour government has continued in the same vein with the Home Office setting a performance target for "substantial progress by 2004 towards one million more people being actively involved in their communities" (Krishnamurthy *et al* 2001).

## Who are Victim Support volunteers?

The work of Gill and Mawby in 1990 considered the role of Victim Support volunteers, albeit within the wider framework of voluntary activity within the criminal justice system. They compared samples of probation, police and Victim Support volunteers to see who these people were in terms of certain social characteristics and in this way responded to the premise that Victim Support volunteers were a varied group of people (Reeves 1985). Indeed their work indicated that this rather generalised view of volunteers was not matched by reality; a view that has gained further support from recent research on volunteers generally (IVR 1997). Thus as Gill and Mawby (1990) discovered, Victim Support volunteers, certainly in the South-west, were older rather than younger, female rather than male, and predominantly middle class.

My own research, carried out in the same geographical location, for a smaller group of volunteers (thirteen), supports these earlier views.

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Victim Support emerged and flourished within this era and, as the organisation's director commented (Reeves 1985), the standard model of help for crime victims was to be "based on a philosophy of shared community responsibility for a problem to which we are all equally vulnerable". Thus the notion of 'shared community responsibility' conveniently reflected government policy in its attempts to reshape British society as self-reliant rather than state-dependent. In this way the original model of Victim Support, as the responsive 'good neighbour' approach to crime (Reeves, 1985; Holtom and Raynor 1988), was played out.

A framework for contact was therefore created whereby volunteers would visit those victimised in the community. In this way an 'outreach' service to provide 'crisis intervention' was developed (Holtom and Raynor 1988). These two points are of particular importance in that they reflect the philosophical underpinnings upon which the service was built. The feeling within Victim Support was then that victims should not have to bear the responsibility for contacting the service themselves. In addition the contact offered would generally be a 'one-off' visit in which volunteers would either be able to assist the victim themselves or be able to refer the victim on to another agency (Reeves 1985).

Thus in terms of age profile, none of the volunteers were below the age of 30, just under half (six out of thirteen) were aged between 30 and 49 and more than half were aged 50 and over. In terms of gender, the majority of volunteers (eleven out of thirteen) were female and only one was Black or British Caribbean. In addition the occupational status of nine out of the thirteen volunteers within my sample was, or had been, managerial.

Having arrived at these findings the question may be posed as to why this should be. Gill and Mawby (1990) indicated that the way in which volunteers were recruited may be significant. Indeed they found that it was common practice for current volunteers and management committee members to suggest the names of contacts as potential volunteer material. Thus the use of 'word of mouth' raised the question as to 'whose mouth' was involved. The findings from my research indicate that the recruitment of volunteers is much more of an open process today with only two people having been drawn into the organisation in this way. In the main volunteers had responded to advertisements in the press or had been recruited by a volunteer bureau.

However whilst volunteers are community representatives, they are clearly unrepresentative of the community and of the victim population. This

then raises a second question: namely, how far do the perceptions of volunteers coincide with those of the victims they seek to help?

## Victims' and volunteers' perceptions

In an ideal world the perceptions of these two groups as to the impact of crime and Victim Support intervention could be expected to be similar. To this end victims and volunteers were asked to state their opinions as to the level of impact exerted by the crime and the sort of service offered by Victim Support, and table 1 illustrates the findings in these respects. The findings presented in this paper represent the views of those victims, thirty in all, for whom volunteer feedback was provided. Thus whilst feedback was collected from thirteen volunteers, these were based upon thirty victim cases. As may be expected the responses from this subset of victims largely mirror those of the one hundred who took part in the research overall.

Whilst 73% of victims said that they were affected very much or quite a lot by the crime, a similar albeit marginally lower number of volunteers (67%) expressed this view. The figures for victims (27%) and volunteers (30%) feeling that the crime had little or no effect were also quite similar.

On the other hand, there was much greater variance where the emotional effects of crime were concerned. Generally speaking fewer volunteers appeared to pick up on the level of emotional impact of crime. Thus whilst over three quarters of victims said that they were upset only some half of volunteers made this observation. Equally, volunteers seemed to underestimate the extent to which victims were angry.

Victims and volunteers were also asked to give their views as to the value of the service provided. Table 2 illustrates the responses given. Again whilst there is slight disagreement between the two groups as to whether or not Victim Support was helpful, with a majority of both expressing positive views, larger gaps appear where the type of service provided is considered. Generally speaking volunteers were more positive about what they had done than were victims. These views were again reflected when victims and volunteers were asked to state which services had been most helpful with volunteers tending to over-estimate the helpfulness of particular services, as table 3 illustrates.

This research has considered the views of a group of victims and volunteers as one means of judging the impact of a voluntary service. Thus whilst there were some areas of common ground in the perceptions of these two groups, gaps remain also. Volunteers' perceptions of crime impact tended to undercut those of victims, whilst at the same time their view of the service provided to victims was somewhat exaggerated. Whilst such mismatches may be due to the methodological difficulty of relying upon respondents' powers of recall, attention must be paid to these results and the implications of what they may represent. Indeed as in any activity involving human interaction there may be the danger that volunteers become 'case hardened' and that for some such activity becomes mechanical and routine. These results should then be noted by Victim Support for in whatever way they are viewed, the fact remains that victims and volunteers are not always in agreement as to the level of impact made by crime or the quality of service offered. In this way such findings may be of use to the organisation in terms of the ongoing training and supervision of volunteers. ∎

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**Table 1. The impact of crime according to victims and Victim Support volunteers.**

| Victims who were... | *Victims' perceptions % | Volunteers' perceptions % |
|---|---|---|
| Affected very much | 30 | 20 |
| Affected quite a lot | 43 | 47 |
| Affected a little or not at all | 27 | 30 |
| Angry | 87 | 57 |
| Shocked | 80 | 40 |
| Fearful | 50 | 43 |
| Unable to sleep | 50 | 40 |
| Upset | 77 | 53 |
| Experiencing other reactions | 53 | 20 |

**Table 2. Victims and volunteers perceptions of service intervention.**

| Victims saying that they received... | Victims' perceptions % | Volunteers' perceptions % |
|---|---|---|
| Real help or advice | 53 | 60 |
| Personal support | 73 | 93 |
| Advice about practical help such as changing locks etc | 40 | 50 |
| Information re compensation and insurance | 27 | 30 |
| A link with police | 13 | 3 |
| Suggestions as to other services | 43 | 47 |
| Crime prevention advice | 47 | 57 |

**Table 3. Most helpful service provided by volunteer.**

| Services most helpful to the victim... | Victims' perceptions % | Volunteers' perceptions % |
|---|---|---|
| Personal support | 37 | 73 |
| Advice about practical help such as changing locks | 3 | 17 |
| Information re insurance and compensation | 3 | 17 |
| A link with the police | 7 | 0 |
| Suggestions as to other services | 10 | 30 |
| Crime prevention advice | 13 | 47 |