

Summary, conclusions and recommendations

There are various agencies, public officials and social workers that victims of crimes can turn to (if they wish) for practical, emotional, legal and financial assistance. Together, these organisations constitute a network of victim support.

The emphasis on providing support for victims of crimes in the criminal justice system has increased since the introduction of the Victim Assistance Act (or Terwee Act) and the Terwee guidelines in 1995. Those guidelines have since been replaced by the Policy Directives on Victim Support, which stress the following five points:

1. the provision of information to the victim;
2. the treatment of the victim;
3. the position of the victim in the criminal proceedings;
4. the possibility for the victim to receive compensation;
5. cooperation between parties involved in victim support.

The Policy Directives on Victim Support are based on the assumption that the position of the victim of a crime can be strengthened through good cooperation, the provision of information, correct treatment and the possibility of receiving compensation. This should be reflected in growing satisfaction among victims with the support they are given. This report describes the research structure for a periodic survey of satisfaction among victims of crimes with the support they receive. It also describes the results of the zero measurement.

Research structure

The study comprised two phases: a literature study and a telephone survey among victims. The first phase involved a review of relevant national and international studies. The results of these studies provided an initial impression of the current situation in the field of research. The findings were also compared with the results of the telephone survey that was conducted in the second phase of the study.

Five police regions in the Netherlands (Noord- and Oost-Gelderland, Zeeland, Rotterdam Rijnmond, Groningen, Limburg-Zuid) were selected for the telephone survey of victims of crimes. A sample group was selected in each of the regions from among victims who had reported a crime to the police in the period from the beginning of November 2003 to the end of January 2004. The offences concerned ranged from bicycle theft to burglaries and serious assault. In some cases the identities of the culprits were known and there had been a prosecution, but for some of the victims this was not the case. The victims in the latter group had only been in contact with the police, and sometimes with Victim Support Netherlands.

Prior to the study, a letter was sent to the victims on behalf of the Ministry of Justice briefly describing the objective of the study. Victims who decided not to participate in the study after reading the letter could make this known by completing and returning the reply form at the bottom of the letter. Many of those who were approached availed of this option and this did not lead to any problems. The remaining victims were contacted for the telephone survey. The list of questions that was used mirrored the sequence of events in the process that a victim starts when he or she reports a crime. The questionnaire therefore started with questions about the actual reporting of the crime and any subsequent efforts made by the police to mediate in securing compensation. One by one, the questionnaire then covered the various occasions when the victim was in contact with the public prosecution department (OM), the court and Victim Support Netherlands. A total of 1,859 victims answered the questions, which represents almost 50% of those remaining after the introductory letter had been sent.

Possible improvements for future research

One of the aims of the study was to develop a method of periodically surveying the satisfaction of victims with the system. To this end, a methodology was developed during the first phase of the study and subsequently applied in carrying out an initial measurement in the second phase. A number of points emerged during the performance of this zero measurement that need to be borne in mind when future surveys are being prepared. These possible improvements are briefly discussed below.

To start with, the sample for future surveys must be larger than the one for the zero measurement. That is not because the response was too small - it was in fact higher than anticipated - but because the files that were supplied were highly polluted. They contained many businesses and a large number of victims were included more than once. The telephone numbers of many of the victims were incorrect or missing altogether.

In addition, future measurements should strive for a higher net response. Of the 1,859 respondents who participated in the survey, only 329 completed the list of questions about the court and 164 the questions about Victim Support Netherlands. This latter figure in particular is too low to highlight more subtle differences between categories of victims.

The use of the introductory letter proved successful. It may in future be necessary to explain more clearly the precise reasons for the study and that the survey has no role to play in settling the victim's case, since during the telephone survey it emerged that some victims thought the study was about their specific case or felt that the researchers would be able to assist them in their own case. The letter should perhaps also be written in plainer Dutch.

Conclusions from the zero measurement

This section describes the main conclusions of the study.

Satisfaction and the phase of the legal proceedings

The majority of the victims felt that their contacts with the police, the public prosecution department and the court met their expectations. The later the stage of the criminal proceedings, the smaller the percentage of victims that felt the communication with the relevant agencies exceeded their expectations. Twelve percent of the victims found the contact with the police was better than expected. Of those who had contact with the OM, 8% felt that these contacts exceeded their expectations, while only two percent of those whose cases went to trial felt that the court proceedings exceeded their expectations. The victims also gave the police a higher score (6.7) than they gave the OM (5.9) and the court (5.9). In other words, there was greater satisfaction with the police than with the OM and the court. This means that victims have a less favourable opinion of agencies they come in contact with at later stages of the criminal justice system. This conclusion also emerged from a number of earlier studies. On the other hand, victims who were in a later phase of the legal process were more satisfied than victims in an earlier phase with respect to a particular agency.

The lower satisfaction with agencies later in the legal process is possibly due to the fact that a victim's expectations that the defendant will be convicted or that compensation will be awarded become steadily higher as the criminal proceedings progress. The disappointment is great if these expectations are ultimately not met. This was also apparent from the comments made by respondents about the proceedings at the trial (see appendix 5 in the report). Many of the negative remarks concerned the judgement that was pronounced and the failure to award (full) compensation.

The fact that satisfaction with a particular agency increases the further a victim has progressed in the legal process is probably connected with the knowledge that the case is being taken seriously and that the defendant is being prosecuted.

Nature and seriousness of the consequences of crime and satisfaction

The level of satisfaction of victims regarding their contact with the police and the public prosecution department depends on the nature of the crime they were a victim of. Generally speaking, the level of satisfaction declines in line with the seriousness of the crime. Victims who have suffered physical injury or who say that the memory of the crime still affects them in their everyday activities are less positive than other victims.

The major factor determining satisfaction with the agencies was whether the crime still prevents the victim from functioning properly in everyday activities. The victims who are still affected by the crime were on average 0.7 to 1.5 points more negative about all the agencies. They made up 15% of the total sample. This percentage was as high as 34% in the category of victims of violent and sexual offences. The group of victims who are still affected by the crime were also more positive about a particular agency in a later phase of the legal process than during an earlier phase. Almost half of the victims falling into this group were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the verdict, while that percentage was 36% among other victims.

Victims were generally also less positive about their contacts with the police and the public prosecution department if they had again been a victim of a crime after the offence they had reported in the period between late 2003 and early 2004.

This difference in levels of satisfaction could possibly be due to the high expectations that victims of serious crimes have with regard to the performance of the police and the public prosecution department. The victims have had a traumatic experience, want to be taken seriously and expect firm action from the relevant authorities. Any disappointment in this regard will hit them harder than it would victims of less serious crimes. Another possible explanation is the manner in which the victims of serious crimes are treated. This aspect should be investigated further.

The financial consequences of the crime also affect the satisfaction of victims. The greater the financial loss, the lower the satisfaction. Satisfaction also declines in line with the amount of the loss not covered by insurance. However, the response of the victims was a lot more positive if the police or the public prosecution department had mediated in seeking compensation for the loss.

The study by the B&A Group in 1998 already reported that the responses from the police showed that their impression was that victims appreciated their efforts to mediate on the question of compensation.

Satisfaction of victim and treatment, information provision and mediation on compensation

According to the Policy Directives on Victim Support, victims must be given clear and relevant information as quickly as possible by all the relevant agencies, particularly the police and the public prosecution department.

The study by Wemmers in 1994 already showed that a major criticism made by victims was that they were not provided with adequate information. Victims who were kept informed of the status of their case by the police or the public prosecution department were more often satisfied than other victims. This study substantiates that finding and clearly shows the relationship between the provision of information and the satisfaction of victims. The study also clearly shows the connection between the satisfaction of the victims on the one hand and good treatment and efforts to mediate for compensation on the other.

Treatment, mediation for compensation and information provision by police

Between 75% and 85% of the victims felt they were treated correctly by police when reporting the crime. There was a strong correlation between the number of negative points in the treatment of victims and the average score for the police.

Like the research by the B&A Group in 1998, the present study shows that the police still do not automatically provide information about the progress of a case. Only 42% of the victims said the police had

kept them informed. A large proportion of those that had not been kept informed said they had wanted to be. A large group of victims (37%) was not kept informed about the case by the police after they had reported a crime although they did want to be. This group was far less satisfied with the police than the rest of the sample. There is also room for improvement in the information provision concerning the possibilities of receiving compensation when a crime is reported. A large proportion of the victims also said they received no information on this point although they would like to have (32%). The police did not ask 29% of those surveyed whether they wanted to seek compensation even though they did want to.

A large majority of the respondents (65-79%) felt the usefulness, accuracy and comprehensibility of the information provided was adequate to very good.

In fact, this survey paints a more positive picture of the provision of information by the police than the Population Police Monitor 2003 (see table 8.1).

Table 1 Finding of this study compared with the outcomes of the Population Police Monitor 2003

	<i>This study</i>	<i>Population Police Monitor</i>
Percentage of victims referred to the possibility of victim support	55%	32%
Percentage of victims kept informed about the case after reporting a crime	42%	23%

In other words, the police provide information about Victim Support Netherlands in 55% of the cases of reported crimes. In the case of violent offences the figure is 79%. The proportion of the group of victims still affected by the crime in their daily lives that are informed is relatively large (62%). However, roughly 17% of these victims were not informed about victim support even though they would like to have been. This group (3% of the entire group of victims) had a very negative opinion of the police. Efforts by the police to mediate on compensation between the victim and the suspect (which took place in 11% of the cases where there was a suspect) were greatly appreciated by the victims, even if the attempt failed because the suspect refused to pay. If the effort succeeded, the police were given a rounded off score of 8.

Information provision, mediation, interview with public prosecution department

The 22% of victims that were not kept informed by the public prosecution department although they wanted to be had a very negative opinion of the department (average score 4.6), especially those among them who are still affected in their everyday lives by the crime (average score 4.1). The explanations given by the victims for their scores for the police, the public prosecution department and the proceedings at the trial (see appendices 3 to 5 of the report) lead to the conclusion that the dissatisfaction is frequently due to the poor provision of information.

Besides neglect on the part of the public prosecution department (e.g. failure to register the victim), there were various reasons why the victim was not kept informed. For example, because there were no contact details or because the victim failed to respond (or respond in time) when asked whether he would like to be kept informed. It is impossible to discover from this study the extent to which the various possible causes play a role.

Only in a minority of cases (15%) did the public prosecution department mediate in the issue of compensation. The department's rating was significantly higher in those cases where it did. The scores given for the public prosecution department by victims who are affected in their everyday lives and for whom there was no mediation on compensation were particularly low (average 4.9). Important reasons for the failure to mediate on compensation included the difficulty of determining the damage or of doing so in time and the refusal of the suspect to cooperate.

Victims that did not require an interview with the public prosecutor were more positive about the public prosecution department than those who had an interview or would like to have had one. The victims still affected in their daily lives who did have an interview gave the public prosecution department a higher rating

(average 5.7 compared with 4.2) than those who did not have an interview but would like to have had one. In other words, the interview had a positive effect on their satisfaction with the public prosecution department for the group of victims still affected by the crime. The public prosecution department also received a significantly higher score if it mediated on compensation (in 21% of cases).

Joining in proceedings, presence at hearing, satisfaction with the judgement

Victims who attended the hearing were slightly more negative (average 5.7) about the proceedings in the court than those who were not present (average 6.0). By contrast, 34% of those who did attend the hearing were (very) satisfied with the sentence, while among those who were not present the figure was 43%. Relatively speaking, a far larger number of victims who are affected in their daily lives by the crime attend the hearing than other victims. This explains why those who attended the hearing were more negative about the proceedings in court and the judgement than those who did not attend. This is also apparent from the fact that the victims whose lives are still affected by the crime but did not attend the trial were more negative in their views of the proceedings than those who did attend. It is not the fact of attending the hearing but the type of victim who attends that accounts for the lower satisfaction with the court proceedings among those who attended the trial.

Of those victims who had joined in the criminal proceedings (44% of cases which came to trial), 45% were awarded compensation. This clearly had a positive effect on the rating for the court. Victims who did not join the proceedings were more positive than those who did join but were not awarded compensation. Those who were awarded higher compensation than the amount claimed were very positive about the proceedings in court. They gave an average score of 8.6.

The victims were highly polarised in their satisfaction with the judgement: 41% were (very) satisfied and 39% were (very) dissatisfied. There was a strong correlation between the satisfaction with the judgement and satisfaction with the police, the public prosecution department and the court.

Not surprisingly, the greater the satisfaction with the sentence, the greater the satisfaction with the handling of the case as a whole.

Satisfaction with Victim Support Netherlands

The victims were in general satisfied with Victim Support Netherlands. The average score was 7.0. The percentage that said the contact exceeded their expectations was also relatively high at 22%. This percentage was substantially higher than for the police (12%), the public prosecution department (8%) and the court (2%).

A large majority of the victims felt their treatment by Victim Support Netherlands was good to very good. There was a strong correlation between the treatment by Victim Support and the score. Those who had received emotional, legal and/or practical assistance were more positive about Victim Support Netherlands than those who did not receive any support. Those who said they needed support but did not receive any were negative. This latter group accounted for 14-24% of the total number of clients. Another finding is that victims who had frequent contact with Victim Support Netherlands gave a higher rating.

Recommendations

A number of recommendations can be made on the basis of the above conclusions. They are not ready-made solutions but areas in which the policy needs to be fleshed out further.

There are a number of factors that display a strong correlation with the satisfaction of victims. Some of them cannot be influenced by policy relating to victim support. Examples include whether or not a suspect is arrested, the decision on whether or not to prosecute and the ultimate sentence. However, a number of other points show a clear correlation and can perhaps be influenced.

- A large proportion of the victims said they did not receive information about the progress of the case or the possibility of claiming compensation or receiving victim support although they would have liked this information. This has quite a substantial negative effect on the rating of the police and the public prosecution department. The reasons why these persons were not informed and what can be done to rectify the situation could be investigated.
- There is relatively little mediation about compensation between the victim and the suspect by the police and the public prosecution department, although when there is it has a positive impact on the victim's satisfaction. The reasons for the relative infrequency of mediation could be investigated to find out whether improvement is possible.
- A substantial proportion of the victims had no interview with the public prosecutor although they would like to have had one. Here too, possible improvements could be investigated.
- Victims who are still affected in their everyday lives by a crime are considerably more dissatisfied than the other victims. Whether the special support for this group is adequate or can be improved could be investigated.