

Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration

Topic: Supports and Experiences of Victims of Crime

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1. Introduction

AdvIC - Advocates for Victims of Homicide is a victim support organisation working with families affected by homicide. Through our work, we provide ongoing practical and psychological support to individuals and families navigating the aftermath of the most serious crimes.

Our experience places us in a unique position to observe both the immediate and long-term needs of victims, as well as the strengths and shortcomings of the current system of supports. This submission draws on that frontline experience to highlight key issues affecting victims of crime, particularly those bereaved by homicide, and to outline areas where systemic improvement is required.

2. Victim Experience

Victims of crime, particularly those affected by homicide, face complex and long-term challenges that are not always fully recognised or supported within the current system.

Through our work, we consistently see that trauma following homicide is deep and long-lasting. However, access to appropriate long-term psychosocial support is often limited, in part due to a lack of funding. This leaves many families without the level of support they need over time.

Victims' needs often span legal, psychological and social areas. These needs are closely linked and require a coordinated, multi-agency response. In our experience, this is not always reflected in how services are delivered, which can lead to gaps in support.

We regularly see that families experience a lack of coordinated support following a homicide. They must often engage with multiple agencies, including An Garda Síochána, the courts, and support services, without clear guidance. As a result, families are frequently left to navigate complex systems independently during a time of extreme distress.

Communication is also inconsistent. We have observed that families may receive varying levels of information at different stages, which can lead to confusion and additional stress.

In addition, many families we support face financial pressures following a homicide. Engagement with the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme can be difficult and adds further

stress and uncertainty at a time of profound loss. The process is frequently complex, slow, and difficult to navigate.

The death of a loved one as a result of homicide represents one of the most severe and complex forms of bereavement. Evidence from AdVIC's direct work with individuals and families, alongside findings from the international literature, demonstrates that homicidal loss is associated with significantly higher levels of psychological distress than other forms of bereavement. The suddenness of the death, the violent nature of the act, the involvement of the criminal justice system, and the often-prolonged investigative and court processes combine to place affected individuals at heightened risk of long-term mental health difficulties.

Drawing on AdVIC's extensive experience supporting bereaved families, it is clear that psychosocial support and sustained, trauma-informed counselling are not optional interventions but essential components of recovery and wellbeing. Individuals bereaved by homicide commonly experience overwhelming emotional reactions including shock, anger, guilt, fear, anxiety, and profound sadness. These reactions are frequently exacerbated by media exposure, public scrutiny, and the uncertainty associated with legal proceedings. Early psychosocial intervention is therefore critical to stabilise individuals in the immediate aftermath of the homicide, helping them to feel safe, understood, and supported during an acute period of crisis.

The literature consistently highlights that the impact of homicidal bereavement is enduring rather than time-limited. Many adults and children go on to experience complicated or prolonged grief, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety. AdVIC's experience mirrors these findings, with families often requiring specialist support over a number of years rather than months. Long-term counselling provides a vital, structured space in which individuals can process traumatic loss, regulate intense emotional responses, and cope with ongoing stressors such as anniversaries and court outcomes. For adults, this support often centres on managing trauma symptoms, addressing feelings of injustice or self-blame, and adapting to significant changes in identity, roles, and relationships.

For children and young people, the need for sustained intervention is particularly acute. The literature demonstrates that homicidal bereavement can disrupt emotional development, attachment, educational engagement, and social functioning. AdVIC's work with children confirms the importance of age-appropriate, therapeutic approaches—including play-based, creative, and narrative methods—that allow children to express and make sense of their experiences in developmentally appropriate ways. Early and consistent support has been shown to significantly reduce the risk of long-term psychological harm and to promote healthier developmental outcomes.

Beyond symptom reduction, both AdVIC's experience of working with families and research emphasise the role of long-term support in fostering resilience and meaning-making. Recovery in the context of homicidal loss does not involve "moving on" from the death, but rather learning to integrate the loss into one's life in a way that allows for ongoing functioning,

connection, and purpose. Loved ones may find meaning through remembrance (for e.g. AdVIC's Memorial Event), advocacy, or engagement with peer support, all of which require appropriate guidance and facilitation.

In addition, homicidal bereavement rarely affects individuals in isolation. Whole family systems and communities are impacted, often leading to relationship strain, communication difficulties, and social withdrawal. The effectiveness of family- and community-based interventions in strengthening coping capacity, reducing isolation, and preventing longer-term distress is well documented. Group programmes and peer support also play a crucial role in coping with the loss of a loved one from homicide.

Both AdVIC's direct experience working with individuals and families and the wider evidence base demonstrate a clear and ongoing need for publicly funded, specialist psychosocial and counselling supports for individuals and families bereaved by homicide. Sustained investment in these services is essential to mitigate long-term harm, promote recovery and resilience, and ensure that individuals and families receive the level of care and support required following the most traumatic of losses.

3. Key Gaps in the System

The experiences outlined above point to several significant gaps in the current system of support for victims of crime:

- Lack of overarching responsibility: There is no single body responsible for overseeing the overall victim experience across the criminal justice system.
- Inconsistent standards: Victims receive varying levels of support depending on location and service provider.
- Limited accountability: There is no clear mechanism to address issues such as delays, poor communication, or gaps in service.
- Fragmented services: Supports are not sufficiently coordinated, leading to duplication in some areas and gaps in others.

Overall, our experience indicates that these gaps contribute to a system that is difficult to navigate and does not consistently respond to victims' needs in a joined-up manner.

4. Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme

Through our work with families, the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme presents a number of challenges for victims, particularly those affected by homicide.

A key issue is the length of time required to process applications. In many cases, backlogs result in significant delays, leaving families waiting extended periods for decisions while facing financial strain.

The current three-month time limit for applications is often unrealistic. In the immediate aftermath of a homicide, families are dealing with trauma and practical demands. Completing a lengthy and complex application within this timeframe places an additional burden on those already in crisis.

The application process itself is complex and can be difficult to complete. Requirements, particularly those relating to the "circumstances" of the incident, can feel unclear and overly broad, potentially leading to inconsistent outcomes.

The scheme also does not adequately distinguish between fatal and non-fatal cases. Families bereaved by homicide have distinct and long-term needs which, in our experience, are not fully recognised.

Overall, the scheme can feel impersonal and process-driven. From our experience supporting families through this process, there is a need for a more accessible, transparent, and humane approach.

5. Recommendations

1. Establish an Independent Victims' Commissioner

An Independent Victims' Commissioner should be established to oversee the victim experience across the criminal justice system. This role should monitor how victims are treated across agencies, promote consistent standards, identify systemic issues, and ensure that victims' voices inform policy and practice. The Commissioner should also provide a clear mechanism for accountability and complaints.

2. Improve Coordination and Introduce a Clear Victim Pathway

Greater coordination is required across all agencies supporting victims. A structured pathway should outline what families can expect at each stage, from the immediate aftermath through to the conclusion of legal proceedings and beyond.

3. Establish National Standards for Victim Support Services

National standards should ensure consistent levels of support regardless of location. These should include clear communication standards, defined access to supports, and a named point of contact for each family.

4. Strengthen Access to Psychosocial Support

Access to long-term, trauma-informed psychosocial support must be improved. Funding should reflect the enduring impact of trauma on families affected by homicide.

5. Implement Trauma-Informed Training for Frontline Staff

All frontline professionals engaging with victims should receive trauma-informed training, including Family Liaison Officers and other key personnel. This will support more consistent and sensitive engagement.

6. Reform the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme

The scheme should be reviewed to ensure it is accessible, timely, transparent, and responsive to victims' needs. Reform should include addressing delays and backlogs, reviewing time limits, simplifying the application process, and recognising the specific needs of families affected by homicide.

6. Conclusion

This submission highlights key issues affecting victims of crime, particularly those bereaved by homicide. While supports exist, significant gaps remain in coordination, consistency, and accessibility.

Based on our direct experience, addressing these issues through structural reform, improved oversight, and enhanced victim supports will contribute to a more effective and compassionate system.

AdVIC welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this process and remains available to engage further with the Committee.

References

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