



Surviving murder

The impact of murder and manslaughter
on the surviving relatives of victims and
an evaluation of the support received
from Victim Assistance Netherlands

Summary

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Summary

Care for victims is a relatively recent phenomenon in our country. Not until the 1960s did society's and politics' attention for victims of crime grow. In the 1980s special agencies were created to support victims, called Victim Assistance Netherlands (SHN). Every year SHN provides help to over one hundred thousand victims. A few years ago it became evident that a group of surviving relatives of victims of violence were dissatisfied with the 'generic approach' of SHN. These surviving relatives felt that the assistance and support services did not adequately meet the needs and desires of this category of victims. The lack of knowledge of workers concerning mourning and coping with loss and the sometimes limited experience with the target group were missed not only by surviving relatives but by relief workers active in this particular field as well.

Case managers Murder and Manslaughter

In order to better meet the needs of surviving relatives of murder and manslaughter victims, SHN started a new service for this specific target group in the summer of 2007. Case managers are at the centre of this new service. Case managers are professional, paid employees of SHN. Immediately after a murder or manslaughter their services are mobilized to offer appropriate help and support to surviving relatives. The surviving relatives' needs and problems are mapped out and if necessary, case managers will call in specific support for surviving relatives in various areas. Important tasks include offering practical assistance, supporting surviving relatives during the entire process of investigation and criminal proceedings, arranging legal assistance, offering counseling for coping with trauma and loss, and functioning as an intermediary with regard to criminal law partners, employers and social security authorities. The case manager will remain the surviving relatives' contact person for an extended period of time, i.e. until a few months after the sentence has become irrevocable when a suspect has been arrested. If the perpetrator remains unknown, assistance will usually continue as long as the contacts contribute in a positive way to reducing or removing the effects of the crime. This service for surviving relatives of murder and manslaughter victims was initially introduced in three SHN pilot regions. Since 2010 the case

manager Murder and Manslaughter has existed as a national service and by mid 2012 there were sixteen case managers in all.

The SHN service for surviving relatives of murder and manslaughter victims aims to improve assistance and support to the surviving relatives of the victims of such crimes. Commissioned by the Scientific Research and Documentation Centre (WODC) of the Ministry of Safety and Justice, Bureau Beke conducted a study into the impact of murder and manslaughter on the surviving relatives of the victims, their need of support and the extent to which case managers met those needs.

The following research question is central to this study:

What are the effects of murder and manslaughter on the surviving relatives of victims and to what extent do case managers Murder and Manslaughter meet their needs?

Research methods

The research is a longitudinal study in which a group of surviving relatives of crime and manslaughter victims were followed for two or three years after the crime. It started in March 2009 and was completed in May 2012. The case managers were asked to request the surviving relatives of victims of murder and manslaughter whom they counseled, to cooperate in this study. This recruitment resulted in a research group consisting of 62 surviving relatives (43 females and 19 males) concerning 42 murder and manslaughter cases. Approximately one third of the respondents were the victims' mothers.

Interviews

The interviews with the surviving relatives were central to our research. To gain insight into the course of effects and problems that surviving relatives of murder and manslaughter victims are up against, extensive interviews were conducted on several occasions at one year intervals. The interviews took place in 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012. Our goal was to interview all surviving relatives twice and half of the group a third time. 62 surviving relatives took part in the first series of interviews. One year later 57 surviving relatives participated a second time and 25 surviving relatives were interviewed a third time. The response rates slightly decreased in the second and third interviews: From 100 to 92 to 83 percent. Non response in the two follow-up phases included surviving relatives who could no longer be reached or who did not respond to requests to make an appointment.

The interviews were conducted using semi-structured questionnaires. The main topics included information regarding the crime, emotional, legal and practical problems and an assessment of the case manager.

Questionnaires

After every interview the surviving relatives were requested to complete a written questionnaire. This questionnaire – which consisted of two parts – was then sent on to them. The first part concerned the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI), an instrument designed to measure an individual's psychological functioning and to get an impression of the nature and severity of their symptoms. The BSI consists of 53 items and covers nine symptoms relating to the surviving relatives' psychological condition which can be compared with the scores of standard groups.

The second part of the questionnaire asked surviving relatives to rate their satisfaction with different areas of life and with the different aspects of the service provided by the case managers.

In the first phase nearly all respondents completed the questionnaire: The response rate was 90 percent. In the second and third measurements the response rate decreased slightly to 81 and 73 percent respectively. The non response was partly due to the non response to the interviews.

The impact of the crime

The impact of the crime on the surviving relatives of murder and manslaughter victims may be felt in several areas. First, the psychological and emotional and physical effects will be discussed, followed by the social, practical and legal effects.

Psychological and emotional effects

In the interviews the surviving relatives stated that anger was the emotion most felt. They were angry, furious even because of the injustice the perpetrator had done to them by taking away their loved ones, but sometimes they were angry with the police and other authorities as well because they felt they had not acted adequately. In addition, the surviving relatives experienced intense feelings of grief, sometimes expressed in fits of crying. Sometimes grief sunk in slowly and became worse and worse over time. The surviving relatives also mentioned sleeping disorders and fears as direct effects of the crime. Fears were diverse, but were always related to the crime. A minority of the surviving relatives expressed feelings of guilt and revenge towards the victim and the perpetrator respectively. Finally, some surviving relatives also mentioned feelings of depression or spoke in terms that are indications of depression.

From the first BSI test it could be concluded that male surviving relatives compared with males in general – showed significantly more somatic symptoms, depression, hostility, paranoid thoughts and psychoticism symptoms during the first phase after the crime. No differences were found with respect to the other symptoms, such as fears. Compared to a(n) (outpatient) group of patients, male surviving relatives had fewer complaints in other problem areas such as interpersonal sensitivity, a depressed state of mind, fears and psychoti-

cism. Surviving relatives' total scores were lower than the scores of patients in this respect, which can be considered an indication of better psychological health.

The female surviving relatives' scores were significantly higher on all items than those of women in general. It was striking that the female surviving relatives were hardly distinguishable from the group of patients; female surviving relatives only scored significantly lower with respect to interpersonal sensitivity.

With the passage of time the psychological effects, in particular grief and fears, became less intense. 'It wears off', as one survivor put it. They slowly recovered, as was evident from the interviews, the surviving relatives' own grading of their psychological functioning and their BSI scores. On the other hand, feelings of loss and, for some surviving relatives, anger with the perpetrator as well, grew over the years. An important marking point in time was the end of the criminal trial. Until then the surviving relatives needed all their energy for the criminal trial (often followed by an appeal); when everything had come to an end 'they got around to themselves' and then they realized that their loved ones were not coming back. In the cases in which the perpetrator remained unknown, the surviving relatives finally seemed to resign to the fact that no one would be convicted for the crime. The surviving relatives felt life after the crime was not the same anymore: 'Living has become surviving, in a way.'

Physical effects

Nearly all surviving relatives experienced one or more physical problems as a result of the crime. These were new problems or symptoms the surviving relatives already had but which grew worse as a result of the crime. Headache was the most frequently mentioned symptom. In addition, surviving relatives mentioned fatigue, loss of appetite, stomach and bowel problems and heart problems. Some surviving relatives took up smoking (again or more heavily). With the passage of time the physical effects became less severe but could last a long time and could become really intense again at times, particularly around the time of the court sessions.

Social effects

During the first phase following the crime many surviving relatives showed some kind of avoidance behaviour. They did not like third parties to talk to them about what had happened, because they found it too difficult to talk about it. Another reason was that they wanted to avoid third parties' well-meant remarks. Other reasons to avoid third parties were related to the perpetrator, who sometimes lived in the same neighbourhood as the surviving relatives themselves. This avoidance behaviour weakened in the course of time and eventually disappeared. Avoiding third parties is in a sense a natural reaction of the surviving relatives, a form of selfpreservation. Right after the crime the surviving relatives did not feel up to communicating with third parties or they did not know how to respond to questions. They felt paralyzed because of the crime. The solution was for them often liter-

ally stepping outside their own homes and slowly learning to get out and about with other people.

Practical effects

Nearly all surviving relatives experienced financial effects as a result of the crime (funeral expenses, for example). This was not considered an insurmountable problem by most people. Such expenses were usually compensated by insurance companies and funds such as the Violent Offences Compensation Fund (Schadefonds Geweldsmisdrijven). Some surviving relatives did get into financial problems, among other things because of losing one income. Apart from a few exceptions, these financial effects of the crime dissolved over time.

Media attention in the aftermath of the crime was experienced as a problem by a quarter of the surviving relatives because they had been harassed by journalists. Nearly all surviving relatives were greatly bothered with the way in which 'their' case had been treated by the media, for instance because of the incorrect information given about the circumstances of the crime, the victim or the perpetrator. Only few people tried to tell the 'true' story through the media; other people tried to ignore the news altogether. The interviews showed that the media coverage was a major source of annoyance and sometimes anger as well. The surviving relatives felt wronged and continued to be confronted with what had happened against their will. With the passage of time media attention ebbed away completely.

A large part of the surviving relatives experienced administrative problems as a result of their family member's death (including sorting out papers, cancelling contracts, arranging the funeral, selling the house). These were emotional matters to them. The bureaucratic attitude of some authorities made matters even worse. Many examples were mentioned in the interviews from which it became clear that surviving relatives felt misunderstood by authorities or felt little understanding was shown for their situation. The administrative aftereffects were largely dissolved with the passage of time, but even in the third year after the crime situations could arise such as receiving bills meant for the deceased.

Legal effects

The legal effects for the surviving relatives were big. Firstly because they were quite suddenly confronted with a police investigation and a criminal trial; things they had no experience with. Against their will they became part of the legal system, a system they had hardly any influence on. The stories of the surviving relatives made clear that from the very first moment they were told that their loved ones had died as a result of a crime, legal procedures more or less took over their lives. They strongly felt the need, however, to learn everything pertaining to the police investigation. In addition, they wanted to be informed about legal procedures and legal terminology to be explained to them, including information on the implications of a so-called TBS advice (an advice with respect to perpetrators who are sentenced to be detained during Her Majesty's pleasure). In most cases a family police officer was available; because of their tasks and roles these officers did not know anything about

the investigation or did not tell anything about it to the surviving relatives. If there was a suspect, the surviving relatives' attention shifted to the Public Prosecution Service and the (pro forma) sessions. In general, the surviving relatives' experiences with police and Public Prosecution Service at the time of the investigation were positive, in the sense that police and Public Prosecution Service had informed the surviving relatives as much as they were allowed to within the legal boundaries and had had an eye for their interests in the criminal proceedings. Some of the surviving relatives, however, were critical of the way they were treated by police and Public Prosecution Service. These surviving relatives felt they had not been taken seriously in certain cases or had been treated rudely, thought that the police's investigation was bad or sloppy, or that the police were lax in returning the deceased's possessions, for example. Part of the anger many surviving relatives felt originated from these frustrations.

Secondly, the course of the judicial side of the crime had implications for how and when the surviving relatives got around to coping with the loss of their loved ones. The police investigation and the trial that often followed took a lot of the surviving relatives' time and attention. The time around the court sessions was experienced as being very difficult and emotional by the surviving relatives. It stands to reason that the moment of the sentence and the sentence itself were tense occasions for most surviving relatives. The respondents said that not until after the sentence had become irrevocable, which could take a long time, did they really get around to coping with their grief.

Assistance and support

Most interviews clearly indicated that the case manager was the central person who offered the surviving relatives assistance and support in the aftermath of the crime. The case managers were active in many areas. In the practice of case management, these areas overlapped and could only be distinguished from one another for descriptive purposes. Whenever case managers paid a visit or made a telephone call to surviving relatives, the crime, the state of affairs concerning the investigation and trial, social activities, practical and financial matters and their emotional state were discussed. The surviving relatives' needs were guiding the case manager's work: The assistance and support provided was demanddriven. Some surviving relatives only required help to settle financial matters, others appreciated the emotional support.

Psychological and emotional support

As to the psychological and emotional effects it is the case manager's job to discuss the surviving relatives' problems with them. Only a few surviving relatives did not like to go into this because they preferred to discuss the emotional side of the matter with close friends and relatives.

The case managers listened to the surviving relatives' stories and showed understanding for their sometimes fierce emotions. They explained that it was only normal to feel certain emotions and gave practical advice. In addition, case managers could make referrals to grief support groups, GPs or psychologists. The appeal to case managers with respect to psychological problems seemed to be bigger when surviving relatives did not have a social safety net themselves or already had problems before the loss.

Physical support

If the surviving relatives had any physical complaints, GPs in particular took care of that and the case manager's role was limited to keeping an eye on things and if necessary motivate the surviving relatives to consult their GPs or other relief workers.

Social support

Sometimes surviving relatives found it very difficult to meet people who asked them how they were doing after the crime. Our research made clear that the case managers had an important task in motivating surviving relatives to take up their (social) lives again and stop their avoidance behaviour. On the one hand this was done by reassuring the surviving relatives that such behaviour was only natural and on the other hand by gradually encouraging them to step outside their own homes. Sometimes case managers actively supported them in doing so.

Practical support

Concerning the financial effects it was the case manager's task to contact creditors and try and reach an payoff scheme or debt repayment scheme. Case managers also helped with weighing the advantages and disadvantages of choices and decisions, including application for social security and retirement benefits, and insurance policies. Furthermore, the case managers played a role when applying for compensation with organizations such as the Violent Offences Compensation Fund.

Surviving relatives of murder or manslaughter victims may have to deal with the media whenever the crime is covered nationwide. In this respect, it was the case managers' role to advise the surviving relatives about the media and explain what the advantages and disadvantages were of any media contacts.

Legal support

The case managers played a mainly informative role with respect to the police investigation and the criminal proceedings. In nearly all cases the surviving relatives were informed – orally and by means of leaflets – of the possibility to write a victim impact statement, of their right to speak and compensation procedures. Also, the police investigation process was outlined in general terms and the court procedure was explained to them. In order to look

after the interests of the surviving relatives, the case managers accompanied them to meetings with the Public Prosecutor previous to a court session and helped them to write their victim impact statement. The case manager functioned as an important link between the surviving relatives on the one hand and the police and judicial systems on the other hand. The family police officers advised the surviving relatives on the legal aspects of the case as well. The surviving relatives did not consider this double information a problem. Quite the reverse, since a lot of information in the first phase after the crime 'did not sink in'.

Besides the case manager there are relatives, partners, friends and acquaintances that are able to help and support surviving relatives. Our research showed that this happened in varying degrees. Some surviving relatives appealed to the case managers hardly at all, since they had a social network that could support them. Other surviving relatives did not have such a social network or preferred not to use it, because they felt that the case manager understood what they were going through and other people did not, for example. The surviving relatives stated that their families and friends were not always emotionally able to cope with the situation. The availability of a case manager who knew what they were going through, yet was able to maintain sufficient professional distance, meant added value to the surviving relatives.

Satisfaction

The surviving relatives stated in the interviews and in the questionnaires their opinions of the case manager's support. The interviews showed that the level of satisfaction can be considered high. The case manager's demand-driven approach may have been a contributory factor, as well as the fact that beforehand surviving relatives had no idea of what to expect from case managers. The surviving relatives thought the case manager accessible and reliable; a person who was knowledgeable and who functioned as a confidential advisor. The surviving relatives felt the case managers treated them with respect and tact. All this was confirmed by their scores in the questionnaires. Surviving relatives rated the work of the case managers in various areas by means of grades. The scores varied between eight and nine on a scale of one to ten. Over time some surviving relatives gave insufficient grades, in particular with regard to legal support, but they were exceptions.

From conversations with the surviving relatives it became clear why the level of satisfaction was so high: the case managers completely surpassed the expectations of the surviving relatives as to knowledge, quality, presence if needed, and understanding. An important factor in all this was that the case managers' personalities greatly appealed to the surviving relatives: As already stated, there was a 'click' between the surviving relatives and the case managers. The case managers were always standby and supported them if and whenever necessary, from providing help when having to deal with administrative matters to offering comfort.

Points of attention

The surviving relatives were asked whether they could name points for improvement with respect to the case managers' help and support. The most common answer was that they had no idea what could be improved. Several aspects regarding help and support that were mentioned largely exceeded the case manager's individual level. The surviving relatives suggested the following points for improvement or attention:

- Case managers should contact surviving relatives after the crime as soon as possible (when case management was first introduced it sometimes took quite some time).
- Police should be able to explain to the surviving relatives what the case manager is able to do for them in detail.
- Changing case managers should be avoided as much as possible.
- Some people would like a standard list of things to remember or pay attention to.
- Surviving relatives experience strong emotions not only in the period of time before, but certainly after the trial as well. Contact with the case manager is less intensive after the trial. Some surviving relatives' need of contact with and emotional support from the case manager was greater during that period of time.

Epilogue

Case management, the service for surviving relatives of murder and manslaughter victims, started as a project, but it was gradually implemented nationwide during the time of the study. In the project phase case management developed further, working methods crystallized and case managers acquired more experience. It is important to state clearly that problems experienced in the initial phase of case management as a project did not cause dissatisfaction among the surviving relatives. This might be explained by the fact that surviving relatives did not directly come into contact with the 'project' as such, but only with the individual case managers. We can therefore conclude that the strength of the service lies in the individual case managers themselves. If we look at it in a critical way, it is impossible to determine on the basis of this study how surviving relatives would have fared if the case managers had not been there. To answer this question a different research design is needed.

The case managers in this study turned out to provide in the surviving relatives' need for a permanent contact person who is knowledgeable, keeps track of the situation and informs and supports them in practical and emotional respect. The surviving relatives appreciated being counseled by the same case manager throughout the entire procedure. The surviving relatives' satisfaction was linked to the individual case managers. This means that this service for surviving relatives of murder and manslaughter victims is entirely dependent on the individual case managers. It is vitally important to safeguard the knowledge and experience of the case managers.

Being confronted with a serious crime such as murder or manslaughter has an enormous impact on the victims' surviving relatives. What makes this research study unique for the

Netherlands is that a group of surviving relatives of murder and manslaughter victims was followed for two or three years after the crime. Thus we gained insight into the development of the effects of murder and manslaughter during the first few years following the crime. A positive finding is that in general surviving relatives were doing better two to three years after the crime.

Since murder and manslaughter cases may take up a long time, it is advisable to monitor the long-term effects of the crime. At a later stage surviving relatives may be confronted with probationary leave and eventually even with the perpetrator being released. Important questions for SHN remain how to deal with such developments in an adequate way and whether case management should play a role in this respect.

