

**victim  
support**  
find the strength

## Left in the dark

Why victims of crime  
need to be kept informed



“

*I was left in the dark. I didn't know what was happening.*

**Victim Support research participant, 2010**

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# Left in the dark

## Executive summary

People who use public services want to know what the service is doing for them. This is especially true for victims of crime, who have to try to understand and negotiate a complex criminal justice system (CJS) which they may never have dealt with before. All agencies involved in the CJS are responsible for giving information – including the police, Crown Prosecution Service, courts and judiciary. Independent organisations like Victim Support, the national charity giving help and a voice to victims of crime, witnesses, their family and friends, also have a role to play.

This report focuses on one crucial area of information for victims: being kept informed and updated about their case (ie the crime that affected them). From our research and work with victims we know that this is one of the things they most want from the CJS. But the evidence also tells us that, despite the efforts of government and police to improve, victims' needs still too often go unmet. This report aims to show just how often victims are left uninformed and how this affects their wellbeing as well as their confidence and engagement with the police and wider CJS.

Our findings show that the official performance data masks the true extent of the issue and that many victims get little or no further communication from the police or any other CJS agency after they report their crime. This is often a source of distress, disappointment and frustration for those who experience it. Lack of contact and information about their case can make victims feel uncertain and isolated – which can worsen the distress caused by the crime itself. If the victim knows the perpetrator, it can make them afraid for their personal safety or frightened about reprisals.

Lack of information can also make victims think that their case is being neglected or not being taken seriously. Evidence suggests that this is a significant factor in victims being generally less satisfied with the CJS, and having a lower opinion of the police, than the general public. As our strategic audit of the CJS has highlighted, too often contact with it reduces rather than improves people's confidence in it.<sup>1</sup> There is strong evidence to suggest that the quality of service that victims get from the CJS – of which being kept informed about their case is a vital element – is often as important a factor in their satisfaction and confidence in the police and wider CJS as the outcome of the case (ie whether or not the perpetrator is brought to justice).

Our analysis of the main evidence on this issue, including new Victim Support survey findings, reveals that:

- Victims are only kept updated about what is happening in their case to a satisfactory level in around half of all reported incidents. In around a third of reported incidents the victim hears nothing more from the authorities after first contact with police when they report the crime (which includes telling them that the case has been dropped). This equates to millions of victims left in the dark every year.
- This represents a widespread failure to meet the requirements for keeping victims informed set out in the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime.
- Dissatisfaction and loss of confidence can make victims disengage from the criminal justice system. In some cases a lack of communication can even affect the success of the investigation if victims drop out of a case while it is being prosecuted. Negative experiences also make it less likely that victims will report incidents in the future.

<sup>1</sup> Summing up: a strategic audit of the criminal justice system. 2011

- Until recently Local Criminal Justice Boards (LCJBs) measured the performance of police in this area by surveying victims who are most likely to have been kept well updated (ie those whose case results in a charge and goes to court). This produces a picture which is misleading and masks the true extent of the problem as it does not tell us about the average victim's experience.

These findings show that much more needs to be done in this area, and highlight the importance of focusing on improving victim care. Victims who report crime understand that there can be no guarantees that a criminal will be caught. They also appreciate that the police have to prioritise limited resources. Nevertheless, they expect their crime to be taken seriously and want to be assured that it was worth their while reporting it. Furthermore, the cost of ignoring victims' desires to be kept informed about their case has wider consequences for communities and society at large. Public attitudes to the police and wider justice system, and engagement with the criminal justice process are directly affected by how well we care for the victims of crime.

Victim Support believes that these findings are a matter of real concern and that they stand as a call to action to ensure that victims are kept informed about their case.

The police have the main role to play in keeping victims informed about their case because they are the main, and often the only, criminal justice agency which victims come into contact with, and the one that victims generally have the most sustained contact with. As we highlight in this report, the nature and level of the competing pressures and demands involved in frontline

policing can mean that this aspect of their role can be difficult to fulfil. This is especially true at a time when budget cuts are putting pressure on all parts of the CJS and particularly its ability to deliver high quality services for victims. We recognise the difficulty this presents but stress that we are not asking criminal justice agencies to do anything they are not already committed to doing through the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime (Victim's Code) which governs the criminal justice services to be provided in England and Wales.

This report not only stresses the importance of the function of keeping victims informed once they report a crime to police but also sets out specifically what it is that victims want in relation to it, and suggests how this need can be met. We have sought to highlight existing good practice, and profile the 'TrackMyCrime' system – a new online account for communicating with victims.

Our recommendations are set out on the right.

## Recommendations

1. Victims need to be updated regularly on the progress of their case with information that is:
  - understandable – clear explanation of practices, procedures and likely scenarios to make an opaque system comprehensible.
  - comprehensive – regular contact from the police, even if just to report no progress, is often just as important as updating on big developments.
  - accurate – generic updates are of little value; information does not need to be detailed but it should be specific to the case.
2. Victims should be treated like any other service user. The police should look to use innovative and cost-effective solutions to widen victims' choice and adapt their contact arrangements to victims' needs. This should include freeing up resources for face-to-face contact (which is generally highly valued and linked with higher satisfaction) where at all possible. Online accounts offer a promising new and efficient method of contact – the TrackMyCrime system being pioneered by Avon and Somerset police represents current best practice in this area.
3. Agencies need to tailor information to need so that those victims who want information get it in a timely way and in the right format for them. This might mean providing a service to meet the needs of a certain group known to have a specific need. It could also mean checking whether and how an individual victim wants to be updated at initial contact and subsequent stages. This will allow agencies to target resources where they are most needed.
4. Victims' rights to information need to have greater legal force. The Victim's Code should be retained and action taken to make it more robust and credible. The EU directive on establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime, which the UK government has now opted in to, is a further step in this direction<sup>2</sup>. It will provide an enforceable framework of victims' rights which include the right to get information and a clear complaints pathway when agencies fail to meet their statutory obligations.
5. The foundation of any improvement needs to be frontline staff who are aware of their role in providing victim care (and understand why it is important). Police officers and all other criminal justice officials who come into contact with victims need sufficient training and/or awareness raising on key aspects of victim care, including giving information.
6. There needs to be an accurate, consistent and reliable way of measuring compliance and progress to replace the Witness and Victim Experience Survey (WAVES) in order to help drive improvement and provide accountability.

<sup>2</sup> European Commission, Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime [http://ec.europa.eu/justice/policies/criminal/victims/docs/com\\_2011\\_275\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/policies/criminal/victims/docs/com_2011_275_en.pdf)

## Chapter 1: Police and victims: a communications failure?

Once a crime has been reported, the police are responsible for keeping victims informed about their case. Under the Victims' Code of Practice, which came into effect in 2006, the police in England and Wales have a statutory obligation of "keeping victims updated on the progress of ongoing investigations and their outcome, including whether or not action is being taken against any suspect."<sup>3</sup> The Victims' Code specifies that police forces must tell the victim, at least monthly, about progress in cases being actively investigated up until the point of the closure of the investigation. They must also tell victims about key events in their case such as the arrest, bail, charge, summons, remand or other disposal of the case.

These measures are an official recognition of the importance of keeping victims informed. However, despite this statutory right to information, there is strong anecdotal evidence (plus the robust evidence on the information aspect of the Code cited in this report) that victims are not getting the service they are entitled to under the Victims' Code. This is because compliance against the provisions set out in the Code to guarantee victims a high level of service from the police and other agencies is not enforced. And the process for making a complaint under the Code is difficult and complicated. As a result, only two complaints have ever been upheld by the Ombudsman in the Code's six year history.

Evidence suggests that telling victims about their case is an area of particularly weak performance compared to other elements of police contact with victims, as the data from the British Crime Survey (BCS) in Table 1 shows.

Quality of service measure	Incidents in which measure was met (%)	Number of responses based on unweighted bases
Police responded immediately or wait for response was reasonable	84%	4,468
Police showed enough interest in what victim said	67%	5,269
Police kept victim well informed of the progress of their investigation	55%	3,772

**Table 1 Comparison of victim responses on CJS satisfaction/performance measures**

Source: British Crime Survey, 2008-09

Victims tend to have a much better experience at the reporting stage – the point of first contact, where police respond to the report of an incident – than they do of the subsequent weeks, months, even years while the investigation is open.

This contrast between initial and subsequent contact with police is also clear from a 2003 Audit Commission study into victims' experiences.<sup>4</sup> It was also highlighted by more recent research with people helped by Victim Support in the South East in 2010, in which respondents commonly drew a stark contrast between what happened at the reporting stage and afterwards:

*"I believe the police need to address their communication skills. When they arrive they are very re-assuring but following this you have to chase for information."* (Victim Support research participant, 2010)

The case study below gives an example of how victims can find initial police interest and responsiveness dwindle and evaporate, leaving them feeling isolated and angry.

<sup>3</sup> CJI (2009), Report of a Joint Thematic Review of Victim and Witness in the Criminal Justice System, HMCPSI, HMICA, HMIC, p23

<sup>4</sup> Audit Commission (2003), Victims and Witnesses – providing better support

## Jonathan, Anne and Kate's story

Jonathan and Anne contacted the police about their teenage daughter Kate who was being persistently bullied and harassed by a group of pupils in her school. The bullying was led by one girl in particular:

"It wasn't just name-calling, it was quite serious, relentless bullying including over text message and the internet. This girl was inciting other girls to join in through joining Facebook campaigns and things like that." (Jonathan)

After being initially impressed with the police response and the level of contact they had with them, Jonathan and Anne found the police became increasingly uncommunicative. After the police reprimanded the ring-leader bully and it failed to have any effect, Jonathan and Anne had very little further contact or information from the police, despite the problem continuing and despite the fact that they directly contacted the police to report a further incident and check on the status of the investigation.

This inconsistent, uncommunicative police response made the family, and Kate in

particular more distressed and has damaged their trust and confidence in the police:

"It [the police handling of the case] had a massive effect on Kate. ...she didn't know who to trust. She couldn't trust the management of the school and she eventually couldn't trust the police. She had panic attacks and was in a very, very dodgy place. I spent six months just watching her and making sure she was all right and wasn't going to do anything stupid."

"We feel really let down and have had to do everything ourselves – all the paperwork, dealing with the school. Basically, the police have let us down." (Anne)

"We felt completely isolated and unsupported... It makes you think twice about whether to even bother to try and do anything about these things, which is a very sad situation to be in." (Jonathan)

The reaction stems from the lack of contact and information by the CJS, rather than failure to get a result.

## What is the true scale of the problem?

How common is Jonathan, Anne and Kate's experience? The evidence at first sight looks conflicting.

Official compliance figures against which police forces assess their performance on this and other elements of the Victim's Code was, until earlier this year, based on the Witness and Victim Experience Survey (WAVES). WAVES data suggested that the majority of victims were being kept informed and were satisfied with the amount of contact they had.

However, other evidence – including the British Crime Survey – indicates that police performance and victim satisfaction on this issue is a lot lower.

The WAVES survey was cancelled in 2011. The cause of the divergence between WAVES and the other survey evidence is likely to lie in the fact that they represent the experiences and views of victims from quite different populations. WAVES covered only a sub-set of victims – those whose incident was investigated by police, resulting in a charge being brought against the alleged offender(s). It is an established fact that only around half of reported incidents ever reach this point.<sup>5</sup>

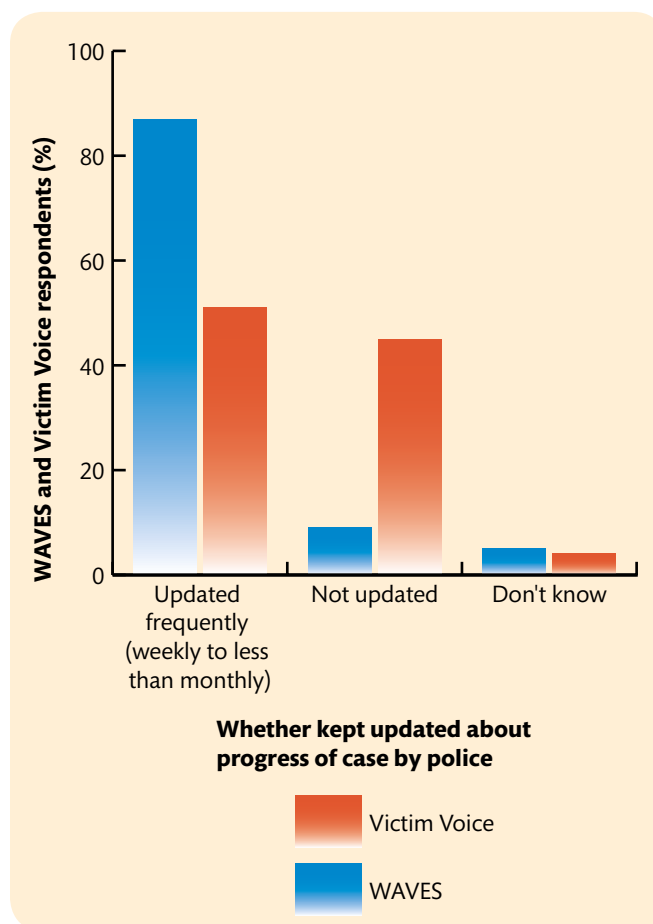
<sup>5</sup> 2009/10 BCS figures show that in concluded investigations police charged or cautioned someone for the offence in 21% of incidents, and did not charge or caution in 79% of incidents (unweighted base: 4,071)

Moreover, the investigations in the vast majority of WAVES respondents' cases resulted in a court trial (these accounted for 91% of respondents in the 2009/10 survey). Only a proportion of cases in which there is a charge subsequently go to trial, so these victims therefore represent an even smaller proportion of the wider population of victims who report crime.

WAVES findings are therefore likely to be a poor reflection of the average experience of victims of reported crime than surveys which cover a much wider cross-section of the victim population.

Victim Support has sought to explore this contradictory evidence and confirm the scale of the problem in keeping victims properly informed. Our 'Victim Voice' survey (May 2011) replicated the question from WAVES on how often respondents were kept updated about their case, but asked it to all respondents whose incident had been reported to police.<sup>6</sup> As Figure 1 shows, the contrast with the WAVES findings is stark:

- Many victims are not only not kept updated but do not hear anything further at all after initial contact with police. When asked what happened after the police became aware of the incident, one third (35%) of 'Victim Voice' respondents said they did not hear anything further.<sup>7</sup> These account for most of the victims in the survey who said they had not been kept updated about their case (58%), while a little over a quarter (29%) were not kept updated while the case was ongoing but were told of the outcome.<sup>8</sup>
- In some cases victims are explicitly told that they will be kept updated and then find that they are not. This is shown by the responses in the 2008-09 BCS of victims who said they felt



**Figure 1 Comparison between WAVES and 'Victim Voice' findings on whether victims are kept updated on their case**

Unweighted bases: WAVES – 19,032; "Victim Voice" – 667

they should have been kept better informed by police, with the particular type of information they wanted. Most (55%) said they had wanted general information on progress of the case and outcome, but some (7%) specifically said they wanted to know why they had not received the amount of information promised or expected.<sup>9</sup>

- Although those who get no further contact at all are worst off, there are also those who are updated, but inadequately, so that they are left wondering what is going on for extended

<sup>6</sup>The Victim Voice survey was conducted in June 2011 by Mori using their omnibus survey. A total of 5,396 interviews were carried out with adults (15+) face to face in home across England and Wales between 3-23 June 2011. Of these 1,134 respondents (21%) identified themselves as having been a victim of crime within the previous two years at an initial filter question, and proceeded to complete the questionnaire. Quotas were set to ensure that a representative sample of the population was obtained, and final data was also weighted by age, gender, ethnicity, social class, working status and Government Office Region to reflect the population profile.

<sup>7</sup>Unweighted base: 667

<sup>8</sup>For 6 % of responses the case was ongoing.

<sup>9</sup>Unweighted base: 1,586

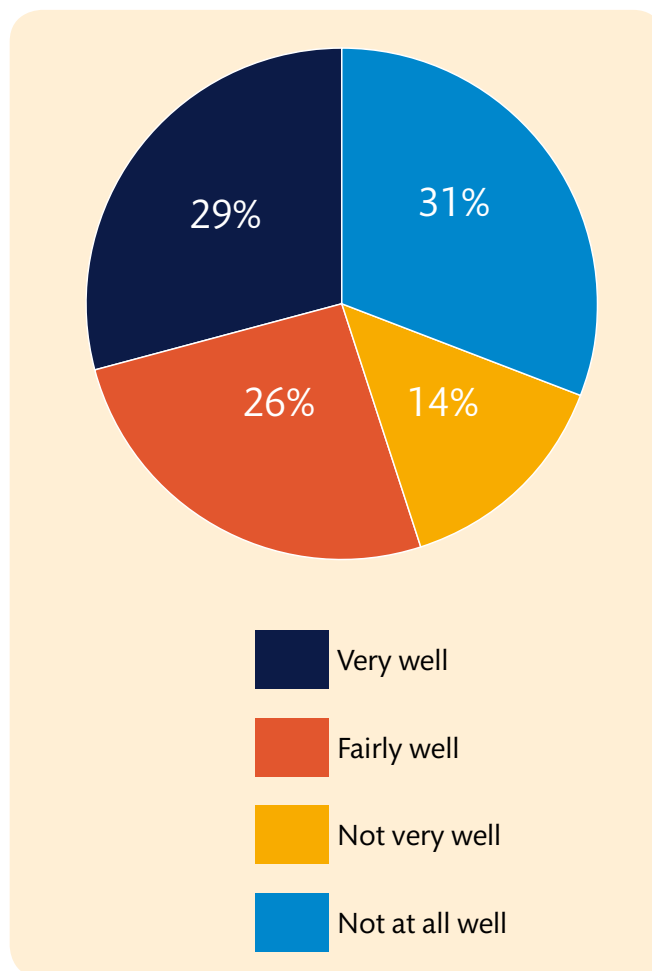


periods. Both WAVES and our own 'Victim Voice' survey suggest that around 20% of victims are updated less frequently than monthly (and therefore fall outside of the Victim's Code commitment). Having large gaps between updates leaves plenty of scope for victims to begin feeling neglected and anxious.

The 'Victim Voice' findings are supported by the main source of evidence on crime and victimisation in the UK, the British Crime Survey (BCS)<sup>10</sup>. As Figure 2 shows, the 2008-09 British Crime Survey found that in around half of incidents victims felt they had not been kept well informed by police (45%), of which 31% said they were 'not at all well' informed). Again this contrasts with the one fifth (20%) of victims found by WAVES to be dissatisfied with the amount of contact they had about progress in their case.

BCS evidence also supports the indications from Victim Support research of a clear link in many victims' minds between lack of information and lack of action or effort to deal with their case. Comparing victims' responses to the British Crime Survey questions on efforts by police in dealing with their incident and how well they were kept updated about the investigation bears this out:

- In 81% of incidents where the victim considered the police had put enough effort into dealing with the matter they also said they had been kept well updated.
- In 88% of incidents where the victim considered the police had not put enough effort into dealing with the matter, they also said they had not been kept well updated.<sup>12</sup>



**Figure 2 How well victims feel police keep them informed of progress in their case**

Unweighted base: 3,772

Source: British Crime Survey, 2008-09

Note: Responses for incidents to which this question did not apply (eg because no investigation was going on) have been removed for the purposes of clarity

<sup>10</sup> We use 2008-09 BCS data in this report for responses to questions which were not asked in the 2009-10 survey.

<sup>11</sup> WAVES finding is based on 19,032 victim respondents

<sup>12</sup> BCS 2008-09, unweighted base: 3,693

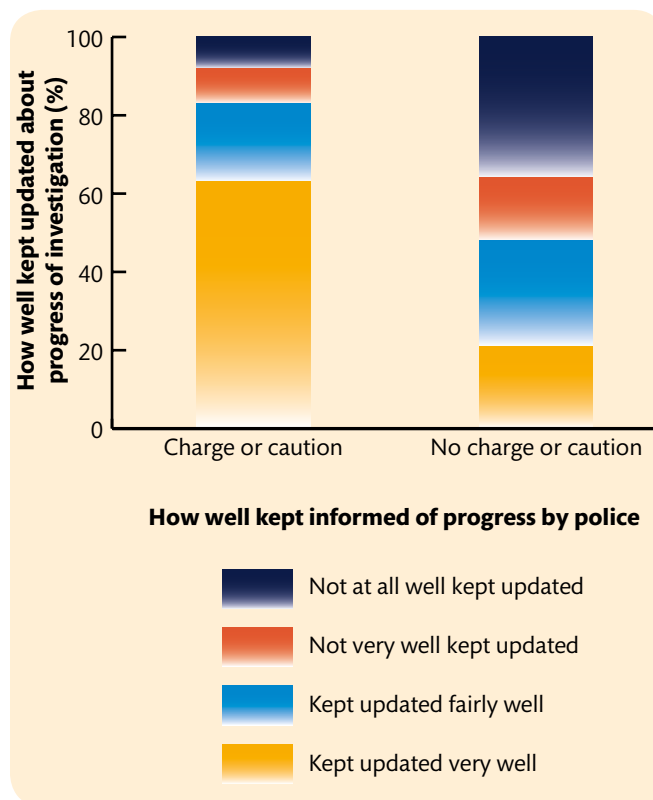
## Chapter 2: Why it matters

There is little doubt about the overall importance that being kept informed has for people's level of satisfaction with all public services. Research has shown that information is one of the top three drivers of satisfaction for public service users.<sup>13</sup> The evidence presented in this report shows that being kept informed about their case is something most victims want and which matters to such an extent that it can have a considerable bearing on their wider satisfaction, confidence and engagement with the police and wider criminal justice system.

### Winners and losers

The above analysis very clearly shows that many victims are either completely or partially left in the dark about what is happening in their case. It also strongly suggests that, as a victim of crime, the key factor which determines the likelihood of being kept updated is whether their case is one of the relatively few which results in the perpetrator(s) being charged and/or taken to court. This is confirmed by examining 'Victim Voice' and BCS findings on being kept informed by outcome, as shown in Figure 3:

- As Figure 3 shows, victims of incidents in which no offender was charged are more than twice as likely to say they were not kept well updated about their case as victims of incidents in which an offender was charged (52% compared to 17%), and particularly likely to say they were not at all well kept updated (36% compared to 8%).
- This is consistent with the finding of the 'Victim Voice' survey that victims whose case went to court were far more likely to have been kept regularly updated than those whose case did not reach court
  - 48% of Victim Voice respondents whose case did not go to court were not kept informed, compared to 15% whose case did go to court.<sup>14</sup>



**Figure 3 How well victims are kept informed by whether police charged someone for the offence**

Unweighted base: 2,991

Source: British Crime Survey, 2008-09

Note: Responses for incidents to which this question did not apply (eg because no investigation was going on) have been removed for the purposes of clarity

There is no clear evidence on exactly why this is the case but there are some likely reasons:

- Having a charge in a case is an indication of an active investigation. The link between being kept informed and whether a perpetrator is charged may be because police are more likely to keep victims informed in active investigations – where there are positive developments to update victims on – than in less active ones.
- The link between the case going to trial and the victim being kept informed is likely to be at least partly because police have an interest in keeping victims informed in cases which look as if they might result in a trial because they may well rely on them for testimony.

<sup>13</sup> Cabinet Office, The Office of Public Services Reform (2004), The Drivers of Satisfaction with Public Services

<sup>14</sup> Unweighted base: 667

- It seems safe to assume that victims are more likely to have good contact from police if a dedicated victim/police liaison is assigned to the case, as happens with certain very serious crimes, such as homicide and rape (in the form of a family liaison officer (FLO) or sexual offence liaison officer (SOLO)). If a member of CID is assigned to a victim's case, the CID officer will also have more time to devote to the investigation. CID work more regular hours than uniformed police officers, who work on more complex shift patterns.
- In cases of lower-level crime which are assigned only to uniformed police officers, irregular hours, combined with the various other competing demands of the job, may make it difficult for officers to keep victims updated. We know that this is an issue for victims because they often tell us that they have had real difficulty contacting the investigating officer on their case.

It is unlikely however, that logistical reasons tell the whole story. It also appears that some officers are simply not sufficiently aware that they have a responsibility to keep victims informed. A joint report from the criminal justice inspectorates in 2009, reviewing victim and witness experiences in the criminal justice system, found that levels of awareness of the Victims' Code among the police were very patchy both across and within police forces. Within forces, there appeared to be considerable differences in levels of awareness between different roles. Staff trained to deal with specialist cases such as domestic or sexual violence, child abuse and hate crime consistently exhibited the most thorough understanding of their obligations to victims under the Victims' Code. Non-specialist personnel (including regular police officers), demonstrated some awareness of the Victims' Code, but were unsure about precise

details such as the time in which victims have to be notified and informed.<sup>15</sup>

What is clear, however, is that the police attitude has little to do with the needs of the victim. It may be, as victims often suspect, that lack of communication reflects lack of action, ie there is no or little active investigation and therefore police do not contact the victim because there is no event to report and they do not want to reveal the lack of progress. However, as this report shows, the majority of victims want to be kept informed and they want to be kept informed regularly – and this is just as true if there is no progress as when there are big events in their case.

We recognise that it is right to prioritise and deliver an enhanced service to victims of very serious crime, but seriousness of the offence from a victim's perspective may not be the same as from an official perspective. Our 'Victim Voice' survey found that victims who said that they were badly affected by the crime committed against them were just as likely to be left in the dark as those victims who said they were not much affected at all. Similarly, it also found that victims who felt their crime was "serious" reported that they were not much more likely to be kept informed by the police as those who thought their crime was not serious.<sup>16</sup>

## Extent and nature of the support need

Of course some victims do not feel the need to be kept informed and/or are not much affected by not being kept well informed. As we might expect, these appear, most often, to be victims of less serious crime. However, it is also true that, even within that group, they are a minority. Evidence strongly suggests that most victims want to be told about what is happening in their case. The British Crime Survey shows that the vast majority

<sup>15</sup> Criminal Justice Joint Inspection (CJJI) (2009), Report of a Joint Thematic Review of Victim and Witness experience in the Criminal Justice System, HMCPSI, HMIC, HMICA; Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMPSI), Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC), Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Court Administration (HMICA)

<sup>16</sup> 42% of victims who rated the incident as serious were not kept informed about it, compared to 48% who did not rate it as serious; 45% of those affected by the incident a fair amount or great deal were not kept informed – the same proportion as those who said they were not or not much affected. Unweighted base: 667

<sup>17</sup> In the 2008-09 BCS, victims said they wanted to be kept informed about progress in their case, when asked, in 95% of incidents. Unweighted base: 805 incidents

of victims asked by police if they want to be kept updated about their case say 'yes'.<sup>17</sup>

Why victims want to be kept informed about their case depends on the individual, but for the most part, it stems from a natural, powerful wish to know the situation rather than be left in uncertainty and doubt. Strongly linked to this is a wish to feel that, once it is known to the police, their experience of victimisation (whether troublesome or traumatic) is being taken seriously. As the Audit Commission has stated, "a lack of contact is often perceived as a lack of action."<sup>18</sup> The police may be doing all they can in their investigation but if they do not communicate this to the victim, the victim will naturally begin to feel forgotten and suspect their case is being neglected. As the two case studies in this report illustrate, this can cause a destabilising uncertainty and sense of isolation which exacerbates the distress caused by the incident itself.

In certain instances lack of information from police may also cause victims to fear for their personal safety. A 2009 research study on victims' needs produced by the Greater Manchester Against Crime partnership (GMAC) with input from Victim Support in Greater Manchester, found that victims of offences which took place at their home tended

to express a particular need for updates on their case. The research concluded that this was often motivated by fear of reprisal from the offender for reporting the crime because the offender knew where they lived.<sup>19</sup> This is something which has also emerged in other research we have done:

*"when they're [the police] speaking to someone you know then they need to get back to you as soon as possible to make sure that you're alright, because it is quite frightening, [I was] 50 yards from this guy [when the police spoke to him] and you don't know what somebody is capable of."*

*"They [the police] let me know when he was released and when he was arrested. That sort of thing was very reassuring for me because unfortunately he lived in the same block as me, and I knew then when it was safer and ok for me to go out."*

It is therefore particularly important for these types of victims to be given warning of developments by police so they can have peace of mind if the perpetrator is not around, or take precautions if they are.

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<sup>18</sup> Audit Commission (2003), Victims and Witnesses – providing better support, p35

<sup>19</sup> The study is based on research capturing all needs expressed by victims referred to Victim Support operations across Greater Manchester over a six month period. The 'personal safety fear' group were linked by being victims of wounding, burglary, theft or damage at the home address and having delayed reporting the crime for two weeks or more after the incident (again, probably because they were unsure whether to report because of fear over possible reprisals).

## Patrick's story

Patrick was the victim of an unprovoked attack from a former colleague which left him with a broken wrist. After being encouraged by staff at the hostel where he lives, Patrick reported the incident to police, made a statement and later was called to the police station where he was told that there was good quality CCTV evidence and that he would be regularly updated on the investigation. However, it was more than five weeks before Patrick was contacted again, and it was only through friends and former colleagues that Patrick found out that the perpetrator had been visited by police and taken in for questioning. Patrick was eventually contacted to be informed that the case had been put to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). After a further several weeks wait with no contact, Patrick was contacted again to be told, with minimal explanation, that the CPS had decided not to prosecute and the case was therefore dropped.

Now, three years after the incident, Patrick still feels hurt and disappointed at the lack

of communication from police. He sees the lack of information as symptomatic of them not taking it seriously – something which he suspects may have been related to his mental health problems:

"I was so angry...The police didn't keep in contact like they said they would... I think, if I'm honest, that it [the way the police handled the matter] was because of my background.

Having already been in a vulnerable situation the experience has had a major, long term detrimental impact on his life:

"The whole thing really set me back. I'm now on anti-depressants and I see a psychotherapist. "

The lack of contact and information from police has led to a big change in attitude towards police and reporting crime.

## Link to satisfaction, confidence and engagement

According to the 'procedural justice' model developed by criminal justice academics, "fair, decent and appropriate treatment – and not results – is key in securing public support for the police".<sup>20</sup> This has recently been supported by a new British Crime Survey analysis we commissioned which shows that victims who have contact with Victim Support – and therefore get more or better 'victim care' – tend to think that the police are doing a better job and have greater confidence in the criminal justice system than victims who do not have contact with Victim Support.<sup>21</sup> As we show overleaf, our new data reveals that how much

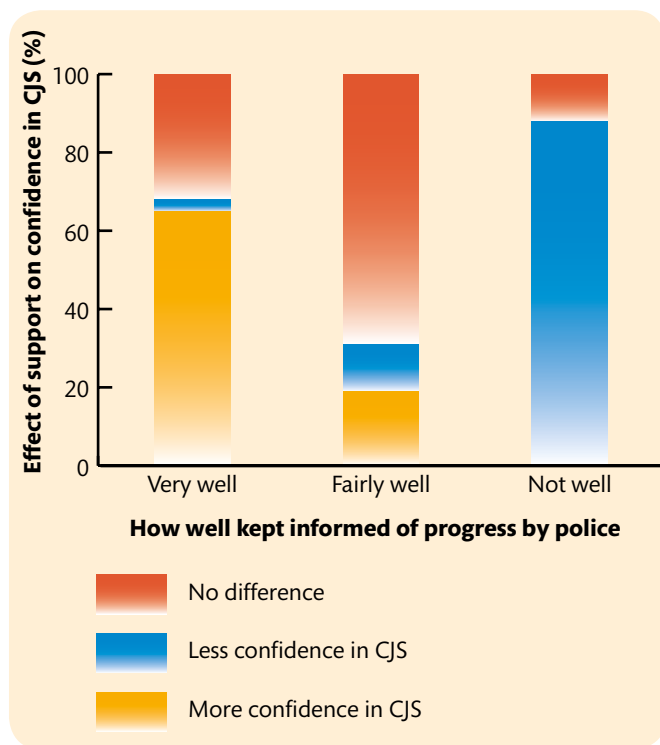
victims and witnesses were kept informed affects key measures of satisfaction, confidence and engagement.

The 'Victim Voice' survey asked victims who had received support, whether it had any influence (positive or negative) on their confidence in the criminal justice system and attitude towards engaging in the criminal justice system in each of four ways: reporting an incident in which they were a victim of crime to police; coming forward to police as a witness to a crime; helping with community safety initiatives, and; participating in restorative justice.

<sup>20</sup> Bradford, B. 'The quality of police contact: procedural justice concerns among victims of crime in London', London School of Economics

<sup>21</sup> Victims who had contact with Victim Support are 36% more likely to say that the police are doing a good or excellent job than those who haven't had contact with Victim Support, and 30% more likely to say that they are confident in the CJS than those who have not had contact with Victim Support. See Victim Support (2011), Summing Up – A Strategic Audit of the Criminal Justice System

Around a third (37%) of victims who received information or support from police said that it had made them more confident in the criminal justice system, compared to a quarter (25%) who said they were less confident in the system and a third who said it had made no difference (36%). As Figure 4 shows, responses were strongly linked to how good a service victims had received from police. Most (63%) victims who felt their support needs had been very well met by police said that receiving this support had improved their confidence in the criminal justice system. Meanwhile, the effect of lack of support from police was to lessen confidence in the criminal justice system (although this finding should be treated with caution).<sup>22</sup>



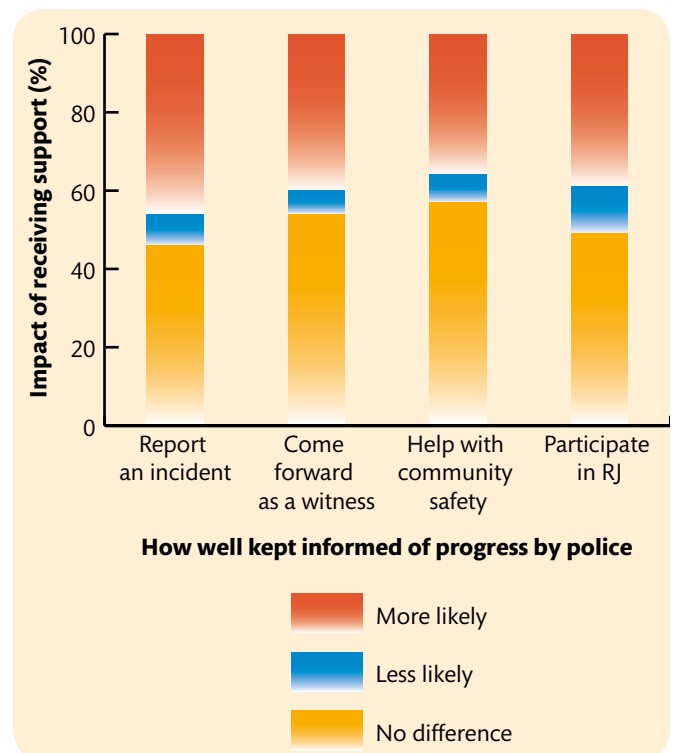
**Figure 4 Effect of having support needs met by police on confidence in CJS**

Source: Victim Support 'Victim Voice' survey  
Unweighted base: 72

Victims themselves often tell us that their experience of the police affects how likely they are to engage with them in future:

*"I didn't know what was going on... You felt that they [the police] saw it [the case] as a bit of paper – 'oh that's not important; we'll put that to one side'. That's how I felt... If anything else happened, I would not call the police again."* (Victim Support research participant, 2010)

Our 'Victim Voice' survey sought to test how common and how wide (in terms of its effect on different forms of engagement) this effect is. As with the findings on confidence, it indicates a strong link between getting information from the police and likelihood of engaging and participating in the criminal justice system. Figure 5 shows the effect of receiving support from police on victims' engagement with the criminal justice system. It shows a strong positive association between receiving support and being more likely to report a crime (43% more likely if received information support), coming forward as a witness (33% more



**Figure 5 Effect of receiving information support from police on future engagement with CJS**

Source: Victim Support 'Victim Voice' survey  
Unweighted base: 105

<sup>22</sup> base sizes are low among those who felt the police met their needs 'not very' or 'not at all' well, and so these results should be treated as indicative only

<sup>23</sup> Information support does not necessarily only cover updates on cases but is likely to mostly refer to this when, as here, it is information received from police. A minority of victims received other support from police as well as information – in these cases the affect on engagement is based on all support received not only information.

likely), helping with community safety initiatives (30% more likely) and participating in restorative justice (31% more likely).<sup>23</sup>

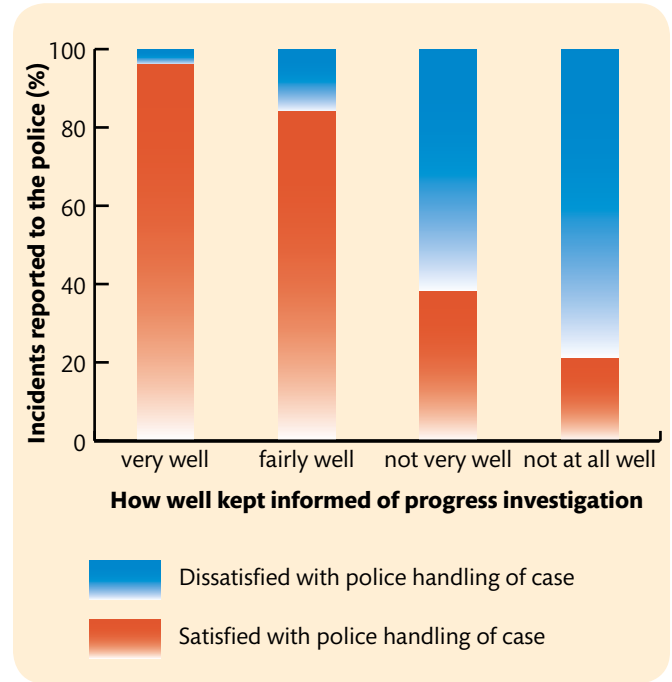
As with confidence, the more the support had met their needs, the more likely it was to have had a positive effect on engagement.

These findings are given further weight by British Crime Survey indications on the relationship between being kept well informed about cases and satisfaction or confidence in the police. Figure 6 shows BCS 2008-09 findings on victims' satisfaction with police handling of each incident in which they had been a victim in the previous 12 months, split according to how well they felt the police had kept them informed. For incidents in which victims felt they were not well informed, satisfaction with police handling of the case overall is low; where victims felt they were kept well informed, it is far higher – in fact up to 96% in incidents where the victim was kept very well informed, compared to only 21% satisfaction amongst victims who were not kept at all well informed.

A similar pattern (although less pronounced) is evident in relation to confidence in the local police. Victims who were not kept very or at all well informed were at least twice as likely to say they were not confident in police in the local area.<sup>24</sup>

These findings should be treated with a sense of perspective. Whether victims were kept informed is only one factor in a complex range of factors governing attitude towards police and likelihood of engaging with the criminal justice system. The large proportions of people who said receiving support made no difference to their confidence or engagement shows that providing support is not a key factor for all. British Crime Survey findings on reasons for not reporting crime do not suggest that previous bad experience of the police or other criminal justice agencies is a main factor in decisions on whether to report crime.

Nevertheless, taken as a whole, this evidence shows that whether victims are kept informed or not really does matter, and that leaving victims in the dark can have a range of potential damaging consequences.



**Figure 6 Effect of how well kept informed on satisfaction with overall handling of case**

Unweighted base: 3,740  
Source: British Crime Survey, 2008-09

<sup>24</sup> This BCS analysis does not confirm a causal link between being kept informed and attitude towards police handling of case or police in the local area, but does show a strong, consistent pattern which strongly suggests that extent of contact and information has a significant bearing on victims' satisfaction with and confidence in the police.

## Chapter 3: What victims want

Any attempts to address this issue have to be based on a clear, consistent understanding of what exactly is needed. If victims' needs are to be properly met then the information not only has to be there, but has to be there in the right type and form.

Evidence on what users want from public services may give us some useful guiding principles for this. The previously mentioned Mori/Cabinet Office research identified some useful measures for effective public sector information provision, which can be summarised as:

- how easy it is to understand
- whether it covers everything the service user needs to know
- whether it is accurate
- which methods of contact are used.<sup>25</sup>

Our own contact and research with victims suggests that in relation to keeping victims informed about their case, there are some general rules of good practice.

### Understandable

The criminal justice system is outside of most people's direct experience and some of its workings are not always well understood. This is true among victims as well as the general public. Information about criminal justice procedures therefore needs to be communicated in clear, plain language. When it is not explained properly, information about the investigation may only act to confuse:

*"I found that whole system to start with was very, very confusing... I didn't know what the system was because I'd never been involved in it before... some of the charges seem quite obscure and you need to know [what they mean], for your own peace of mind, it needs to be explained more to you."* (Victim Support research participant, 2010)

When the process and terms are properly explained, it can be really valued by victims and

can also help to manage their expectations. This should be something that happens at first contact as well as in further communication:

*"Each step was explained to me, why they were doing that, you know what the next step was. Everything was explained very well, from start to finish, when I was giving my statement. So, that was good."* (Victim Support research participant, 2010)

### Comprehensive

It is important to tell victims about big developments in their case (eg the arrest of a suspect) and the eventual outcome, including if the case has been dropped. However, as noted previously, victims also greatly value contact aside from this. Regular contact, even if it is to report that there have been no developments, is often just as important to victims as being told about major developments:

*"I only ask for a courtesy call, even if this is to say there is no update."* (Victim Support research participant, 2010)

For incidents in which the perpetrator knows where the victim lives or knows the victim lives nearby, there is a slightly different need. Here it is important that the victim is given as much warning as possible of upcoming developments (eg the police going to interview the perpetrator, the perpetrator being released on bail etc).

### Accurate

The importance of providing victims with correct information should be a given. However, in this context accuracy is also about how specific it is. Sometimes victims can be given generic updates which are of little value and, worse, can cause the victim to feel that they are being treated dismissively:

*"They used words like we're progressing and we are looking at all avenues. It was all very vague and... non-committal and nothing was answered and*

<sup>25</sup> See Cabinet Office, The Office of Public Services Reform (2004), The Drivers of Satisfaction with Public Services



## TrackMyCrime

'TrackMyCrime' is the first system of its kind in England and Wales: an online service which allows victims to see what is happening in the investigation of their case. The service currently operates in the Avon and Somerset police force, where it was launched in March 2011. 'TrackMyCrime' gives victims a new option for being kept updated about their case which, in the same way as online bank accounts, offers the advantage of being faster, more efficient and more convenient than in person or telephone contact because it does not rely on the two parties both being available at the same time.

Victims are given the option of being able to access 'TrackMyCrime' when they give their statement. If they take it up they are contacted with details of how to access the account. Once the account is set up investigating officers can post updates on the status of the investigation which victims can then view whenever they next log on. Alongside these individual messages, the system also includes standard messages, automatically generated at certain key points in the investigation process (such as conveying that the incident has been recorded, the incident has been allocated to a police officer, or that the incident has been closed or resolved and advising of further support available).

These messages also alert the victim to the system's interactive features, through which victims are able to:

- make general queries during the investigation
- update or correct information on items of property which have been stolen or damaged
- provide feedback once the case has been closed.

Victims can be notified of new updates by email and/or phone and are able to change their contact preferences on the system. Victims can also unsubscribe from 'TrackMyCrime' at any point they wish.

As well as greater convenience and efficiency 'TrackMyCrime' also provides the potential for greater openness and transparency in the relationship between victim and police investigation. 'TrackMyCrime' has attracted interest from a number of other police forces and looks set to be taken on more widely.



*effectively. It carried on like that until they closed the case and by the end of the case I stopped answering their calls. I let them leave voicemails for me because it was so frustrating to hear them go through the motions really. They were simply saying their usual spiel and expecting me to nod and go oh, thank you very much and I really – it was upsetting to feel as though you were just getting passed through the system and nothing really was going to be done.”* (Victim Support research respondent, 2010)

Victims do not want or expect great detail but they do want information which they feel tells them specifically about their case.

## Method of contact

Currently victims are generally kept informed about their case through a combination of face-to-face, telephone and written contact. Which method of contact is appropriate will depend on the individual victim and the nature of the information. However, it is clear from speaking to victims that personal contact is highly valued – particularly face-to-face. BCS analysis indicates that the overall satisfaction of victims with the police handling of their case is substantially higher when they have had face-to-face contact.<sup>26</sup> While face-to-face is preferable, all personal contact (whether in person or over the telephone) carries the advantage of allowing victims to ask questions and have a dialogue:

*“I would prefer information by telephone. If an officer calls you it’s more personal and you’ve got the chance to ask him questions.”* (Victim Support research respondent, 2010)

This may contribute to the view of some victims that information is generally easier to understand if delivered through personal contact. There is also a place for contact by letter, in part because letters provide a tangible, official record of key developments. However, letters can also be seen

as impersonal and, in some cases, inappropriate and even insulting. For example, one person helped by Victim Support who had been a victim of a brutal mugging in which he was seriously hurt was upset when he received a seemingly generic standard letter (and nothing further) telling him that the police investigation had been closed. He would have preferred it if the letter had been accompanied by a phone call or visit. There may be a variety of other reasons why written contact is inappropriate (for example if the victim does not have good English, has a low literacy level or has a visual impairment).

Of course there are also logistical considerations to be taken into account over which method of contact to use. Face-to-face contact is time consuming and telephone contact can also be problematic and inefficient because police officers may call several times and not get through or may not be on duty when the victim is available to speak (particularly if the officer is on a certain shift pattern).

The internet offers a potential way to ease these logistical difficulties without weakening victim care. The ‘TrackMyCrime’ online account system developed by Avon and Somerset police is profiled on page 17. Online accounts should not (and are not intended to) replace personal contact and not all victims will want to, or be able to, use them. However, victims do appear to be generally receptive. When we sought the reaction of victims to the idea of online accounts, the response was largely enthusiastic<sup>27</sup>:

*“I think that [having an online account] would be excellent [because] without having to chase people up, I could actually see what was happening for myself and read it, you know, in my own time and take it in.”* (Victim Support research participant, 2010)

*“it would be good...being able to log on and see the progress of your case – that would be reassuring.”* (Victim Support research participant, 2010)

<sup>26</sup> Audit Commission (2003), Victims and Witnesses – providing better support

<sup>27</sup> albeit not everyone said they would use them and some reservations were expressed over security of information



**Victim Support** is the national charity giving free and confidential help to victims of crime, witnesses, their family, friends and anyone else affected across England and Wales. We also speak out as a national voice for victims and witnesses and campaign for change.

We are not a government agency or part of the police and it's not necessary to report a crime to the police to get our help. We can be approached for help any time after the crime has happened, whether it was yesterday, last week or several years ago.

We have offices throughout England and Wales and we run the Witness Service in every criminal court.

**[www.victimsupport.org.uk](http://www.victimsupport.org.uk)**

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