In the past decade, there has been growing effort across numerous disciplines to begin to document, explain, and address the problem of stalking. Because community services for stalking victims have scarcely been addressed in the literature, this study sought to explore the provision of services to stalking victims in the context of crime-victim service delivery networks. A 40-item questionnaire was mailed to all victim services programs listed in Florida and California. Victim services practitioners (VSPs) were asked to describe and evaluate the needs of stalking victims and their communities' responses to this population. The study found that: (a) VSPs' perceptions and provision of services varied significantly across employment settings (criminal justice vs. private/nonprofit or university-based programs), (b) victims of nondomestic stalking (perpetrated primarily by acquaintances and strangers) appear to be underserved, and (c) VSPs suggest community and service-provider education and training would help improve communities' responses to stalking victims.

Victims of Stalking
A Study of Service Needs as Perceived by Victim Services Practitioners

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Stalking is the “willful, malicious, and repeated following or harassment of another person” (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998, p. 1). Approximately 1 million women and 370,000 men are stalked each year in the United States, making women three times more likely to be stalked than raped (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Stalking victims experience significant adverse psychological, social, and physical impacts (Pathé & Mullen, 1997; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Despite this high prevalence and significant harm, there is no existing literature that has explored service delivery for these individuals.

Service delivery to stalking victims has only been discussed hypothetically thus far (Dziegielewski & Roberts, 1995; Meloy, 1997). To date, there are only two known nonprofit organizations in the country specifically designed to provide services to stalking victims: Sacramento Survivors of Stalking (CA) and Survivors of Stalking (Tampa, FL).
Otherwise, stalking victims may be served by two types of victim service organizations: specialized, small, private, and nonprofit agencies such as domestic violence shelters, rape crisis centers, and victims’ rights advocacy organizations; or small units that are institutionally housed in police departments and prosecutors’ offices. However, in the context of these organizations, it is not clear where or how stalking victims are currently being served.

Tjaden and Thoennes (1998) reported that half of stalking victims sought help from the police, and fewer than one quarter had their cases referred to a prosecutor. Because a large proportion of victim assistance programs are based in prosecutors’ offices (Roberts, 1990), it seems likely that many stalking victims may not be accessing these services. Of the non-criminal-justice-based victim assistance programs, most are domestic violence shelters or rape crisis centers (Weed, 1995). Approximately 50% to 60% of victims are stalked by their former intimate partners (Hall, 1997, 1998; Kong, 1996; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998) and in many cases were abused or controlled by their partners during the relationship (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Because of this large population of domestic-related stalking, it is possible that some of these victims are receiving services from domestic violence shelters. It is unknown, however, whether these programs also serve victims of non-domestic (stranger and acquaintance) stalking. In a survey of 269 direct victim service providers in Ohio, it was reported that 49% served victims of stalking (Spahr Nelson, DiNitto, Lewis, & Campbell-Ruggaard, 1997). However, it was not reported whether this figure differed across employment settings or victim-offender relationship categories. In light of these knowledge gaps, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. Are stalking victims being served by community-based crime victim service delivery networks?
2. Does the provision of services to stalking victims vary across (a) categories of victim-offender relationships and (b) criminal-justice-based and non-criminal-justice-based employment settings?
3. What do victim services practitioners (VSPs) perceive to be the primary service needs of stalking victims?
4. What are victim services practitioners’ perceptions regarding their communities’ responses to stalking victims?

METHOD

The perceptions of victim services practitioners (also referred to as victim advocates and victim assistance workers) were examined via a survey. These respondents were chosen because (a) they tend to work closely with victims,
(b) they tend to be specially trained to assess the needs of victims, (c) they engage in boundary-spanning activities with other members of the service delivery network, and (d) they represent both institutional and private, nonprofit organizations (Gandy, 1983; Weed, 1995).

The sampling frame was the National Organization of Victim Assistance (NOVA) mailing list for the states of Florida and California. These states were selected because they are both large, ethnically and geographically diverse, and have antistalking statutes that have been on the books for several years. Nondirect service, child abuse, homicide survivors, and drunk-driving organizations were removed from the original lists. The final mailing list contained 261 Florida programs and 237 California programs. Forty-three Florida agencies and 68 California agencies were later eliminated due to the discovery of inaccurate mailing addresses, programs that were no longer in existence, duplicates, and programs that did not employ victim services practitioners. This left 389 programs. Of these, 191 returned their surveys, for a response rate of 49% (Florida, 52%; California, 46%).

A questionnaire was mailed to the victim services programs/agencies, with a cover letter addressed to the agency/unit director requesting that the questionnaire be filled out by a victim services practitioner and returned in a postage-paid envelope. The questionnaire was divided into four parts consisting of 37 closed-ended questions and three open-ended questions. The first section dealt with job responsibilities, the second with perceptions about stalking victims’ service delivery needs, the third with perceptions about communities’ responses to stalking, and the final with demographics. Only VSPs who provided services to victims of stalking were asked to complete the entire questionnaire. Those not serving stalking victims were asked to fill out the sections relating to job responsibilities and demographics. Out of 191 respondents, 161 completed the full questionnaire and 30 completed partial surveys. The partially completed questionnaires were more likely to be returned by VSPs employed in private, nonprofit victim services organizations, {$\chi^2(1, n = 188) = 6.0, p = .015$}.

RESULTS

Sample Demographics

The majority of respondents (55%) were employed by criminal-justice-based programs. Another 41% were employed by private, nonprofit organizations, and 4% were employed by colleges and universities. For further anal-
ysis, the latter two categories were combined for the comparison of criminal-justice-based versus non-criminal-justice-based programs. The VSPs represented a wide range of communities, from small/rural areas (29%) to college towns (7%), medium-sized cities (37%), and large metropolitan areas (26%). VSPs’ educational levels ranged from high school diplomas and general equivalency degrees (7%) to juris doctors (3%), with the majority having achieved bachelor’s degrees (42%), master’s degrees (27%), or associate/technical degrees (22%). Of those with college education, the most frequent areas of study were social work (27%), criminal justice (21%), and psychology (19%). The majority of respondents were White (82%) and female (94%). Finally, VSPs had an average of 7.3 years of victim services experience, with a modal response of 3 years.

**Job Responsibilities**

Out of a list of 19 different services, respondents were asked to check those that they provide to clients on a regular (at least monthly) basis. Most VSPs provided community referrals (98%), information about the crime they experienced (89%), information about the criminal justice system (88%), legal advocacy (81%), crisis intervention (80%), accompaniment to court hearings (79%), safety planning (77%), personal advocacy (77%), and assistance with restraining orders (75%). More than half provided assistance with crimes compensation applications (67%), transportation (58%), and support groups (50%). Fewer than half provided accompaniment to non-criminal-justice-related hearings (49%), emergency shelter (49%), 24-hour hotline counseling (43%), assistance with relocation and financial assistance (43%), individual/couples or family counseling (28%), and therapy groups (27%). Non-criminal-justice-based respondents were significantly more likely to provide 24-hour hotline counseling, $\chi^2(1, n = 185) = 54.7, p = .000$; emergency shelter, $\chi^2(1, n = 185) = 6.7, p = .010$; support groups, $\chi^2(1, n = 185) = 25.7, p = .000$; therapy groups, $\chi^2(1, n = 185) = 10.8, p = .001$; individual counseling, $\chi^2(1, n = 185) = 27.1, p = .000$; and assistance with relocation, $\chi^2(1, n = 185) = 5.5, p = .019$.

Altogether, 15% of the respondents reported they did not provide services to any victims of stalking, 83% provided services to victims of domestic stalking, and 45% served victims of nondomestic stalking. Criminal-justice-based VSPs were more likely to serve both types of stalking victims: domestic, $\chi^2(1, n = 185) = 11.1, p = .001$, and nondomestic $\chi^2(1, n = 185) = 5.8, p = .016$. 
VSPs’ Perceptions of Stalking Victims’ Service Needs

Respondents were asked to rate 15 different services on a scale of 1 to 4 with 1 being not very important and 4 being essential to meeting stalking victims’ needs. All of the services received a mean rating of at least 3, indicating that they were all considered to be at least important. The five highest rated needs included “assistance obtaining restraining orders” (M = 3.78), “face-to-face crisis counseling” (M = 3.74), “information re: criminal justice system” (M = 3.53), “legal advocacy” (M = 3.61), and “emergency shelter” (M = 3.58). Criminal-justice-based VSPs were more likely to give higher ratings for the need for legal advocacy, χ²(3, n = 158) = 0.5, p = .015; and non-criminal-justice-based VSPs gave higher ratings for the need for a 24-hour hotline, χ²(3, n = 158) = 9.5, p = .024.

VSPs’ Perceptions of Individual Case Successes

For each of nine different agencies or groups, VSPs were asked to recall their most recent contact in relation to a stalking case. For each agency-client dyad, VSPs were asked to rate the success of that agency’s ability to meet the victim’s needs on a scale of 1 to 5, from very unsuccessful to very successful. The groups contacted most frequently were law enforcement (n = 116), prosecution (n = 92), domestic violence shelters (n = 89), and judicial personnel (n = 85). The least contacted groups were probation departments (n = 52), social services (n = 48), mental health counselors (n = 43), medical professionals (n = 43), and private businesses (n = 42). Those contacted most regularly also tended to receive the highest ratings. Domestic violence shelters were rated the highest (M = 4.2) but were more likely to receive high marks from VSPs who only serve domestic stalking victims, χ²(8, n = 89) = 23.8, p = .002. Law enforcement officers received an average rating of somewhat successful (M = 4.0) and were more likely to receive high ratings from VSPs employed in criminal-justice-based programs, χ²(4, n = 116) = 12.4, p = .015. Medical professionals received mean ratings of 3.5 (midway between neutral and somewhat successful) but were more likely to receive higher ratings from VSPs who serve only victims of domestic stalking, χ²(6, n = 43) = 13.7, p = .033.

VSPs’ Suggestions

Three questions asked VSPs to suggest services that would best meet the needs of stalking victims and to comment on what they thought their commu-
nities could do to help. A total of 291 suggestions were made. The largest number of responses \((n = 59)\) related to the need for the community as a whole to become more “aware.” The majority of these suggested training \((n = 37)\), an increase in “sensitivity” and “understanding” \((n = 14)\), and more victim outreach \((n = 8)\). The second largest category was labeled *criminal justice training* \((n = 42)\). Three quarters of these responses specifically mentioned the need for law enforcement officers to either gain a better understanding of stalking, be able to recognize stalking cases, or be more sensitive to victims \((n = 31)\). The need for prosecutor and judicial training was frequently mentioned as well \((n = 14)\).

Numerous responses \((n = 41)\) called for more direct victim services. The most common requests were for more shelters (for domestic and nondomestic stalking victims), more victim advocacy programs, the development of stalking-specific support groups, and the need to offer more safety planning. Another large response category dealt with the need for additional and improved criminal justice services \((n = 35)\). Suggested improvements primarily included the need for better law enforcement identification and tracking of stalking cases, increased prosecution of stalking cases, and the need to speed up actions taken when protective orders are violated. Suggestions for added services included the development of specialized stalking units in police departments and prosecutors’ offices and technologically advanced “stalk the stalker” programs.

VSPs also frequently mentioned the need for practical tools to enhance victims’ safety \((n = 28)\). Twenty-two VSPs specifically identified the provision of cellular phones programmed to dial 911 as being a critical need. Several others \((n = 6)\) suggested additional technologies such as personal body alarms and surveillance cameras.

Many VSPs suggested changes in state laws and local policies \((n = 17)\). These concerns related to California’s statutory mandate of a “credible threat,” victims’ need for confidentiality of public records (i.e., addresses on court documents), better arrest policies, and stricter sanctions. Numerous VSPs noted a need for more community coordination \((n = 13)\), financial assistance \((n = 13)\), and attention to special victim populations \((n = 10)\). In the area of community coordination, VSPs suggested improved multiagency communication and the development of interdisciplinary teams. Financial assistance was suggested to help victims relocate, change locks, and purchase safety-enhancing devices. Populations that were perceived to need additional or adapted services included ethnically and linguistically diverse groups; gay, lesbian, and/or transgendered individuals; college students; and nondomestic stalking victims.
This study found that the job responsibilities of VSPs are varied across employment settings. VSPs working in criminal-justice-based programs were significantly less likely to engage in therapeutic activities. These data support Weed’s (1995, 1997) findings that non-criminal-justice-based programs tend to be oriented toward victim well-being and criminal-justice-based programs tend to be oriented toward victim participation in the criminal justice process. Given that criminal-justice-based VSPs were significantly more likely to serve victims of stalking, it is evident that the availability or accessibility of therapeutic services to stalking victims may be lacking in some communities.

Furthermore, for victims of nondomestic stalking, the data show that service accessibility is problematic. Overall, fewer than half (45%) of the VSPs served nondomestic victims of stalking. When compared across employment settings, criminal-justice-based VSPs’ rate of service rose to 54% and non-criminal-justice VSPs’ rate fell to 37%. Hence, the VSPs who provide services emphasizing victims’ well-being are the least likely to serve victims of nondomestic stalking. These findings are of concern because 41% of female and 70% of male victims are stalked by someone other than an ex-intimate partner (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Given these figures, it is recommended that communities examine service accessibility and outreach activities for this subpopulation of stalking victims.

When asked to rate a series of 15 different services for their value to stalking victims, VSPs on average found them all to be either essential or important. These data provide evidence of the wide range of services perceived to be needed by victims of stalking. It is also important to consider the highest rated service, “assistance obtaining restraining orders,” in the context of Tjaden and Thoennes’s (1998) finding that these orders are violated for nearly 70% of stalking victims. It is evident that the processes of both obtaining and enforcing orders for protection are equally important.

It is important to point out the paradoxical responses between VSPs’ ratings of law enforcement contacts and their frequent beliefs that police officers need more training and improved attitudes and practices. When asked about their most recent contact with law enforcement agencies (in regards to a stalking victim), VSPs on average rated them somewhat successful in meeting their clients’ needs. Higher ratings were significantly more likely to come from VSPs employed in criminal-justice settings, an indication that in-house VSPs are either more successful in advocating for their clients or are more biased in their perceptions.
Overall, these data indicate that more often than not, VSPs perceive their clients’ needs to be at least somewhat met by community agencies and groups. Although promising, the findings demonstrated that communities’ responses to stalking victims are inconsistent. These findings did not differ across community size, which ranged from small rural communities to large metropolitan areas. With the exception of domestic violence shelters, at least one quarter to one half of VSPs found the responses to their clients to fall below successful levels. When asked for assistance with stalking victims, medical professionals, mental health centers, social service agencies, and private businesses frequently failed to meet the expectations of the VSPs. These findings support VSPs’ suggestions that more community outreach and education is needed.

REFERENCES


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