

# VictimConnect 2020 Annual Report

PREPARED BY SARAH OHLSEN



A PROGRAM OF



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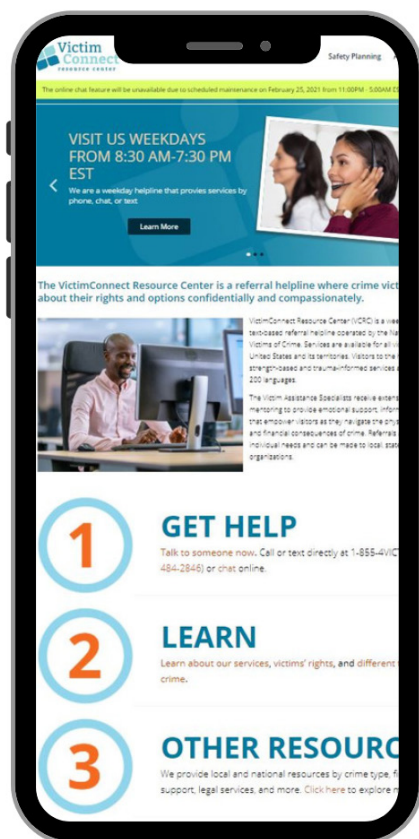
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## Introduction

The VictimConnect Resource Center (VCRC), a program of the National Center for Victims of Crime, served over 10,513 visitors in 2020 thanks to the ongoing support and funding from the Office for Victims of Crime. This year, the victim service field faced many unique challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent jurisdictional responses led to unprecedented changes.

This unique time in history has led to a substantial increase in stress for individuals all over the country.



This stress, combined with economic instability, stay-at-home orders, isolation, and increased anxiety, presents a significant risk for all types of family violence, including intimate partner violence (IPV), child abuse, and elder abuse (Hans

& Mosqueda, 2020; Lawsen et al., 2020; Makaroun et al., 2020; Evans, Lindauer, & Farrell, 2020). This is particularly true for individuals who had already been experiencing violence in the home before the impacts of COVID-19 (Lawson et al., 2020; Makaroun et al., 2020). While the risk of violence has increased, access to resources has decreased. Government or privately enforced COVID-19 policies restrict or require the shut-down of many in-person services. Victims face an increased exposure risk to the COVID-19 virus if they seek services that are available in person.

Regardless of the type of crime endured, all crime victims may be impacted by the pandemic policies by potentially limiting or halting support systems, hindering identified self-care plans, and diminishing coping options. This leads to an increased need for emotional support, identifying available solutions, and professional service options to continue to meet victim and survivor needs.

During the pandemic, VCRC met the growing need of individuals seeking support. VCRC offers remote access to all visitors and offers phone, text and chat capabilities so visitors can choose what is best for them and their individual circumstances. Since VCRC supports all victims of crime and their personal support networks regardless of crime type or when the crime occurred, the program provides the same level of service to every visitor at a time when in-person resources are reserved for the most severe and time-sensitive cases.

Though this annual report is not solely focused on services during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to acknowledge the significant effect of COVID-19 as VCRC services, data, and trends are reviewed.

### PERFORMANCE MEASURE CHANGES

In reviewing VCRC data and trends, it is important to note that several performance measures were enhanced this year, including changes to demographics. These changes will allow VCRC to better understand the services provided by Victim Assistant Specialists (VAs) and referral services requested. In addition, greater analysis can be conducted on trends by special populations and crime type. The VCRC's platform was updated on September 1, 2020. This report will highlight some of the new information that can now be analyzed which was not able to be analyzed or was difficult to analyze in the past.

### 2020 HIGHLIGHTS

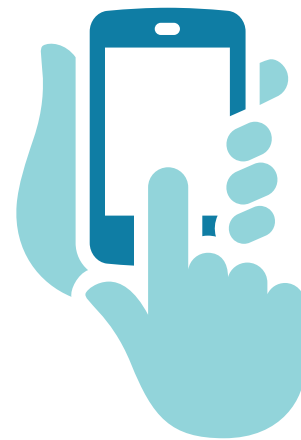
VCRC staff has worked diligently to maintain core services for visitors during the pandemic and enhance the program. Highlights include:

- Supporting **10,513** visitors by phone, text, or chat.
- Providing information to **235,206** website visitors.
- Moving fully remote in March 2020 and providing virtual training to seven VAs.
- Performing system upgrades to ensure quality control in the remote environments and implementing robust quality control protocols.
- Improving website accessibility.
- Improving performance measures.

In 2020:

# 10,513

visitors were supported by  
phone, text, or chat



- Developing a volunteer program and training the first five volunteers.
- Supporting the [Urban Institute](#) in developing a formative evaluation of VictimConnect.

VCRC remains focused and committed to continuous improvements by providing the highest quality of services, expanding, and enhancing services during this difficult time.



#### EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Trauma-informed  
Culturally-informed  
Strength-based  
Survivor-centered



#### INFORMATION

Victims' Rights  
Safety Planning  
Crime Reporting  
Systems Processes  
Identity Theft Recovery



#### REFERRALS

National  
Local  
Tribal  
Individual

# VictimConnect Resource Center

## OVERVIEW OF VICTIMCONNECT RESOURCE CENTER

VictimConnect Resource Center (VCRC) is a weekday phone, chat, and text-based referral helpline for all victims of crime in the United States and its territories. Visitors to the hotline have access to strength-based and trauma-informed services and referrals in over 200 languages.

The Victim Assistance Specialists (VASs) receive advanced training and mentoring to provide emotional support, information, and referrals that empower visitors as they navigate the physical, emotional, legal, and financial consequences of crime. Referrals are tailored to individual needs and can be made to local, state, and national organizations.

## METHODS OF CONTACT

VCRC is a weekday helpline open Monday-Friday. Visitors can contact the helpline by calling or texting **1-855-4Victim (855-484-2846)** or chat online at [chat.victimsofcrime.org/victim-connect](https://chat.victimsofcrime.org/victim-connect). Visitors can also learn more about services at [victimconnect.org](https://victimconnect.org).

## SERVICES

VCRC serves victims of all crime in the U.S. Individuals who contact the helpline are referred to as “visitors.” Whether by phone, online chat, or text messaging, trained specialists assist visitors in locating appropriate national, local, and online referrals. VictimConnect also has a special focus on populations, crimes, and topics that are generally underrepresented or underserved in the victim services field.

Victims of crime have a variety of needs, from simple to complex. VASs seek to empower victims as they regain control, navigate options, and take next steps. With extensive specialized training, VASs are ready to provide anonymous and confidential services that help crime victims with emotional support, information and planning, and referrals.

On September 1, 2020, VCRC improved data collection on the types of services VASs provided to callers, including emotional support, advanced information, system navigation, and referrals. See below in ‘Demographic & Trends’ for information on ‘Services Provided’.

## CONFIDENTIALITY

VCRC services are both anonymous and confidential. The specialists begin each conversation by inquiring about safety and privacy concerns. User information (including phone numbers and IP addresses) are not stored in order to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the visitors. For visitors seeking local services, specialists may ask for their city and state in order to provide the most accurate referrals; however, specialists do not request personally identifying information, such as the visitor’s exact address or name. Specialists may also collect non-identifying information regarding the types of services requested and the crimes that were discussed in order to improve overall services.

## ACCESSIBILITY

VCRC strives to improve access of services for all visitors through language access, website improvements, and service modality.

### *Language Access*

VCRC employs both English and Spanish-speaking VASs. In an effort to provide equitable services, VictimConnect prioritizes serving callers in their language of preference without

interpretation services. To achieve this effort, 33% of full-time VASs speak Spanish. In 2020, 91% of callers seeking services in a language other than English were Spanish-speakers and 81% of these callers were able to speak to a Spanish-speaking VAS without interpretation services.

If a caller needs services in any other

# 81%

of Spanish-speaking callers were able to speak to a Spanish-speaking VAS

language, all VASs have access to a phone-based language service which offers interpretation services in more than **200 languages**. In 2020, VCRC served visitors who spoke Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, Korean, Portuguese, and Russian through the language line. For individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing, VASs will take calls from visitors who use a preferred relay service to have their conversation typed and then spoken to the VAS. VCRC also provides a chat and text feature, that allows individuals to connect to the helpline directly.

#### *Service Delivery*

Visitors have the option of connecting with helpline staff through phone, chat, or text. This provides visitors with a choice in service delivery. They can determine which modality is the safest and most comfortable for them to access.

#### *Website Improvements*

In 2020, VCRC enhanced the website by adding **Recite Me**. This accessibility improvement allows visitors to customize the VCRC website in a way that works best for them. This includes using the screen reader, which reads page text aloud, changing text (style, size, color, or spacing) to meet individualized needs, and translating content into over 100 languages. In addition to improving accessibility, VCRC will launch a refreshed website in 2021 that includes a victim service resource map. This will allow visitors to access more information online.

#### **REMOTE VICTIM ASSISTANCE SPECIALIST TRAINING**

In 2020, VCRC hired and trained seven (7) new VAS staff members. Because of COVID-19 restrictions, each member went through the training virtually. Each training group was hired in a cohort and used Zoom meetings to simulate traditional in-person learning and develop connections. To reduce Zoom fatigue, OVC online modules



and pre-recorded sessions were introduced with follow-up “in-person” discussion. To assist with remote training, VCRC enhanced



the helpline technology platform to provide supervisors with the ability to shadow the trainees remotely for quality assurance and support. While the method of training delivery has changed, VASs continue to complete 80+ hours of initial training and coaching, along with 20 hours of ongoing education/professional development per year. During their initial training, after completion of the initial 80 hours, helpline supervisors continue to coach the VASs and periodically monitor their interactions with visitors. In the 80+ hours:

#### **VAS staff learn core skills:**

- Call-Taking Basic and Advanced Skills
- Handling Crisis Calls
- Responding to Suicide and Self-Harm
- Vicarious Trauma, Resiliency, Self-Care, and Wellness planning.
- Safety Planning
- Mandatory Reporting
- Handling Difficult Interactions
- Providing Victim-Centered and Trauma- Informed Care
- Ethics
- Victim Service Values
- VCRC Operations

#### **VAS receive training to enhance knowledge in the following topic areas:**

- Sexual Assault
- Intimate Partner Violence
- Stalking
- Safety Planning
- American Tribal Populations and the Justice System
- Human Trafficking
- Elder Abuse
- Financial Crime
- Identity Theft
- Victim Compensation and Restitution

- Homicide
- Criminal Justice System
- Crime Reporting
- Civil Legal Systems
- Military Justice System
- Child Abuse
- Gang Stalking
- Victims' Rights
- Working with Underserved Populations
- Working with Incarcerated Victims of Sexual Assault
- Immigration Populations
- Serving People with Disabilities
- VINE

#### **SPECIAL TRAINING TOPICS**

This year, all VASs received several mandatory trainings in addition to optional training they select for their own professional development. This year the topics included:

- Advanced Elder Fraud Training (1.5 hrs)
- Diversity and Equity Training (4 hrs)
- Vicarious Trauma Training (Delivered by OVC TTAC) (6 hours)
- LGTB Competency Training (1 hr)
- Basic Cyber Security Training (1.5 hrs)

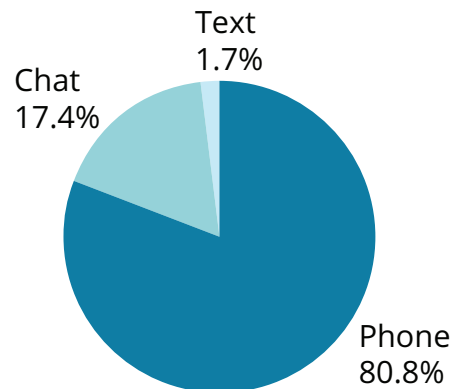
In 2020, all VASs also began the initial training to receive the Sexual Assault Counselor Certificate (39 hrs). Each VAS will also have the option to obtain an additional Sexual Assault Advocate Certificate (20 hrs), and an additional Sexual Assault Youth Advocate Certificate (20 hrs). It is expected that all VASs who will complete the sexual assault certificates by May 2021.



## Demographics & Trends

### VISITORS SUPPORTED

VCRC serves all victims of crime. During this reporting period (January 1, 2020 - December 31, 2020), VASs supported 10,513 visitors (80.8% Phone, 17.4% Chat, and 1.7% Text).



VASs record basic demographic information that visitors choose to disclose. Not all visitors are comfortable providing certain demographic information, so VASs are trained to only ask for demographic information that will aid in helping a visitor identify appropriate resources and to solicit this information as a natural part of the conversation. Visitors are not required to provide any information that is asked.

### AGE & GENDER

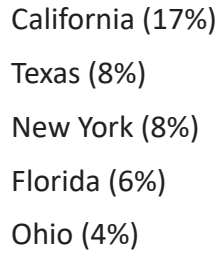
Of the visitors who shared their demographic information, 68% identified as female and 91% were 18 years of age or over. Changes implemented in September 2020 will allow for a more meaningful analysis of a visitor's age in 2021. However, it can be determined that in 2020 over half of the known ages were at least 55+.

### RACE AND ETHNICITY

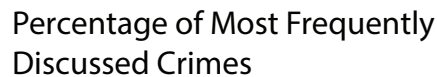
The category of Race and Ethnicity is one of the least offered and captured demographics, with only 2% of visitors sharing their race/ethnicity with the VAS. Knowing a visitor's race is often not needed to locate the most appropriate resource; however, sometimes it is voluntarily shared by the visitor, and other times it is helpful to discuss the visitor's race/ethnicity in order to identify culturally specific referrals. VASs are trained not to request demographic information that is not needed to provide supportive services.

### VISITOR LOCATION

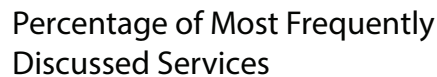
VASs support victims and survivors from across the nation. Over the last 12 months, VASs supported visitors from all 50 States, the District of Columbia, and US Territories. Visitor location is the most frequently collected demographic. This year, 89.89% of visitors shared some location information about where the crime occurred. Of those who shared the specific state of the crime, the five most frequently cited states are as follows:



When visitors reach out to VCRC, they typically share the type of crime that they or their loved one experienced. Of all the interactions received in 2020, four crimes were most frequently discussed (i.e. more than 10%).



During all interactions, VASs discuss and provide referrals. In 2020, the most frequently discussed services (the referrals that were mentioned in at least 10% of interactions) were as follows:



As of September 1, 2020, VCRC was able to better identify the type of legal resources a visitor was looking for (civil or criminal). In reviewing September-December legal resource data, 78% of legal resources discussed were related to the civil system.

In addition to the most commonly discussed services, VASs also regularly assisted visitors seeking mental health counseling, emergency shelter, and other social services or looking to join support groups and recover from/protect themselves from identity theft.

### SERVICES PROVIDED

Prior to the beginning of September, data collected in this area focused on the type of referrals VASs offered to visitors. On September 1, 2020, changes were made to enhance VCRC's data collection to include all of the types of services provided.

Of the 3,779 visitors to the hotline between September 1, 2020 and December 31, 2020, 67% of them were seeking, and were provided with, emotional support. Of those seeking help with system navigation and advanced information, 89% asked for, and were provided with, information about VictimConnect Resource Center's services. 29% were provided with safety planning, 9% were provided with information about identity theft or fraud recovery, 6% were provided with information about the criminal justice system, and 5% were provided with information about Victims' Rights.

### ACCESSING VICTIMCONNECT RESOURCE CENTER

The VCRC website, [victimconnect.org](https://victimconnect.org), has been undergoing significant updates. In 2020, work began to refresh and rebrand the VictimConnect logo, upgrade the website's look and feel, and create a Victim Connect Resource Map to provide website visitors with more information about services available to them. This new and enhanced website will launch in 2021.

### WEBSITE VISITORS

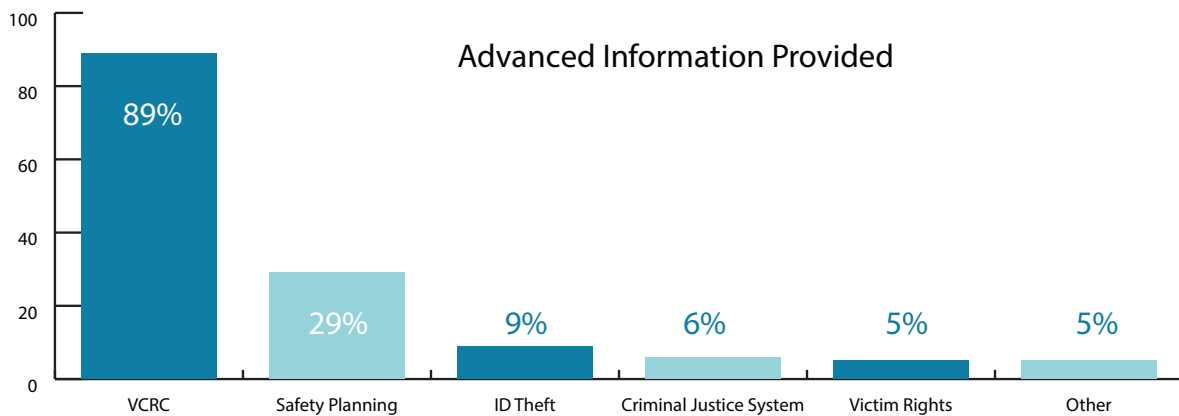
In 2020, **235,206** visitors accessed the website for information. This is a **114%** increase from 2019, when 109,875 visitors viewed the site. After the pandemic shut-downs in March, web traffic slowly grew until May, when it reached about 20,000 views. There was a large spike in June (36,090 users) before the remaining months of the pandemic maintained a range of approximately 20,000-24,000 visitors per month.

# 235,206

visitors accessed  
VictimConnect for  
information.

# 114%

increase



### WEBSITE ACCESSIBILITY

In 2020, VCRC added **Recite Me** to its website to improve accessibility. This is a cloud-based tool that allows website visitors to customize the VCRC website in ways that work best for them. The Recite Me toolbar provides text to speech functionality, fully customizable styling features, reading support aids, and a translation tool with over 100 languages, including 35 text-to-speech voices, and many other features.

### COVID-19 HELPLINE SERVICE TRENDS

While there was little difference between the volume of visitors between 2019 and 2020, there was a difference in how visitors accessed the platform. In 2019, 88-90% of all visitors accessed by phone, with the remaining 10-12% of visitors accessing by chat. This was similar to the first quarter of 2020. Beginning in March 2020, VCRC saw a shift. For the last three quarters, calls accounted for approximately 80% of the interactions, 18-19% were chats, and 1-2% were texts. This is a 44.28% increase in chats from 2019



to 2020. Similarly, in 2019 VCRC received 30 texts total. In 2020, this number jumped to 181, a 503.33% increase. While causation of this increase cannot be determined, it is hypothesized that this increase is linked to a decrease in the ability to privately communicate during the pandemic. Chat and text services generally offer more privacy than phone services.

Additionally, during reviews with the staff, they felt that calls appeared to be longer and more complex. Staff reported that many visitors seemed to have their needs met through emotional support and were not seeking referrals. Further, feedback from visitors to the hotline indicate that they felt lost and isolated because they have limited face-to-face resources.

### OTHER TRENDS

#### Cybercrime & Technology Facilitated Crimes

Thirteen Percent (13%) of visitors in 2020 indicated that the crime they were discussing was also related to technology or was a cybercrime. By the conclusion of 2021, VCRC is expected to have the capacity to better understand co-occurring crimes and crime types so that the Hotline Leadership Team can provide targeted training and resources to VASs to better serve visitors with these elevated needs.

**Protective Order**

After September 1, 2020, VCRC started collecting data on visitors who needed information or support related to protective orders. Fifteen (15%) of the 3,779 visitors between September 1, 2020 and December 31, 2020 were seeking information, referrals or support related to protective orders. VASs can talk with survivors about this option, help them weigh their choice, and successfully navigate the system within their own jurisdiction.

**Gang Stalking**

In 2020, 15% of all interactions were related to gang stalking. This is not a crime type, but a psychological issue where the individual feels targeted and reports being followed, under surveillance or otherwise harassed. Individuals who report gang stalking typically describe considerable suffering. Though this is generally a mental health concern, the need of the visitor is real because of their suffering. Typically, other hotlines and victim service providers forward gang stalking callers to other reporting agencies instead of connecting the caller with a service provider who can help them address the psychological symptoms they are experiencing. In 2021, VCRC will research the most meaningful support that can be provided to these visitors and help connect them with a more appropriate place to contact in the future.

**Complaints and Misconduct**

Five percent (5%) of all visitors called to make a complaint against a local agency, and an additional 5% of visitors made a complaint regarding law enforcement. Complaints can be related to the visitor's satisfaction with services or investigations, or it could also be a more egregious misconduct complaint. Visitors who have complaints or are alleging misconduct do not always desire to make a formal complaint. VASs can

provide emotional support and help visitors find alternative solutions to address their needs. Additionally, if the visitor does want to make a formal complaint, the VAS can refer them to the appropriate resource.

**Visitors with a Disability**

In 2020, 6% of all visitors indicated that they had a cognitive, mental, or physical disability. In 2021, VCRC will identify additional services and supports that can be provided to a visitor when this information is disclosed.

## The National Hotline Consortium

The National Hotline Consortium (Consortium) was formed in 2015 by a group of leading national victim service and crisis intervention hotlines, with the National Center leading this group. The primary goals of the Consortium were to develop and model best practices for victim services and crisis response hotlines and to facilitate communication and coordination among these hotlines in order to provide high-quality response to users of the services.

In 2020, NCVV continues to lead the consortium efforts. This year the consortium members reviewed and re-committed to their goals, developed subcommittees, and regularly discussed issues related to the impacts of COVID-19 on operations, technology, and staff.

### NATIONAL HOTLINE CONSORTIUM GOALS

The National Hotline Consortium (NHC) seeks to:

(1) Identify, implement, and share technology service delivery and promising practices that support accessible and high quality direct victim services and crisis response delivered through phone, chat, text, emails, or other forms of technology.

(2) Pool knowledge and resources to respond to needs and crises that impact NHC Members.

### NATIONAL HOTLINE CONSORTIUM SUBCOMMITTEES

In 2020, the Consortium had three active subcommittees: (1) Operations and Programming, (2) Technology, and (3) Training.



These subcommittees have been addressing issues related to COVID-19 and vicarious trauma as it relates to the wellness of hotline staff. The subcommittees have also been developing shared materials to support the training and professional development of hotline staff.



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The National Center for  
Victims of Crime  
3118 Washington Blvd  
P.O. Box 101207  
Arlington, Va 22210  
Tel. 202/467-8700  
Fax 202/467-8701  
[www.VictimsofCrime.org](http://www.VictimsofCrime.org)

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