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**The COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts
on Canadian victim services**

by Mary Allen and Brianna Jaffray

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The COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on Canadian victim services

by **Mary Allen and Brianna Jaffray**

Due to social distancing and restrictions put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic, many victim services in Canada had to modify their methods of assisting and supporting victims. Many physical locations had to close and staff worked primarily from home. Victim services commonly include counselling and crisis services (including sexual assault centres), protection services, as well as court preparation and accompaniment and other assistance to navigate the criminal justice system. Given the pandemic, many of these activities were severely curtailed, raising concerns about the ability of services to provide adequate access and support for victims of crime or violence.

While the restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic may impact victims of any type of crime or violence, many organizations within Canada and internationally have raised concerns about increased domestic violence. Research has shown that social isolation, loss of employment and reduced income are all factors known to increase the risk of domestic violence and these conditions have been heightened in recent months. In addition, the pandemic has led to increased stress, with lockdowns and families confined at home, the closure of schools and child care facilities, and possible increased tension in the home. For those experiencing violence, especially within the home, accessing help may be more difficult because of restricted contact with networks and sources of support, both formal (schools, counsellors, and victim services) and informal (family and friends).

This report examines the experiences of Canadian victim services over this period of higher risk. The Impacts of COVID-19 on Canadian Victim Services survey was carried out in June and July, 2020, and asked a sample of victim services about the changes they had experienced in the number of victims they had served, factors that affected their ability to provide services and how they had adapted their operations in order to continue to serve victims. The sample for this survey was small and is not representative of all victim services in Canada. However, the results provide important insights into the COVID-19 experiences of those who responded to the survey.

Half of victim services reported no change in the number of victims they served, while some reported increases and others reported decreases

The first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic yielded varied experiences among the reporting victim services. Between mid-March and early July, half (50%) of the victim services who responded to the survey perceived no change in the number of victims that they served, while 31% said that the number of victims served had increased and 19% indicated that they had seen a decrease.

When asked about victims of domestic violence specifically, just over half (54%) of the responding victim services reported an increase in the number of victims they served during this time. A further 29% said that the number of domestic violence victims they served stayed the same and 17% reported a decrease.

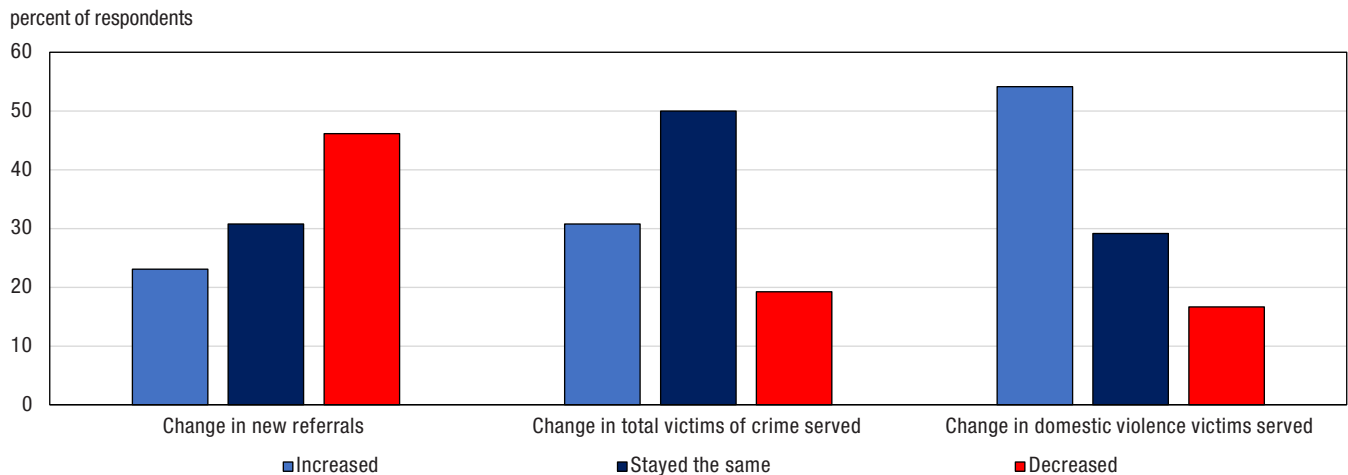
Many victims who receive support from victim services are ongoing clients. They may be seeking help related to recurring violence or receiving ongoing support as they navigate the criminal justice system. In addition to changes in their overall caseload, victim services reported on changes in the number of new referrals for service (new clients).

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During the early period of the COVID-19 pandemic, almost half (46%) of victim services that responded to the survey reported that they saw a decline in the number of new clients. About one-third (31%) reported no change, and 23% reported that they saw an increase.

When asked what they attributed these various changes to, the responding victim services provided a wide range of reasons. Some victim services noted the ways that COVID-19 restrictions and staying at home increased the risk of violence in the home, and some noted that victims may not have the opportunity to report their victimization. Other reasons suggested by victim services included the impact of changes in the operations of other organizations that refer victims to service—such as the police or health services—as well as changes related to the courts.

Chart 1
Perceived changes in the number of victims served since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020



Notes: Because of the non-representative nature of the sample, the results in this study do not represent all victim services in Canada. Excludes respondents who reported "don't know".
Source: Statistics Canada, Impacts of COVID-19 on Canadian Victim Services.

Large majority of respondents adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic by having staff work from home and introducing enhanced health protection or cleaning practices

Canadian victim services found ways to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic in order to continue serving their clients. As with many organizations during the pandemic, the most common change made, reported by 92% of the victim services that responded to the survey, was to introduce enhanced health protection or cleaning practices. Similarly, 88% of the responding victim services shifted staff to working from home. Almost two-thirds (62%) reported that they used a new technology to communicate with clients. Just under half (46%) reported that they had employed new forms of community outreach during this time.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, victim services that responded changed how they communicated with victims

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many victim services had to change their methods of communication with clients in order to continue to provide support. The majority of the victim services who responded to the survey said that their use of phone (73%) and email (58%) increased. With many workplaces shifting to remote work, the vast majority (92%) reported a decline in face to face (in person) meetings.

Some victim services reported that they had introduced telephone conferencing, video conferencing or online chat with clients in order to continue to deliver services during the pandemic, and that these were not previously offered. Overall, many of the responding victim services reported a new or increased use of telephone-conferencing (50%), video-conferencing (42%), or text messaging (42%).

Most victim services that responded were impacted by their ability to access resources for clients and their shift to working remotely

Victim services also reported on the degree to which various challenges impacted their ability to provide services to their clients during this period. It should be noted that it is not possible to determine the actual impact of these challenges on the victims themselves.

The most common factors impacting service delivery to a moderate or great extent were accessing resources for clients (such as food, legal aid, housing, medical care, or mental health supports — 76%) and the shifting of staff to working from home (72%). Among victim services where the availability of volunteers was pertinent, two-thirds (67%) were impacted to a moderate or great extent.

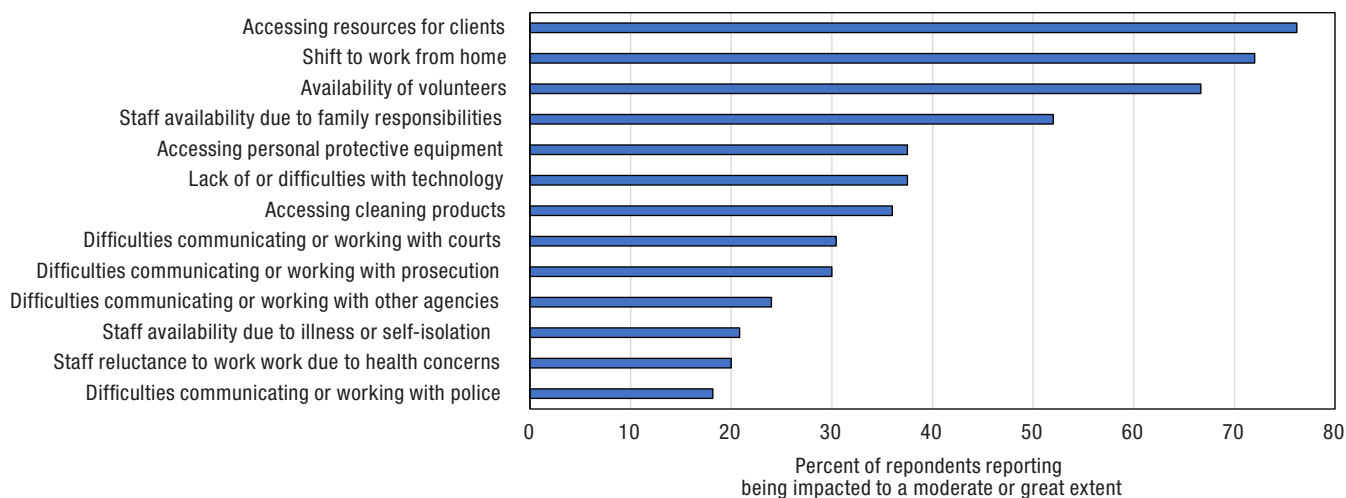
About half (52%) of respondents said that staff availability due to child care or caring responsibilities impacted their ability to deliver services to a moderate or great extent. On the other hand, a smaller proportion of the victim services that responded to the survey reported that staff availability due to illness or the need to self-isolate (21%), or staff reluctance to work due to health concerns (20%) had a similar impact on their ability to serve clients.

Over one-third of respondents identified the lack of technology or difficulty communicating with clients using available technology (38%), and accessing personal protective equipment (38%) or cleaning products (36%) as challenges that impacted their ability to provide services to a moderate or great extent.

Some respondents reported that difficulty communicating or working with the courts (30%), prosecutors (30%), or other agencies such as victim services or shelters (24%) impacted their ability to provide services for clients to a moderate or great extent during this time. Fewer reported a similar impact related to communicating with police (18%).

Chart 2

Factors impacting the ability of victim services to provide services to clients to a moderate or great extent since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020



Notes: Because of the non-representative nature of the sample, the results in this study do not represent all victim services in Canada. Percent calculation excludes responses of not applicable or not stated.

Source: Statistics Canada, Impacts of COVID-19 on Canadian Victim Services.

Methodology

This study is based on data from the Impacts of COVID-19 on Canadian Victim Services (ICCVS) survey. Between June 29 and July 13, 2020, the ICCVS collected information on the impacts of COVID-19 restrictions on the operations of Canadian victim service programs, including factors that have affected their ability to provide services and how they have adapted their operations to continue to serve victims. The reference period of the survey was from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (March 15, 2020) until the time the questionnaire was completed.

The questionnaire was sent to a sample of 81 victim services in Canada based on estimated size. The estimated size was based on the number of victims served by the organization, as reported on the 2011/2012 Victim Services Survey. The largest services were identified and selected. Victim services include those offered by police services and court programs, community-based services and sexual assault centres, as well as system-based programs in some provinces.

Victim services were asked about changes in the number of new victims served (new referrals), changes in the total number of victims of crime served, as well as changes in the number of victims of domestic violence served. No specific definition for domestic violence was provided in the survey as legal definitions differ by jurisdiction and may include all family violence or just intimate partner violence. Respondents therefore provided information based on the information available to them.

The ICCVS response rate is 32% and as a result there is no analysis by geographic region. Because of the non-representative nature of the sample, the results in this study do not represent all victim services in Canada. The information presented here represents the victim services that responded. These results must therefore be interpreted with caution.