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RESEARCH REPORT

Formative Evaluation of VictimConnect

Preparing for Rigorous Evaluation of a National Resource Center

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December 2020

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Formative Evaluation of VictimConnect

The VictimConnect Resource Center is a nationwide helpline that provides information, emotional support, and referrals to victims of crime and their loved ones through four technological modalities: softphone (internet-based phone calls), online chat, text messaging, and its website. In 2019, with funding from the National Institute of Justice, the Urban Institute launched a multiphase evaluation of VictimConnect, collaborating with research liaisons at the National Center for Victims of Crime (NCVC), which operates VictimConnect. During the first phase, the evaluation team conducted a formative evaluation of VictimConnect, focusing on assessing its evaluability, using those findings to strengthen its research capacity, and developing a comprehensive plan for implementation and outcome evaluations.

Findings from the first phase are summarized in this report and supplemented by the VictimConnect Evaluation Toolkit resources, which are briefs on the seven components of this formative evaluation: (1) foundational theory and literature, (2) refining the logic model, (3) evaluability assessment, (4) the implementation evaluation plan, (5) the outcome evaluation plan, (6) research capacity building, and (7) evaluation instruments. If funded, the next phases will begin in 2022 and will entail a comprehensive implementation evaluation and rigorous outcome evaluation of VictimConnect. This report summarizes components of the formative evaluation and clarifies how they fit together to prepare VictimConnect for future evaluation of its effectiveness.

Introduction to Formative Evaluation

Generally speaking, evaluating programs, services, and policies is a form of research that helps us learn the details and potential benefits of an effort by gathering and reviewing information about it. Researchers often distinguish between two categories of evaluations: formative and summative.¹ A summative evaluation judges a program's effectiveness after it has been established as ready and appropriate for such assessment (Wholey, Hatry, and Newcomer 2005). By contrast, a formative evaluation typically occurs during the earlier years of a program's development and implementation and is useful for assessing whether the program is feasible and appropriate for its intended purpose and target population (Hogan 2007; Patton 2015). A formative evaluation also identifies what improvements are needed before a program undergoes subsequent (summative) evaluation of its

effectiveness. In this way, formative evaluation involves assessing a program’s “evaluability” or readiness to undergo rigorous summative evaluation and identifying the research capacity building and planning needed to improve its evaluation readiness (Trevisan and Walser 2015).

Successful formative evaluations require close collaboration between the research team and program leadership and staff and a shared understanding of the program, including its goals, users, and components. By studying a program’s developmental foundation, its conceptual model, and its actual operations, researchers can provide valuable feedback to program directors and staff about the extent to which the program has been optimized for success and suggest ways to strategically adapt its readiness for rigorous evaluation (James Bell Associates 2018; Stetler et al. 2006). Formative evaluation activities often include descriptive research to understand or clarify a program’s model, assessments of its evaluability and research capacity, and development of research instruments for future testing of its implementation fidelity and effectiveness at achieving its intended outcomes. Urban’s formative evaluation of NCVV’s VictimConnect Resource Center included each of these components.

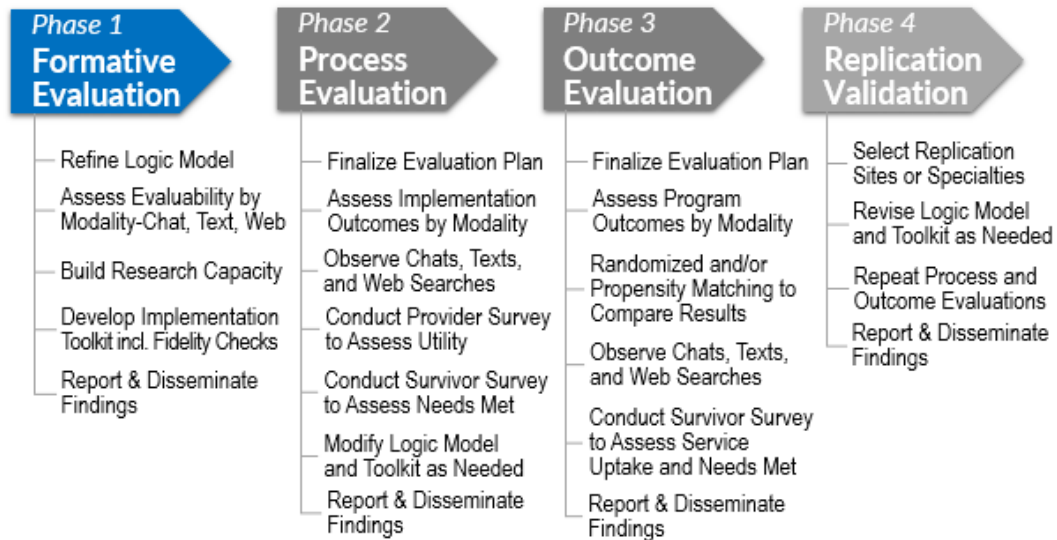
VictimConnect’s Formative Evaluation

From 2019 to 2020, Urban conducted a formative evaluation of VictimConnect as the first phase in a multiphase effort to contribute critical knowledge to the field regarding the use and effectiveness of technology-based victim services (figure 1). The formative evaluation had three overarching goals: (1) to assess the evaluability of VictimConnect, (2) to use those findings to strengthen its research capacity, and (3) to develop comprehensive plans for future, summative evaluations of VictimConnect’s implementation fidelity and its ability to achieve positive outcomes for victims and their supporters. As described in Dusenbery and coauthors’ review of previous hotline evaluations,² there is limited evidence on their effectiveness for crime victims, and few evaluations have focused on hotlines’ technological components. Rather, most evaluations have focused on process or implementation measures, with the main exception being McDonnell and colleagues (2018, 2020), who examined the National Domestic Violence Hotline. For these reasons, we envisioned that victim resource centers and service providers across the country could benefit from information about the ways in which VictimConnect’s online technologies were used to improve the nation’s response to crime victims.

Launched publicly in 2015, VictimConnect is the nation’s only resource center offering comprehensive referral information and helpline services to victims of *all* crime types. VictimConnect offers four technological modalities: (1) softphone calls via an internet-based connection, with the

option for a warm handoff to an external service provider; (2) online chatting with a Victim Assistance Specialist (VAS); (3) text messaging with a VAS; and (4) informational resources on the website. Each modality is delivered over a secure technological platform designed to protect the anonymity of crime victims and their families.

FIGURE 1
Phased Evaluation of the VictimConnect Resource Center



As described in NCVV’s *VictimConnect Operations Summary (2020)*, prepared as part of this formative evaluation, the program has fielded more than 40,000 interactions with crime victims and their supporters since its 2015 launch. The most common victimizations reported by visitors are stalking, assaults and homicides, elder abuse, domestic and intimate partner violence, and mass event crimes. The most frequent resources sought are financial compensation, help with crime reporting, information about legal services, and referrals to other hotline services. Most recently but before the COVID-19 pandemic, VASs responded to approximately 35 softphone calls and 4 online chats a day (NCVC 2020). However, since the pandemic and because of their support of Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color impacted by police brutality,³ their daily interactions have dramatically increased (by rates that NCVV is still internally analyzing; NCVV 2020).

Given its broad scope, its embracing of communications technology, and its relatively recent founding, VictimConnect was at the prime stage in 2019 and 2020 to undergo formative evaluation. During that stage, integration of research capacity building, implementation fidelity tracking, and other evaluation components were most opportune. Furthermore, Urban’s research team, working

collaboratively with VictimConnect’s developer (NCVC), believed that findings from the multiphase effort could clarify how to reach more victims in the most efficient technological ways while preserving the rights and protecting the confidentiality of victims and their families.

Methodology

With the previous goals in mind, Urban researchers engaged in formative evaluation activities that focused generally on **listening and learning** to understand more about VictimConnect in its initial form and then on **developing plans** for supportive research capacity building and the most rigorous outcome and implementation evaluations feasible. Listening and learning activities for the formative evaluation included the following:

- reviewing and summarizing literature supporting VictimConnect’s foundation and relevant theoretical frameworks
- reviewing previous evaluations of victim helplines, hotlines, or similar services⁴
- collaborating with NCVC to refine the goals, activities, and intended outcomes of VictimConnect as a detailed logic model
- examining documentation and aggregated data collected by NCVC on VictimConnect’s development, current operations, visitor needs, and visitor characteristics
- interviewing VictimConnect VASs, VASs’ supervisors, and VictimConnect leadership regarding its training program, operational activities, and feasibility of different evaluation strategies
- observing VictimConnect’s technological platform and reviewing a sample of chat conversations

Subsequently, developing and planning activities for the formative evaluation included the following:

- clarifying the multiphase project’s overarching research questions and specifying subquestions specific to VictimConnect’s implementation and outcome evaluations
- developing a plan, protocols, and research instruments for evaluating VictimConnect’s implementation activities and intended outcomes in ways that operationalized its identified logic model components

- identifying opportunities for VictimConnect to build research capacity in support of both summative evaluation plans and ongoing performance assessments

To accomplish these activities, Urban convened biweekly as an internal research team and biweekly with NCVJ's research liaisons. The team also met quarterly with the project's advisory board and consulted with internal Urban experts and the National Institute of Justice grant manager as needed. To facilitate collaboration and secure information sharing, all Urban researchers signed project confidentiality agreements, and the partners used a shared folder on a secure, cloud-based system, which also allowed continued work remotely after the COVID-19 pandemic began in the US in mid-March 2020. Interviews of VictimConnect staff were conducted virtually and privately by voluntary and informed consent, with deidentified notes recorded by Urban staff for qualitative assessment afterward. Questions were designed to assess VictimConnect's evaluability, asking about staff background, training, understanding of the program's operations and visitor characteristics, appreciation for the role of research, and perceptions of the feasibility of evaluation options presented by Urban's team (e.g., use of after-hour VictimConnect visitors as a comparison group for surveying).

Research Questions

This formative evaluation of VictimConnect focused on four overarching research questions that will also guide the summative evaluations. The below questions reflect the goals of VictimConnect as a national resource center and of the broader field of victim services. In addressing these, Urban's team has emphasized what will be measurable given the existing and possible data sources and the most rigorous evaluation methods feasible for answering each question, given the goal of providing the most useful and meaningful information to the field. The research questions are as follows:

- RQ1: Does VictimConnect increase access to victim services?
- RQ2: Does VictimConnect improve delivery of victim services?
- RQ3: Does VictimConnect protect victims' rights and confidentiality?
- RQ4: Does VictimConnect strengthen the efficiency of victim services?

These questions and the specific subquestions related to a future implementation evaluation and outcome evaluation are described in more depth in the next sections and in the [fourth](#) and [fifth](#) toolkit resources.

Results

Urban's formative evaluation of VictimConnect resulted in key products that are useful internally for the program's evaluation and externally for the field. With Urban's guidance, NCVC produced a revised logic model and a summary of VictimConnect's operations (NCVC 2020), while Urban's team produced the present report and a series of seven briefs that make up the VictimConnect Evaluation Toolkit.

Each brief presents introductory information defining key terms and explaining their general importance, followed by elaboration on how each effort was applied in support of Urban's formative evaluation of VictimConnect. Moreover, Urban developed a journal article on the efforts of previous hotline evaluations and how the present evaluation of VictimConnect could advance the evidence base in the field;⁵ it also worked collaboratively with NCVC to codeliver a webinar to victim services practitioners and researchers on the partnership's success and formative evaluation results (Dusenbery, Bastomski, and Johnson 2020). In the remaining sections, we summarize these activities and results.

VictimConnect Foundational Theory and Literature

The first step involved in Urban's formative evaluation of VictimConnect was to understand the reasons for its development by reviewing foundational literature and considering relevant theoretical frameworks and perspectives. In the first toolkit resource (White, Dusenbery, and Bastomski 2020), we identify the level of need in the victimization field, explaining why VictimConnect came to be and what its core operations attempt to accomplish. We also reviewed theoretical perspectives that frame its service delivery model and its expected impact on people it serves.

To understand this, the research team reviewed program materials from VictimConnect's development and operations; summarized literature regarding crime victimization as a problem and the need for a technology-based victim resource center that serves victims of *all* crime types; and conducted a scan of potentially applicable theories that support the goals, approaches, and activities of VictimConnect. We then worked collaboratively with NCVC's research liaisons to capture a theoretical framework and approaches informing VictimConnect's development and operations.

The literature review established that crime victims experience serious harms and have diverse backgrounds, experiences, and needs, and that there was clear need in the victim services field for a secure technology-based resource center covering all crime types. Despite declining crime rates in recent decades, millions of Americans experience victimization every year. In 2019, 1.2 million

Americans reported experiences of violent victimization and 13 million reported property crime victimizations (Morgan and Truman 2020). Victims can suffer physical injuries, pain, and trauma; property, job, and home loss; and even death (D’Inverno et al. 2019; Turanovic 2019). Some victims face immediate crises, whereas the consequences for others are longer lasting (Bouffard and Koeppel 2014; Priester et al. 2016; Widom, Czaja, and DuMont 2015). Victimization also frequently impacts the lives of victims’ families, friends, and communities of support. Moreover, certain groups have historically been at disproportionately higher risk of certain victimization experiences. These include people of color, LGBTQ+ people, people with disabilities, and older adults (Flores et al. 2020; Zweig and Yahner 2013).

Despite this established need, most victims remain unserved by providers who might otherwise help them recover, and historically marginalized populations often face the greatest difficulties accessing potentially helpful services.⁶ The Bureau of Justice Statistics’ National Crime Victimization Survey data consistently show that fewer than 1 in 10 victims receive any type of formal victim assistance provided by government or privately funded service providers (Morgan and Truman 2020). Provided victims’ privacy is protected, mobile and web-based communications can play a powerful role in expanding victims’ access to information and services (OVC 2013). Several hotlines targeted to specific crime types have embraced technology as a promising approach to service delivery. However, before VictimConnect, there was a need for a technology-based resource center to serve polyvictims (people who have experienced multiple crimes during their lives) and help victims of all types of crime experiences determine what resources they need and where to access them.

The core theoretical perspectives and guiding frameworks relevant to VictimConnect’s operations were identified as crisis intervention theory and trauma-informed, victim-centered, and strengths-based approaches. Crisis intervention theory advocates that professional service providers responding to physical, mental, and social health crises meet people where they are in terms of experiencing crisis and empathetically facilitate problem solving and action planning to help clients begin to return to a state of social functioning (Collins and Collins 2005). Crisis intervention theory has been conceptualized by Roberts (1991, 2005) and Roberts and Ottens (2005) as a multistep model for use in situations of rapid assessment and response, and these steps substantively accord with those in which VictimConnect staff are trained—namely, safety assessment, collaborative rapport-building, problem identification and clarification, supportive and empathetic response, discussion of potential solutions, and facilitated development of an action plan.

In addition, VictimConnect staff advocate use of trauma-informed and victim-centered approaches that acknowledge the role trauma has played in a person’s life and center the victim’s needs and

decisionmaking power in the service response. These approaches encourage responders to provide nonjudgmental care, emphasize self-determination, and prioritize safety and security. Lastly, NCVC operates VictimConnect using strengths-based practice, which aims to uplift victims, highlight their capabilities and resources, and empower them to make their own choices. VictimConnect staff take an action-oriented, strengths-based approach by intentionally highlighting doable actions that activate visitors' diverse strengths and mobilize their resources. This understanding of VictimConnect's developmental history and theory-informed service approach laid the foundation upon which components of VictimConnect's logic model could be clarified.

Refining the VictimConnect Logic Model

The second step in Urban's formative evaluation of VictimConnect was clarification of the program's logic model—that is, its conceptualization of objectives, the activities used to carry them out, and the anticipated outcomes. The second toolkit resource (Dusenbery 2020) presents an overview of logic models, describes the process of completing the VictimConnect logic model, and summarizes its content and use.

In general, a logic model presents what a program is intended to achieve and how it is expected to work in a visually accessible format. Basic logic models depict the relationship between the resources available, activities offered, and intended results, and they may include additional components like objectives, the problem the program addresses, assumptions, and external factors. The Urban and NCVC teams closely collaborated to refine the VictimConnect logic model as a foundational program component and critical evaluation tool. The process included review of examples of other relevant logic models, review of VictimConnect program materials and previous VictimConnect logic models, meetings to determine what elements to include, development of a template, and multiple rounds of review internally and externally to finalize the content.

The finalized VictimConnect logic model contains the following key components: a goal statement, objectives, inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, assumptions, and external factors. The goal statement establishes the population of focus and intention while emphasizing VictimConnect's strength-based approach. The inputs, activities, and outputs are divided into five focus areas—VictimConnect visitors, technology, staff and volunteers, outreach and collaboration, and evaluation and improvement—to improve readability and clarify organization. Each focus area also has an objective describing VictimConnect's specific aim for that category. The inputs capture VictimConnect's funding, helpline platforms, internal and external teams, and data collection efforts. The linked activities and outputs

describe the services provided to visitors, technology support, staffing, outreach resources, and evaluation efforts. The outcomes are divided into focus areas for visitors (for example, improve access to services, ensure satisfaction, and increase knowledge) and other service providers (for example, increase capacity to serve victims, support victims through technology, and encourage evaluation). The assumptions identify what NCVC believes victims need to achieve recovery and empowerment, and the external factors identify what would limit victims' access to VictimConnect or affect VictimConnect's operations.

The revised VictimConnect logic model has been of great benefit to NCVC and the Urban evaluation team. Thus far, NCVC has used it to inform strategic planning, the development of an operations summary (NCVC 2020), and potential funding opportunities. It intends to regularly update the logic model and use it to guide technology improvements, report writing, website updates, staff training, and other operational changes. The Urban team has used the logic model to understand VictimConnect's overarching components throughout the evaluability assessment and development of implementation and outcome evaluation plans. It will further support future evaluations, including the creation and use of data collection instruments.

VictimConnect Evaluability Assessment

Urban's third step in conducting a formative evaluation of VictimConnect was to assess the overall evaluability of the program, using information gathered through the first two steps and working collaboratively with NCVC's research liaisons. As described by the Center for Victim Research, evaluability assessments help determine the extent to which a summative evaluation will be useful and feasible for a program to undergo (Bastomski 2020). When included as part of a program's formative evaluation, evaluability assessment is useful for identifying improvements that may help a program's intended vision better align with its actual operations (Trevisan and Walser 2015). In response, organizations operating a program may embrace and integrate changes that improve its plausibility and its capacity for future, rigorous evaluation of implementation and outcomes.

Urban's evaluability assessment of VictimConnect is described in the third toolkit resource (Yahner et al. 2020). This effort aligned with the six stages of evaluability assessment theory (Wholey et al. 2005) and, accordingly, entailed a process with the following six steps:

1. Urban worked collaboratively with NCVC staff to develop an accurate understanding of VictimConnect program operations and objectives.

2. Urban clarified the program’s logic model—including links between VictimConnect inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes—and documented its goals, assumptions, visitor needs, and existing sources of data.
3. Urban explored VictimConnect’s actual operations by interviewing staff, observing the platform, and documenting how operations aligned with staff descriptions.
4. Urban and NCVC reached agreement on feasible and planned changes to program design to better achieve and evaluate VictimConnect’s intended outcomes.
5. Urban explored alternative evaluation designs based on the most comprehensive and relevant data that could be collected (while prioritizing doing no harm to visitors), the types of rigorous analyses that could be conducted, the confidentiality protections needed to preserve visitor privacy, and implications for VictimConnect stakeholders.
6. Urban and NCVC agreed on evaluation priorities and the meaningful use and dissemination of future results to increase the evidence base supporting helplines, hotlines, resource centers, and victim services providers nationally that are considering similar technological approaches.

These evaluability assessment activities resulted in several accomplishments. Working with NCVC to understand VictimConnect’s operations and objectives and its conceptual logic model resulted in clarification of VictimConnect’s foundational theoretical framework and literature (White, Dusenbery, and Bastomski 2020), refinement of its logic model components (Dusenbery 2020), and a comprehensive summary of VictimConnect operations (NCVC 2020). Urban’s team also learned about the four sources of data already being collected on VictimConnect—session statistics, visitor feedback survey results, visitor demographics, and website traffic data—that are detailed in the [fourth toolkit resource](#).

From Urban’s reviews of this information, observations of the VictimConnect platform, review of chat conversation samples, and interviews with VASs, their supervisors, and NCVC leadership, changes to program design were identified and changes to evaluation designs were considered. Design changes included refining the list of visitor demographics to improve consistency in its collection and meaning, creating quality-control rubrics for use by VictimConnect supervisors in oversight and VASs in training, committing to upgrade VictimConnect’s technological platform to enable collection of referrals made during each interaction, and other research capacity building activities described in the [sixth toolkit resource](#). It was also clear to Urban’s research team that the program served a sizable and diverse number of visitors to support rigorous evaluation of its effectiveness, particularly via softphone, online chatting, and web search connections.

Working with the project’s advisory board, Urban identified additional sources of data to be collected by Urban’s research team to fully support the planned implementation evaluation (Dusenbery, Yahner, and Bastomski 2020) and quasi-experimental outcome evaluation (Bastomski, Yahner, and Dusenbery 2020). These included VictimConnect session observations, VAS staff interviews and surveys, stakeholder interviews, longitudinal visitor surveys (including those warm-transferred to the most frequently referred providers and a comparison group of people who attempted to contact VictimConnect after hours but were unsuccessful), and additional review of VictimConnect materials and its platform. Through ongoing discussions, Urban and NCVC leadership agreed on the evaluation priorities, analytic strategy, and capacity building activities described in the next sections.

VictimConnect Implementation and Outcome Evaluation Plans

Urban’s fourth step was to use the aforementioned information to develop plans for conducting concurrent, summative evaluations of VictimConnect’s implementation and outcomes. Implementation evaluations—sometimes referred to as process evaluations—document a program or service’s delivery, producing transparency about the program or service’s model, knowledge about whether it has been implemented as planned, and early warnings about challenges or problems to which the overseeing organization can respond. Implementation evaluators typically capture data about the services provided, participants, staff, and fidelity to the model through document review, program observation, interviews with and/or surveys of staff and clients, administrative data review, and staff completion of checklists. By contrast, outcome evaluations—sometimes referred to as impact evaluations—identify how a program or service is expected to positively affect clients and then assess the extent to which those intended effects are realized. A rigorous outcome evaluation can provide clarity around a program’s key goals and provide a robust assessment of program functioning, informing critical decisions about program refinements and sharing knowledge with the field. Outcome evaluators pair high-quality quantitative or qualitative data sources with the most rigorous feasible methods, including quasi-experimental approaches and randomized controlled trials.

Urban’s research team developed the VictimConnect implementation and evaluation plans in collaboration with NCVC through a series of conversations and document reviews that included identifying activities, outputs, and outcomes from the logic model, reviewing previous relevant evaluations, identifying data sources and matching those sources to revised research questions, and developing the evaluation protocol and instruments. These plans are detailed in the [fourth](#) and [fifth](#) toolkit resources.

EVALUATION GOALS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The goals of VictimConnect’s implementation evaluation are to document the functions that VictimConnect is carrying out and whether it meets the expectations identified in the logic model and other program plans; to understand whether VictimConnect is reaching its target population and providing services as intended; and to assess the degree to which VictimConnect visitors are satisfied with the services and feel they meet their needs. The goals of the outcome evaluation are to examine the extent to which VictimConnect increases the reach of its services over time by connecting to more victims and diverse victim populations; to understand whether VictimConnect services impact visitors as intended (that is, by bringing about positive changes to visitor knowledge, awareness, and outlook and facilitating uptake of relevant victim services); and to determine whether VictimConnect strengthens the capacity and efficiency of community providers to offer high-quality services to victims.

Paired with the implementation evaluation, the outcome evaluation will empower VictimConnect staff to make data-driven program refinements and will provide the field with rigorous evidence to inform technology-based service delivery. Urban’s researchers also prioritize taking a trauma-informed, victim-centered approach to evaluation protocols, an approach that includes maintaining strict privacy protections for participants and emphasizing the voluntary nature of the study and each question.

Drawing from interview data and documents reviewed during VictimConnect’s formative evaluation, the Urban team expanded upon the four overarching research questions for the multiphase evaluation and solidified the following subquestions for the implementation and outcome evaluations.

- RQ1. Does VictimConnect increase access to victim services?
 - » RQ1A. Who are the users of VictimConnect? (implementation evaluation)
 - » RQ1B. Does VictimConnect reach underserved populations? (implementation evaluation)
 - » RQ1C. Does ease of access vary by the different technological modes, and do visitors prefer some modes over others? (implementation evaluation)
 - » RQ1D. How knowledgeable are Victim Assistance Specialists about different victim services nationwide? (implementation evaluation)
 - » RQ1E. How well are VictimConnect visitors informed of, referred to, and/or warm-transferred to community services relevant to visitors’ needs? (implementation evaluation)
 - » RQ1F. Does VictimConnect serve more victims over time? (outcome evaluation)
 - » RQ1G. Does VictimConnect increase visitor awareness of services in the local communities? (outcome evaluation)

- » RQ1H. Are VictimConnect interactions followed by uptake of community-based services, if that was visitors' desired goal? (outcome evaluation)
- RQ2. Does VictimConnect improve delivery of victim services?
 - » RQ2A. Are VictimConnect's services delivered as intended through the four technological modalities? (implementation evaluation)
 - » RQ2B. Are the mechanisms of service delivery appropriate and suitable for the needs of visitors? (implementation evaluation)
 - » RQ2C. Are visitors' emotional, informational, and resource needs addressed through interactions with VASs? (outcome evaluation)
 - » RQ2D. Does visitor knowledge about victimization experiences and available victim services increase through interactions with VASs? (outcome evaluation)
 - » RQ2E. Does VictimConnect improve the capacity of community-based providers to help victims heal and increase victim satisfaction? (outcome evaluation)
 - » RQ2F. Does VictimConnect increase service providers' use of technology to support crime victims? (outcome evaluation)
- RQ3. How does VictimConnect protect victim rights and confidentiality?
 - » RQ3A. How do VictimConnect's technological platforms protect the right to anonymity and confidentiality for victims and families? (implementation evaluation)
 - » RQ3B. How consistently and in what ways is information about VictimConnect's anonymity and confidentiality protections conveyed to victims/visitors? (implementation evaluation)
 - » RQ3C. Do visitors perceive that VictimConnect offers an option for information and service access that protects privacy in a manner that would not otherwise be available to them? (outcome evaluation)
- RQ4. Does VictimConnect strengthen the efficiency of victim services?
 - » RQ4A. Does VictimConnect adequately prepare staff and volunteers according to its stated goals? (implementation evaluation)
 - » RQ4B. Does VictimConnect maintain up-to-date and high-quality information in its database of community providers and resources for (1) VASs to use when providing services and (2) visitors to find online? (implementation evaluation)
 - » RQ4C. Has VictimConnect increased its network of service providers over time (1) overall (all collaborations) and (2) in terms of diversity of victimizations and populations served? (implementation evaluation)

- » RQ4D. How well does VictimConnect reach service providers through training and technical assistance (TTA)? (implementation evaluation)
- » RQ4E. Does VictimConnect's TTA to service providers result in (1) greater efficiency of providing relevant services to victims and (2) greater integration of research into providers' practice in order to assess and/or improve their programs? (outcome evaluation)
- » RQ4F. Are paid professional VictimConnect staff better able to meet the immediate and follow-up needs of visitors relative to volunteers? (outcome evaluation)

METHODOLOGY

To answer the above questions, the Urban team envisions a 36-month project where phases two and three (see figure 1)—the implementation and outcome evaluations—will occur concurrently. These evaluations will rely on existing sources from NCVC and evaluation-specific research tools and mechanisms for collecting data. Data from NCVC include session statistics from the VictimConnect online technological platform, the demographics about visitor characteristics and interactions that VASs enter after each session, the ongoing VictimConnect visitor feedback survey with four Likert scale questions and one open-ended question, and the website traffic data from Google Analytics. Every six months during the data collection period, NCVC will share this information with Urban using a secure file-sharing program.

Urban also envisions using additional research tools and mechanisms to collect the following data relevant to the implementation evaluation: between 300 and 500 live phone session observations and between 100 and 300 analyses of chat session transcripts using an observation tool; semistructured interviews with all VictimConnect staff and volunteers; online surveys completed by VASs during a six-month period about the first or last session of their shift; 30 to 50 semistructured interviews with stakeholders including service providers victims are commonly referred to, TTA recipients, and National Hotline Consortium partners; a longitudinal visitor survey by Urban administered to up to 500 VictimConnect visitors and a quasi-experimental, “after-hours” comparison group of up to 500 people who attempt to contact VictimConnect after hours but fail to connect; and a review of VictimConnect's materials and technological platform. Draft copies of the core evaluation instruments are included in the [seventh](#) toolkit resource (Dusenbery et al. 2020) and will be finalized after pilot testing.

The analytic strategy that Urban will employ and the human subjects protections it will follow in its comprehensive implementation evaluation and rigorous outcome evaluation are described further in the [fifth](#) and [seventh](#) toolkit resources. The implementation evaluation will align with conceptual elements put forth by Proctor and colleagues (2011), using quantitative and qualitative analyses to

assess VictimConnect’s acceptability, adoption, fidelity, penetration, and sustainability. Acceptability refers to the perception among VictimConnect staff and visitors that the program’s services and delivery (including the technology it uses) are satisfactory or agreeable.⁷ Adoption focuses on VictimConnect’s delivery of trauma-informed, victim-centered, and strengths-based services while protecting victims’ privacy. Fidelity refers to the extent to which VictimConnect is implemented in accordance with its policies and protocols, including how and what services are delivered to visitors. VictimConnect’s penetration refers to its institutionalization or reach within the service provider community. Lastly, VictimConnect may achieve sustainability if its resource directory and network of service providers are maintained and integrated for routine, ongoing use.

Urban’s quasi-experimental outcome evaluation plan, by contrast, aligns with the Kirkpatrick conceptual framework (Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick 2006, 2016), examining the impact that VictimConnect interactions have on visitors. That framework includes the following: (1) reactions, including satisfaction with the empathetic response and resources provided; (2) learning, including knowledge of relevant rights and referral sources; (3) attitudes and behavior, including safety planning and empowered decisionmaking; and (4) organizational results or impacts, such as overall improvements in well-being or service receipt (if these are visitors’ desired outcomes). The key data sources will provide information collected from VictimConnect visitors (including those who are and those who are not warm-transferred to other providers) and from a comparison group of victims and their supporters who attempt to contact VictimConnect after hours but do not do so successfully. In this way, Urban’s researchers will examine the impact of VictimConnect on visitor outcomes by comparing two major groups: (1) visitors who receive VictimConnect services (by engaging with VictimConnect staff, receiving a warm transfer, and/or using website resources), and (2) visitors who try to contact VictimConnect after hours and do not reach it.

VictimConnect Research Capacity

Each of the previous steps involved in Urban’s formative evaluation of VictimConnect was conducted in collaboration with the research liaisons at NVCV and the project advisory board and resulted in some aspect of research capacity building for the VictimConnect program itself. “Research capacity building” encompasses all the activities that support a program or service’s ability to undergo research and evaluation. Integrating these mechanisms is critical to helping program providers and future evaluators learn enough—once a program is underway—about what may need to be changed, maintained, or expanded to achieve a program’s implementation fidelity and outcome success.

As described in the [sixth](#) toolkit resource, since NCVC established VictimConnect in 2015, program staff have been attentive to the importance of collecting and analyzing data to assess VictimConnect's performance. Accordingly, several mechanisms were put in place, including session data on each interaction and a visitor feedback survey assessing satisfaction (among other factors). For the present formative evaluation, Urban worked in partnership with NCVC to identify a dozen additional research capacity building activities to prepare VictimConnect for a future comprehensive implementation evaluation and rigorous outcome evaluation. These activities aligned with three goals: to strengthen the operational model of VictimConnect, to refine and expand VictimConnect data collection activities, and to foster the sustainability of research and evaluation in support of ongoing and future analyses of VictimConnect data.

More specifically, the research capacity building that NCVC staff engaged in during this formative evaluation included the following:

- strengthening VictimConnect's operational model by embracing a theoretical framework (White, Dusenbery, and Bastomski 2020), refining a logic model (Dusenbery 2020), documenting program operations (NCVC 2020), revising the VictimConnect training protocols, and developing quality-control rubrics (Yahner, Dusenbery, and Bastomski 2020)
- refining and expanding data collection by upgrading the VictimConnect technological platform to support enhanced supervisory and research capabilities (Yahner, Dusenbery, and Bastomski 2020), identifying frequently referred providers to support Urban's future connections with warm-transferred visitors and evaluation of service providers' perceptions of VictimConnect, refining collection of demographic characteristics on visitors (NCVC 2020), and assessing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the number and type of VictimConnect interactions and visitor needs (NCVC 2020)
- focusing on evaluation sustainability by seeking to hire a research and evaluation director, exploring rigorous research designs with openness to randomized controlled trial and quasi-experimental approaches, and expanding analysis of performance measures (NCVC 2020; Yahner, Dusenbery, and Bastomski 2020)

These activities to build research and evaluation capacity have been discussed, integrated, and/or planned for VictimConnect without altering its core technological victim services functions—namely, to provide an empathetic response, confidential and high-quality referral information, and (where possible) a warm handoff to a victim services provider. For these reasons, an intentional focus on

research has helped and will continue to help the program better meet the needs of crime victims and their supporters nationwide.

Conclusion

This report summarizes the purpose and components of Urban’s formative evaluation of NCVC’s VictimConnect Resource Center, a nationwide helpline serving victims of all types of crime who contact the program through softphone, online chat, text messaging, or the website. This formative evaluation was the first of a multiphase effort in preparation for a concurrent implementation and outcome evaluation. In this phase, we assessed VictimConnect’s evaluability, used those findings to strengthen its research capacity, and developed comprehensive plans for future summative evaluations of its implementation and outcomes. The components of this formative evaluation are detailed in greater depth in seven supplemental briefs covering VictimConnect’s [foundational theory and literature](#), its [logic model](#), the [evaluability assessment](#), the [implementation evaluation plan](#), the [outcome evaluation plan](#), [research capacity building](#), and [evaluation instruments](#).

Again, a successful formative evaluation happens when a research team partners closely with program leadership to gain a shared understanding of a program and improvements to develop its research capacity in meaningful ways. Urban’s researchers engaged in such collaboration with NCVC throughout this effort via biweekly meetings, qualitative interviews, advisory board conferences, and targeted discussions focused on helping Urban listen, learn, and plan and develop activities to support a rigorous evaluation of VictimConnect’s implementation and goals. We recognize the value of this partnership opportunity to plan and prepare for a future program evaluation in such comprehensive ways. This formative evaluation has better prepared us to address critical questions for the victim services field regarding VictimConnect’s ability to improve access to and the delivery and efficiency of victim services. We also hope the products emerging from this effort provide a template for advancing subsequent evaluations of this sort—of national hotlines, resource centers, and other victim services programs—that undertake any or all of this evaluation’s components.

Notes

- ¹ Some researchers also distinguish a third category, developmental evaluation, that is focused on assessing and assisting programs not yet well formed or conceptualized (i.e., programs in development; Patton 2015).
- ² Malore Dusenbery, Jennifer Yahner, Sara Bastomski, Krista White, and Erica Henderson, “Advancing the Field of Hotline Evaluations: Review of the Literature and Introduction to VictimConnect’s Formative Evaluation” (unpublished manuscript, December 21, 2020), Microsoft Word file.
- ³ As described in the *VictimConnect Operations Summary* (NCVC 2020, 10), the program “has always served as a resource to victims of law enforcement misconduct [and] in light of increased national attention on police brutality and other forms of racism and white supremacy, VictimConnect aims to uphold its commitment to victims from marginalized communities through the services it provides.”
- ⁴ Dusenbery and coauthors, “Advancing the Field of Hotline Evaluations.”
- ⁵ Dusenbery and coauthors, “Advancing the Field of Hotline Evaluations.”
- ⁶ See, e.g., Hines and Douglas (2011) and Iyengar and Sabik (2009).
- ⁷ VictimConnect defines visitors as anyone who contacts VictimConnect, including victims/survivors; family, friends, and other supporters of victims; and other professionals, such as service providers.

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