

Unsolved homicides: Operation Persist, an example of victim-centred policing?¹

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Abstract

In 2015, the South Australia Police Major Crime Investigation Branch launched Operation Persist, involving renewed scrutiny of unsolved homicide cases in South Australia. An integral part of the operation is the provision of victim services to the families and friends of unsolved homicide victims through contact with specialist Victim Contact Officers and experienced detectives. As some of the unsolved homicides date back to the 1960s, some of the co-victims were not afforded the level of victim support that is expected today. The police consider Operation Persist an example of victim-centred policing.

When the police made their first communication about Operation Persist with co-victims, they completed a questionnaire. The questionnaire covered the co-victim's attitude towards the operation, whether the communication caused the co-victim to become anxious, and whether the co-victim expressed any concern. It was also used to record whether co-victims approved information about their loved ones in five strategies: a police-led media strategy; playing cards for distribution in prisons; police publications; on reward posters; and in the general media.

Depersonalised data was obtained from eight-five co-victim respondents to a questionnaire. The data was collated and analysed. This article reports on the findings, which show, among other things, that 50 of 80 co-victims were supportive of the police operation. One co-victim stated they did not want to be involved, and six others expressed concerns. Eight co-victims said the police contact about the operation stirred up or rehashed unpleasant memories, and seven co-victims expressed concern about the effects of the operation on others, such as other members of the deceased victim's family. Most co-victims were positive, and one of the common concerns was concern about the effects on other family members. Although the findings favour the police claim that the operation is victim-centred, it is yet to be discovered whether co-victims' support and positive attitudes will wane over time, especially if their expectations are not met. Despite the shortcomings in the study, the findings show the police were keen to engage co-victims, to gather their views on Operation Persist, and to obtain their cooperation for five and nine key strategies. The findings also add to understandings about co-victims need to be kept informed and desire for killers to be held accountable.

Key words

Police Homicide Victim Co-victim Grief Victim-centred policing

Police officers play a vital role in relation to victims of crime. They are often the first person with whom the victim has contact after a criminal incident. How the victim is treated then but also throughout the investigation can significantly affect how well the victim copes with the impact of the crime. It is crucial that police give victims accurate information about their rights and how to invoke their rights. It is important that victims are not misled, and their expectations unnecessarily raised. Since the 1980s, the South Australia Police has given more attention to the suffering many victims of

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crime experience. Police services to victims include an appropriate telephone response to victims when they report crimes, psychological first aid, information about victim assistance programmes, specialist victim contact officers, and follow-up procedures.

Regarding homicide, death notifications of a loved one is one of the most difficult tasks the police face. This is the first step in preparing the victim for possible investigative outcomes and case proceedings. The South Australia Police Major Crime Investigations Branch has considerable contact with immediate family and close relatives bereaved by homicide, and specialist victim contact officers, work alongside detectives to support these people throughout the investigation, even if that investigation takes many years. In 2014, these police introduced Operation Persist that focuses on solving historic 'unsolved' homicides dating back to 1960. Since then, over one hundred unsolved South Australia homicide cases have come under renewed scrutiny by experienced police investigators.

A victim-centred approach is key to Operation Persist. When establishing the operation, the police considered both how the operation might affect the next-of-kin of homicide victims and how the police should deliver information about the operation. The police were keen to protect next-of-kins' psychological safety and respect the wishes of these people in determining what actions are taken, and how. This article begins with a review of literature on the experiences of families bereaved by homicide. Next it describes the elements of Operation Persist and reports on next-of-kins' reactions to the operation. The police collected information on next-of-kins' reactions when they first met these people to explain the operation and attain their views. Among these next-of-kin were people who had faced years of anguish over the fact that their loved one was killed, and the killer got away with it. The findings show that police taking a victim-centred approach stirs positive reactions among most next-of-kin, even after the absence of police contact for many years.

Homicide defined

There are various definitions of homicide. The US National Organisation for Victim Assistance (1985) defines it as "the reckless or intentional taking of a human life by another individual". The online Britannica dictionary (2022) states, homicide is a general term that may refer to criminal and non-criminal "killing of one human being by another". Across Australia, each state and territory define homicide differently in law, and each jurisdiction also defines degree, culpability, and intent in separate ways. For national criminal statistical collection, however, by agreement among the jurisdictions, the term homicide refers to "the unlawful killing of a person; a homicide incident is an event in which one or more persons are killed in the same place and at the same time" (Bryant & Bricknell 2017, p.iv). As this article is about unsolved homicides and Operation Persist in South Australia, it is appropriate to explain how that state's law defines homicide.

Homicide covers two forms of unlawful killing: murder and manslaughter. Murder is not defined in Section 11 of the Criminal Law Consolidation Act 1935 (SA), although that section prescribes the penalty for murder is mandatory life imprisonment. The definition of murder is found in the 'common law' that South Australia inherited on colonisation by the British. Murder is the unlawful killing of a person and the killer intended to kill that person or cause him or her grievous bodily harm; or the killer was reckless as to causing death or causing grievous bodily harm. Manslaughter is the unlawful killing of a person, however, the killer neither intended to cause that person's death, did not intend to cause him or her grievous bodily harm, nor was the killer reckless as to whether death or grievous bodily harm would occur. The question whether a killer is guilty of murder or manslaughter is often left to the jury. This article is about unsolved homicides and Operation Persist, so the distinction between murder and manslaughter need not be tackled.

Victim of homicide defined

Homicide affects individuals, communities, and societies. While identifying the direct victim as the deceased might be done with relative ease; identifying who else is a victim is complex and requires an understanding of the different ways people can be affected.

There have been many explorations to determine who is the victim of crime (O'Connell 1992, 2004). The United Nations Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power (1985) defines a victim of crime as "persons who, individually or collectively, have suffered harm through ... [a] violation of criminal law"; and, where appropriate, include, "the immediate family or dependants of the direct victim" [as well as] persons who have suffered harm in intervening to assist victims or to prevent victimization". Consistent, the victimologist, Weir (1990) defined a victim as "a person who suffers some deprivation, loss, injury or stress through circumstances for which that person is not entirely responsible". Hence, in law and in victimological discourse, the bereaved, family members are also victims of homicide, and therefore have a right to be kept informed about the police investigation, and a right to know the outcome of an investigation, as well as entitled to be protected from unnecessary intrusions on their privacy. In this article, these victims will for clarity be referred to as a 'co-victim'.

On becoming a co-victim of homicide

Grief is a natural response to the death of a loved one (McKissock & McKissock 1991). The loss triggers feelings of sorrow and heartache. Grieving is the process of emotional and life adjustment that the bereaved go through.

On becoming a co-victim of homicide, people suffer an initial phase of shock and confusion, and some struggle with accepting that their loved one is dead (Victim Support 2006; Burgess 1975). Often, these co-victims encounter difficulty comprehending the homicide. Though there are common feelings, such as a deep sorrow and loss, other feelings vary from one victim to another. Many co-victims, however, experience feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, as well as a sense of turmoil. The trauma of the homicide can also affect their personal relationships, work and social life, physical and emotional well-being. Even years on, some victims still suffer the effects, for instance, high levels of distress, and unresolved grief can cause further issues (Kaltman & Bonanno, 2003; Rynearson, 1995). For example, victims with unresolved grief are at risk for developing post-traumatic stress disorder.

Co-victims of homicide also experience a "grief and loss" process like people bereaved by other means (Kaltman & Bonanno, 2003; Kilpatrick, Amick & Resnick 1990). Malone (2007, p.284) explains the 'grief experience' differs "significantly in duration, intensity, and complexity—partly due to the traumatic nature of the death and partly due to the need to suppress grief reactions in order to deal with complex practical, legal and financial matters during the months after the death."

Co-victims' experiences with the police

The transitional events model suggests that people's adjustment following an unexpected, sudden death is influenced by a cascade of stressful events that occur after the death (Felner, Terre & Rowlison 1988). This model proposes an interplay between an individual's experiences following the death (for example, financial difficulties), the individual's protective resources (for example, coping

skills (see Dussich 1988) and the interaction between these and external factors, such as dealings with the police, other facets of the criminal justice system, and the coronial system.

Co-victims of homicide find themselves involved into a daunting, unknown, legalistic world. The way the police respond is a delicate balancing act. Although it is widely accepted that they should prioritise apprehending the offender, victims frequently have broader expectations of the police. Moreover, many factors mediate or moderate victims' experiences with the police, as they do with other facets of the criminal justice system.

Some victims may also feel victimised by the police (but not necessarily the police alone). The attitude of the police, for instance, lack of compassion and victim blaming, and/or how the police notify the co-victims can amplify the distress (O'Connell & Hayes 2019; Rosenbaum 1987). Believing that the police did not give them accurate information about what happened to their loved one can also cause anger. Conversely, some co-victims find the police helpful and, at least initially, informative, and this can alleviate distress. Several studies (O'Connell & Nitschke 2000; Sprang, McNeil & Wright 1989; Magee 1983) have identified other causes of distress to victims of homicide. These include waiting for the police to apprehend the killer and the police failure to keep them informed. When a loved one's body is not found, and the killer refuses to disclose the whereabouts, co-victims' desire for revenge as well as their anger increases in intensity and the grieving process is prolonged. Victim-police relations might become difficult when the police perceive indirect victims, such as co-victims, as suspects. Although this article is about unsolved homicides and Operation Persist, it is important to acknowledge that it is not just the co-victims' experiences with the police that can be the cause of secondary victimisation. Many co-victims "leave the criminal justice system feeling marginalized and revictimized" (Englebrecht, Mason & Adams 2014, see also Reed & Blackwell 2006).

Victim-centred policing

Police services across Australia have adopted a victim-centred approach to policing. Common among these police services is a commitment to reducing re-victimisation, improving services for those in need of assistance and fostering confidence and trust. The underlying tenet of this approach is that victims need of assistance is central to policing. Key elements of victim-centred policing are compliance with human rights obligations, which includes the rights of victims of crime; respectful deliver of effective police services that are responsive to victims' needs; active referral to relevant non-police support services; provision of timely and honest information about the investigation and criminal justice process; and employment of procedures and practices to prevent secondary victimisation (Clark 2003). The implementation of victim-centred policing has required a rethinking of police organisational structures and processes, including training and education, which the South Australia Police commenced in the 1980s (O'Connell 2009).

South Australia Police and victims of crime

In 1981, the South Australia Police conceded that the old ways of dealing with victims of crime and meeting their needs was no longer justified (Murray 1982). They pointed to a willingness to change but also that their resources were inadequate to cater for all the needs of victims. The police recommended a joint approach involving other government department and community organisations, such as the Victim Support Service (which victims established in 1979). The joint approach, however, did not mitigate the police taking on a greater responsibility in providing information to victims. Illustrative, the police collaborated with the Legal Services Commission and the Victim Support Service and designed two pamphlets for operational police to give victims who

reported crimes. One pamphlet carried pre-crime, preventive information and the other outlined the options open to victims, and the services available to help them deal with the effects of crime.

In 1987, the South Australia Police were the first government department in South Australia to fully adopt the Declaration of Victims' Rights, which the Government had promulgated in 1985 (O'Connell 2009). The police established a Victims of Crime Branch to drive structural and cultural changes. By 1989, the police had within their ranks a Victim Impact Statement Co-ordinator and specialist Police Victim Contact Officers. As well, the police had introduced the practice of giving victims who reported crime an information leaflet that the Attorney-General's Department produced. The leaflet gave victims information on their rights, role and responsibilities in the criminal justice system, and information about support services. It also provided the police with a page on which to record the Crime Report Number and a police telephone number to assist a victim who invoked his or her right to information about the progress of the investigation.

For two specialist sections of the police – the Major Crime Investigations Branch and the Sexual Assault Unit – staying connected with victims and giving them support throughout the investigation had become common practice (Soloff 1988). Furthermore, training relating to victims' needs and their rights, was integrated into the cadet course, non-commissioned officers training and the Commission Officers course. The basic psychology course gave police information on how to deal respectfully with victims, how to compassionately deliver a death notification, and how to respond to the needs of victims of domestic violence and sexual violence. Other in-service courses, such as Detective Training, were revised and information on dealing with victims added.

Many of these initiatives have remained in place or been altered in ways intended to improve police responses to victims (O'Connell 2009). For example, there are more Police Contact Officers, including a dedicated officer in the Major Crime Investigations Branch, and police seeking promotion to the rank of sergeant or above must complete an Advanced Diploma in Policing, which incorporates a 15-week unit on Victimology.

South Australia Police respond to unsolved homicides

Understanding the most common expectations and needs of homicide on victims, and assessing resource availability and utilisation to address these, can assist in developing meaningful interventions to help victims better cope after a homicide has occurred (Mastrocinque, Metzger, Madeira, Lang, Pruss, Navratil, & Cerulli 2014). In 2015, the officer in charge of the South Australia Police Major Crime Investigations Branch launched a police operation focused on solving historic 'unsolved' homicides dating back to 1960. He announced a range of tactics to progress these cases.

Operation Persist tactics have included the full case reviews of unsolved murders, rewards offered in connection with those – both for a conviction, but also for the recovery of remains where a body has not been located – a strategic media campaign and the identification of new forensic opportunities. For example, during their review of unsolved homicide, the police identified 169 people previously convicted in South Australia of homicide dating back to the 1960s who were not currently recorded on the DNA database. Hence, the police commenced a programme to obtain DNA and/or fingerprints from those persons to cross-checked with evidence taken from other crime scenes, which by January 2019 resulted in the capture of material from fifty-four homicide offenders living in South Australia, and identified fifty-three offenders as living interstate, with the remaining sixty-two either dead or living overseas.

The nine strategies also included the distribution of playing cards with photographs of the deceased on them and the installation of an electronic billboard at the Adelaide Railway Station, which is a

transport and shopping hub (see Table 1). Five of these tactics directly affected co-victims, so the police consulted the Commissioner for Victims’ Rights.

To ascertain victims’ views on the operation and specific tactics, the police (with input from the Commissioner for Victims’ Rights) designed a questionnaire. The questionnaire required police to record their observations but also victims’ reactions to the operation and to ask victims which of the specific tactics that affected them, they approved.

Table 1 – Strategies integral to Operation Persist

Full case reviews of unsolved murders
Rewards offered for information leading to a conviction and/or the recovery of the deceased person’s remains.
A strategic media campaign, including a televised commercial featuring co-victims
Identification of new forensic opportunities
Packs of playing cards with each card featuring a photograph of the deceased victim and information about the reward on offer distributed to prisoners in jails
Information screens erected at correctional services premises
Electronic billboard erected at the Adelaide Railway Station, which is a central transport hub
A ‘hotline’ staffed by ‘Crime Stopper’ police
Publication of a pamphlet for co-victims and others affected by the police operation

Objective of the interviews

To find out if co-victims supported Operation Persist by examining their attitudes towards the operation, their support for or opposition to five police strategies, and their concerns about the operation, if any.

Methods for data collection

The police identified 111 unsolved cases (which relate to 124 deceased victims) for scrutiny. Of these, the police attempted to contact the next-of-kin in eighty-seven cases. The police completed a questionnaire for eight-five cases, which is 77.5% of the unsolved homicide cases associated with Operation Persist. The questionnaire was not designed for empirical, scientific research. It was expected that the questionnaire would elicit information from co-victims’ to hold the police accountable rather than to produce knowledge in the field of Victimology. Consistent with this intent, it was designed to obtain short-term answers to specific questions, such as does the co-victim support one or more of five policing strategies that are integral to Operation Persist. The results of the study of co-victims’ answers show, for instance, whether co-victims were supportive, or not, of the operation, and whether the police met their obligation to inform a co-victim about the investigation as well as to avoid unnecessary intrusion into a co-victim’s privacy.

The police completed the questionnaire at the time they contacted the next-of-kin who the police identified in the questionnaire as a ‘co-victim’. Co-victims were entitled to read the questionnaire, and at least one co-victim did so. The questionnaires were completed in the co-victim’s presence. All co-victims were familiar with the police taking notes because all had prior dealings with police, though not necessarily the same officer as that who contacted them about Operation Persist.

All police officers involved in contacting co-victims had completed victim awareness training and were encouraged by the Commissioner for Victims’ Rights to be sensitive to the particular nuances of a given case or encounter with a co-victim. They were also cognizant that their contact with co-

victims might cause distress. The police who attended were experienced, and the specialist Victim Contact Officers had additional training on 'victim awareness'. Both Victim Contact Officer and detectives had developed personal relationships with many of the co-victims. The police documented the date of the last known police contact with the co-victim or other family member.

A Police Victim Contact Officer alone contacted thirty-eight of the co-victims; and a Police Victim Contact Officer accompanied by a Detective contacted fifteen of the co-victims. A detective alone contacted twenty-six of the co-victims. No police officer was identified with the other six cases, but of these for two cases the police were unable to find a co-victim, and in two cases the co-victim requested the police have no contact. The police did contact a next-of-kin for one other case, but that person was adamant that they did not want anything to do with the operation and refused the police permission to refer to their loved one in any of the strategies.

The police completed the questionnaire at the time they contacted the next-of-kin who the police identified in the questionnaire as a 'co-victim'. To avoid unnecessary intrusion on victims' and co-victims' privacy, the questionnaires were depersonalised, so neither the victim, the co-victim nor the incident were identifiable. The data taken from the depersonalised eighty-five completed questionnaires was collated in a spreadsheet before being analysed. It was not possible to re-attribute the date to any individual case.

Co-victim information was recorded on 78 questionnaires; however, co-victims' answers were recorded on 80 questionnaires. Table 1 shows the relationship between the deceased victim and the co-victim (i.e., next-of-kin). In some cases, when the police contacted the co-victim, another family member was present. For example, a mother and brother, and a son and daughter, were present. A co-victim was not identified in three cases, but a questionnaire was completed. Hence, there is a difference of between the total number of questionnaires (n=85) and the number of entries in relation to co-victims (n=96). Notwithstanding the difference, the police recorded only one answer per contact.

Table 2 - Relationship of co-victim to deceased victim

Mother	24
Brother	16
Sister	12
Father	10
Son	7
Daughter	4
Wife	3
Ex-Partner	2
Step Grandson	1
De facto	1
Husband	1
Sister-in-law	1
Aunt	1
Nephew	1
Niece	1
Unable to locate NOK	2
No known NOK	1

Not stated	2
No contact requested	2

Of the cases where the relationship is stated, thirty of the next-of-kin were male, and forty-six were female. Seventy-one co-victims were the deceased persons' close family members.

Analysis of the co-victims' responses to the questionnaire

After the police explained the purpose of the police operation and outlined some of the strategies, the police officer contacting the co-victim recorded the co-victim's attitude towards the operation. Fifty of the eighty co-victims (i.e., 62.5 percent) were supportive or very supportive of the police operation. Twelve of these co-victims used terms such as excellent, very happy, and very good, whereas thirty-eight used terms such as happy, good, positive, and supportive (see Table 4). Three of the supportive co-victims hoped that their case coming under renewed scrutiny by experienced investigators might lead to it "finally" (as one victim said) being solved, and one co-victim, although 'happy' with the police operation, did not want further communication until the case was solved. Eleven co-victims expressed feelings that can be described as neutral or realistic. Four co-victims responded in ways that indicated mixed feelings. Only three co-victims had a negative attitude towards the police operation, and one of these was recorded as 'hostile'.

Of the victims who were supportive of Operation Persist (n=50), twenty-four were contacted by a Police Victim Contact Officer, nineteen were contacted by a detective, and seven were contacted by a detective accompanied by a Victim Contact Officer. Conversely, of the victims who expressed mixed feelings or were not supportive of the operation (n=7), a Police Victim Contact Officer contacted five of them, a detective contacted one, and a detective accompanied by a Victim Contact Officer contacted one. A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between the police officer status (i.e., a Victim Contact Officer or a detective) and whether the co-victim was supportive or not supportive of Operation Persist.

To determine whether the status of the officer contacting the co-victim affected the co-victim's support for the operation two statistical tests were used. The contingency table below (see Table 3) shows the data to calculate the chi-square statistic 0.0242, and the p-value.876347; hence, the relationship between the status of the police officer and co-victim's attitude towards the operation is not significant at $p < .05$. The same 'not significant' result was attained using the Fisher Exact Test (Fisher exact test statistic value was 1, so the result is not significant at $p < .05$). Other factors therefore likely influenced the co-victim's attitude towards the operation. These factors include their expectation that the mystery surrounding the death of a loved one might be solved, or the co-victim's perception of the integrity of the police, rather than the officer who contacted them (for example, a co-victim believed the case was unsolved because of a police cover-up) or the co-victim worried about the effects on other family members.

Table 3 – Contingency table – Status of Police Officer & Co-victim Support for Operation Persist

	Supportive	Not Supportive	Marginal Row Totals
Victim Contact Officer	24 (24.24) [0]	7 (6.76) [0.01]	31
Detective	19 (18.76) [0]	5 (5.24) [0.01]	24
Marginal Column Totals	43	12	55

One of the factors considered was the length of the period between the last contact the co-victim had with the police prior to the operation and the contact to introduce the operation. Two cases where a Police Victim Contact Officer contacted the respective co-victim and the last known date of contact prior to the operation was unknown, have starkly different co-victim's attitude. One case the co-victim was "very happy" and supported the operation, whereas another case the co-victim is hostile and did not support the operation. Regarding the latter case, the Victim Contact Officer noted that the hostile co-victim worried that the operation might reveal detail about the deceased and the circumstances of their death that were not known to at least one other family member. The data set was inadequate to do more than make this observation but given other studies have shown a correlation between victim satisfaction and victim being kept informed, this issue warrants further attention.

Although 50 (62.5%) co-victims (where an answer was recorded) did not express any concern about the police operation, eight (9.4%) co-victims told the police that being contacted about Operation Persist brought up unpleasant or unwanted memories, and seven (8.2%) expressed concern for others, primarily other family (see Table 6). One co-victim was anxious because he had previously had an undesirable experience with the police (i.e., the police used a photograph of the deceased contrary to the family's wishes) and stated he told the police he was worried this would happen again.

Table 4 – Co-victims Attitude Towards Operation Persist

Co-victim's Attitude Towards Operation Persist	VCO	Detective	Detective/VCO
Excellent	1	2	
Very happy	1	1	
Very hopeful	1	1	1
Very positive	2	1	
Very good	1		
Happy	4	2	1
Hopeful	2		1
Positive	1	6	2
Good	11	3	2
Supportive		3	
Okay/Polite			3
Reasonable			1
Wants case solved	1	1	
Realistic	3	1	1
Neutral	2		2
Reserved	1	1	
About time' - wants son's case solved	1		

Mixed feeling and did not want it brought up again	1		
Over it - gone on for too long			1
Does not want contact unless advancement		1	
Does not want to be involved	1		
Not impressed - believes there has been a police cover-up	1		
Hostile	1		
Not recorded	1	4	
Total	37	27	15

Co-victims support for five of the nine key strategies of Operation Persist

On contacting a co-victim, the police explained the operation and introduced five of the key strategies. The police officer asked each co-victim if they were agreeable to information, such as photograph of their loved one, used publicly during the operation. This included using a photograph on the playing cards for distribution in South Australia prisons. The officer recorded yes or no alongside each of the five strategies for each co-victim. Table 5 shows how many of the co-victims who wanted to be involved approved each strategy and how many did not. Of interest is the difference between the number of co-victims recorded as supportive of the police operation (i.e., n=50) and the number of co-victims who approved to be involved with the five key strategies (i.e., 77 with one exception where the number of co-victims who approved was 76). The difference might be explained because some victims expressed neutral views on the operation as a whole and some wanted the homicide solved. Another possible explanation could be that some co-victims felt compelled to support the police investigation, rather than the operation itself. The data was not adequate to explore this issue further.

Table 5 – Co-victims’ approval of Operation Persist Strategies

Co-victims Replies	Media Strategy	Playing Cards	Police Publications	Reward Posters	General Media
Approved	77	76	77	77	77
Did not approve	2	3	2	2	2
Not stated	6	6	6	6	6

The one co-victim who did not approve the printing of a photograph of their loved one on a card in a deck of playing cards for distribution in South Australia prisons, was not impressed by the renewed police attention, and suspected that corrupt police officers impeded the initial police investigation. Despite the distrust of the police, the co-victim’s desire to access the mechanisms of justice led them to support four of five of the strategies. The two co-victims who did not approve use of a photograph of their loved one in any of the five strategies and did not want further publicity about their case, also did not support any facet of the operation.

Impact on co-victims

A common measure used to assess anxiety is the Hamilton Anxiety Scale, which is often used to assess general anxiety symptoms across conditions (Baker, Simon, Keshaviah, Farabaugh, Deckersbach, Worthington, Hoge, Fava & Pollack 2019). The Spielberger State-Trait Anxiety Inventory and the VAS for Anxiety are also commonly used instruments to measure anxiety (Jaruzel, & Gregoski 2017). The police, however, did not employ any of these instruments or other sophisticated instrument to measure the impact of their communication about Operation Persist on the co-victim. Instead, the police who told the co-victim about the operation recorded what they heard and/or observed, and the record was made as a response to the question “Did the co-victim state any anxiety about the police operation?” This question differed from a question on whether the co-victim stated any worry about the operation.

The police did not develop a definition of anxiety, so the answers reflect individual officer’s concept of anxiety. The data itself shows that while some officers had some understanding of anxiety, others appear not to. Some recorded answers suggest co-victims were feeling or showing unease about something to do with Operation Persist but that something is not always identified in the data. Some recorded answers are not indicative of anxiety but rather some other matter such as an expectation the police operation will bring “a result”.

Table 6 shows fifty co-victims did not express any comment that suggested to the police officer that they were anxious. Two co-victims stated that the police contact had brought “all back again” while other co-victims expressed similar anxiousness but in different words, for instance, it “hurts still to talk about it”, the police operation “has stirred memories”, and “unpleasant memories,” said another co-victim. One co-victim said the police contact “rehashe[d] emotions”, and two co-victims who supported the operation overall stated the notification had triggered sadness. In sum, twelve co-victims’ reactions were emotional responses associated with, or characterized by, despair, grief, and sorrow, which are common reactions to the loss of a loved one to homicide (Mastrocinque et al 2014; Englebrecht et al 2014; Kilpatrick, et al 1990; Amick-McMullan et al 1989).

Eight co-victims worried about the impact the police operation would have on others who were primarily family. One of these co-victims told the police that a sibling still goes searching for their brother, which implies the sibling is unsure whether their loved one is deceased. Consistent with this notion of uncertainty, two co-victims mentioned that their loved one was believed to be missing, rather than killed, by at least one family member.

Table 6 – Effect on co-victims on being told about Operation Persist

Did the co-victim state any anxiety about the police operation?	Number
No	50
Contact brings all back again	2
Very positive	1
Sibling still goes searching for brother	1
Worried that wrong photograph would be used as happened previously	1
Police operation has stirred memories	1
Does not want family or themselves identified in any media or other	1
Some anxiety as contact with police rehashes emotions	1

Does not want publicity as that brings memories up again & people begin calling deceased's brother	1
A little anxious - talking about case made sad	1
Got upset - bringing everything up again	1
Believes victim missing, not murdered	1
A little anxious - aging and murder has taken toll	1
Happy for the police to contact them again	1
Sadness	1
Hurts still to talk about it	1
Slight apathy	1
Many people have forgotten & bringing up will hit them hard ... many did not know deceased mixed in homosexual community	1
Speaking with the police will bring back unwanted memories	1
Mother anxious as son still missing	1
Wanted to review questionnaire before approving it	1
Wants action & a result	1
Worried as brother of deceased unaware of all facts	1
Worried how might feel seeing images of deceased on TV - concerned people might start talking in ways that make feel uncomfortable	1
No, thought other family would be reluctant	1
Not really - though police contact triggered some unpleasant memories	1
Not really - though protective of family/kin	1
Not recorded	8
Grand Total	85

Co-victims' concerns about Operation Persist

As Table 7 shows, the police did not record any remark or observation in relation to a concern that the co-victim might have regarding the police operation on 62 of 85 questionnaires. Where the police had recorded a remark or observation, most co-victims (n=15) did not express any concern about the police operation. Of those who did express a concern, two did not want any further police contact unless the police had "concrete" or "real" information. Two co-victims expressed scepticism: one did not expect "anything new to come of the police operation", and the other (who worked in the department for correctional services) did not believe the strategies targeting prisoners would work. Two co-victims stated that they were concerned for others who might, for instance, become distressed by the renewed attention.

Table 7 – Co-victims' concerns about Operation Persist

Did the co-victim state any concern(s)?	
No	15
Do not expect anything new to come of the police operation	1
Want more resources dedicated to solving son's murder	1
Daughter - Prison strategies do not work (NOK employed in correctional services)	1
Does not want further contact, unless there is some concrete information.	1
Worried about what other people might say	1
Worried for elderly mother's wellbeing	1

Would like to know what happened to her daughter	1
Supportive but does not want contact unless real information	1
None recorded	62
Total	85

Discussion

Homicide is the most serious crime. It is devastating for the bereaved. The physiological, emotional, and psychological effects can persist for many years. As bereaved confront the tragedy and strive to comprehend the loss of a loved one, the police start to act. Co-victims complain that they almost immediately lose control over their loved one as the police appropriates the body for forensic examination, and the coroner determines when the body is released for funeral rituals (Casey 2011; O’Connell & Nitschke 2000). The deceased victim’s and/or the co-victim’s home might become a crime scene. As the mechanisms of the criminal justice system turn, they turn around the co-victims, leaving them with little influence on key decisions that affect them and little power.

Since the 1980s, a victim-centred approach has evolved in the South Australia Police. This approach has brought into focus the needs and rights of victims of crime, and victims’ well-being has become a priority in all matters and procedures. The police have acknowledged the importance of building rapport and trust with victims, meeting their needs, and assisting them navigate the criminal justice system. The South Australia Police Major Crime Investigations Branch, which investigates homicides, has over the past few decades, paid attention to the needs and concerns of those bereaved by homicides. A specialist Police Victim Contact Officer ensures the compassionate and sensitive delivery of police services, including keeping co-victims informed about the progress of an investigation.

Studies have shown that co-victims of unsolved homicides often believe that the police have given up the murder investigation (Stretesky, Shelley, Hogan & Unnithan 2010). The South Australia Police ‘Operation Persist’, which a majority of the 85 co-victims of the 111 unsolved homicides support, seeks to counter that belief. By explaining the operation to co-victims during the operation’s emergent stages and openly recording co-victims’ views and other, as well as, inviting them to choose which of the five strategies they were prepared to engage with, the police legitimised the operation. The data is inadequate to prove that the police approach to their interventions with co-victims mitigated some of the emotions and psychological effects that might otherwise have been stirred up in many by re-experiencing the trauma in painful recollections. It does, however, suggest this is possible when police adopt a victim-centred approach. The data shows that there was no statistically significant difference between the contact with co-victims by either a Police Victim Contact Officer or a detective. It is likely that both officers were sensitive to co-victims’ stress reactions because they were members of the Major Crime Investigations Branch that specialises in investigating homicides.

The police maintain the operation has afforded more co-victims with access to the mechanisms of justice than would have occurred if the operation were not conducted. The data analysed above shows the police have experienced success in gaining co-victims acceptance. Most co-victims appear enthusiastic about the renewed focus on the unlawful killing of their loved ones. Though some victims had serious concerns about facets of the operation – and one was openly hostile to it – co-victims mostly viewed the operation in a positive manner, thus were supportive of the operation and five key strategies. Most victims did not express any worries or concerns, though this does not mean they were anxious or not concerned.

Co-victims want to know what happened, who is responsible for the death of their loved one and ensure that person faces court. Through Operation Persist, the police offer renewed hope and for some co-victims, raised expectations. Most co-victims expect the death of their loved one to be taken seriously. At this time, it is unknown how co-victims will feel if their hope wanes and/or the expectations are dashed. Other research shows co-victims have a compulsive need for information, and this need for information can be central in the healing process (Casey 2011; Victim Support Service 2011; Stretesky et al. 2010; Rock 2000). Only two or three co-victims stated that they did not want further police communication unless the police had 'concrete' information to solve the case. The police committed to keeping those co-victims who asked, informed. As police solve more cases they will grapple with competing pressures and demands, which can mean their commitment becomes difficult to fulfil. However, the cost of ignoring these co-victims' desires to be kept informed could have wider consequences than co-victim dissatisfaction (Lafree 1998). Public attitudes to the police are affected by the perception of how well they care for victims, including co-victims of homicide. Based on anecdote from co-victims whose cases have been solved during the Police Operation Persist, keeping co-victims informed has not taken a back seat to detectives' interests in protecting the integrity of the investigation and building a strong case for the prosecution. This is an issue that requires further inquiry.

Since Operation Persist commenced in 2015, the police have made arrests in connection with six murders. Four cases are before the criminal courts, with two unlawful killings resolved, leading to the imprisonment of the killers. More than eighty prisoners have contacted police, with some agreeing to provide evidence. The operation has also received the South Australia Premier's Excellence Awards in 2019 and recognised with six Crime Stoppers awards. Crime Stoppers is a charitable, non-profit, community-based programme that operates through the cooperative efforts of the public, the media, and the police. Like Operation Persist, Crime Stoppers seeks public help to solve unsolved criminal cases. As the operation has run, the police have accomplished other things, such as additional resources and investment in forensic technology, access to prisoners, and publicity, some of which might diverge from the apparent purposes of the operation and the collective interests of those bereaved by unsolved homicides.

Conclusions

This study is based on data from a questionnaire developed by the South Australia Police Major Crime Investigations Branch. The questionnaire was used to gather data to inform the police administratively and to substantiate that the police met their crime victims' rights obligations to co-victims. The data was not collected as an empirical research project, so the rigid rules and practices that govern research were not followed.

A major focus of Operation Persist was a victim-centred approach. The data does, despite its limitations, shows the police were keen to engage co-victims, to gather their views on Operation Persist, and to obtain their cooperation for five and nine key strategies.

According to Rock (1998) researchers must examine ways to attenuate or eliminate the feeling on the part of co-victims that "nothing is being done". One of the strengths of Operation Persist is that it does this, and that most co-victims are supportive of the police efforts is at least *prima facie* favourable evidence. Central to the operation is a tailor-made intervention to communicate with co-victims, explain the operation and key strategies, and to obtain co-victims' attitudes towards the operation, to gather co-victims' concerns, as well as to gain co-victims approval for the five key strategies that affect them.

Though the results of this study suggest strong support among co-victims for the police operation, these results should be taken with caution. This study reports only on the co-victims' attitudes and concerns and so on at the time of the initial communication. It does not show how co-victims' attitudes and/or concerns have changed since that initial communication. The police case review might, for instance, lead them to suspect the co-victim is with-holding information or is the killer, so instead of keeping the co-victim informed, the police stop communicating with him or her. Alternatively, the police case review might be protracted, which might frustrate the co-victim. Or a co-victim might seek to be more actively involved in trying to solve the homicide – perhaps, as one co-victim is already doing (see <http://www.australianmissingpersonsregister.com/GailKing.htm>).

Responses to the police operation by those co-victims who were unsupportive, it is possible that perceptions of secondary victimisation undermine the legitimacy of the police. These co-victims might have had a prior negative experience in dealings with the police. There is a risk that the expectations of those co-victims who support the police operation are not met that they might be re-traumatised and/or they might believe that the police undertakings are empty pledges, which can cause distress and increase dissatisfaction (see Amick-McMullan, Kilpatrick, Veronen, and Smith 1989). On the other hand, support for the police operation fostered by the initial communication suggests that sensitive, engaging communication that involves co-victims in decision-making can foster a good relationship between co-victims and the police. It is important that the police continue to use forms of communication to reduce perceptions that police have given up, and when the police have exhausted all avenues of inquiry without a 'case clear-up', it is crucial that they are truthful and respectful when telling the co-victim. Whether the South Australia Police are able to keep the majority of co-victims on-side is a matter for future research.

This study provides an important insight into the value of a victim-centred policing operation. It is also a first step in understanding more about unsolved homicide co-victims' experiences with police. Furthermore, the study provides useful insights to inform police who are increasingly investing resources in solving unsolved crimes that they colloquially call 'cold cases'.

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