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## Trump Budget Would Shrink Crime Victims Fund by \$1.3 Billion

Cuts could strain the long-term viability of an aid program for survivors of shooting assaults and other crimes.

BY ELIZABETH VAN BROCKLIN · [@ELIZVANBROCKLIN](#) · May 31, 2017

**A** federal fund that helps crime victims pay for medical care, mental health counseling, and funeral costs would shrink by \$1.3 billion under the first full budget put forth by the Trump administration. The proposal also calls for rerouting more than \$600 million from the fund to support other fiscal priorities.

The proposed budget changes would affect the Crime Victims Fund, the main source of federal assistance for millions of victims of assault, domestic violence, sexual abuse, homicide, and other violent crimes. The fund, administered by the Justice Department, finances state-level programs that issue direct reimbursement to crime victims, and helps support organizations that provide services like counseling, crisis intervention, and emergency

shelter.

Unlike programs like Medicare, which is financed by taxpayer dollars, the Crime Victims Fund is maintained through the collection of federal criminal fines and penalties. Because those collections change from year to year, the fund's deposits fluctuate, as do the size of annual state agency grants from the fund.

The fund's balance is estimated to be \$11.8 billion at the end of fiscal year 2017, according to the Department of Justice's [budget appendix](#). This fiscal year's "cap," or ceiling on the amount of money that can be disbursed in 2017, is \$2.57 billion.

Trump's budget requests "permanently" removing \$1.3 billion from the fund altogether in 2018. It's not clear where that money would go.

The plan also calls for increasing the fund's annual disbursement cap to \$3 billion for 2018. But that figure comes with an asterisk: It includes hundreds of millions of dollars redirected to programs that haven't traditionally been supported by the Crime Victims Fund. Specifically, the plan stipulates [transferring](#) \$445 million to Violence Against Women prevention programs (which are bracing for their own [deep cuts](#) in the coming years) and \$165 million to bolster Office of Justice initiatives, including a sex offender registration and human trafficking services. All told, these budget items total \$610 million.

(The full budget appendix is located [here](#). The Crime Victims Fund section can be found on page 723.)

While these programs benefit violent-crime victims indirectly, the money to support them, in the past, has come from other streams of revenue — not from the victims fund, which was established as a separate account in 1984 under the Victims of Crime Act statute, or VOCA. Steve Derene, executive director of the National Association of VOCA Assistance Administrators, a

nonprofit that promotes services for crime victims nationally, said he is worried that the proposed repurposing of victim fund dollars could pave the way for deeper future cuts and diversions.

“I get concerned that it erodes the viability of the fund, and its long-term ability to support the basic victim programs it was intended to support,” he said.

According to Derene, the new budget lays out more than a billion dollars worth of spending on programs not authorized under the VOCA statute.

If Trump’s plan is adopted, it would not be the first time Congress has tapped the Crime Victims Fund for non-VOCA programs. Beginning in 2012, several million dollars were [diverted](#) to cover administrative and management costs for the Office of Justice Programs. As deposits accrue in the fund, “this becomes a very attractive pot of money to fund other things,” said Derene, a self-proclaimed “VOCA groupie” who has been shaping and defending crime-victim legislation since the 1970s.

The budget unveiling coincides with a recent unprecedented surge in VOCA funding. In fiscal year 2015, Congress tripled the spending cap, from \$745 million to \$2.36 billion. As a result, state agencies suddenly had the chance to fund organizations that support victims who have historically been left out, including survivors of street crime and urban violence.

Ohio, for example, funneled \$2.6 million of its VOCA assistance money to fund a statewide [trauma recovery network](#). Comprised of five hospitals and five service organizations, the network aims to address psychosocial issues that can complicate a crime victim’s recovery, including the need for safe housing, legal advocacy, mental health counseling, and basic needs like food and clothing.

In California, Los Angeles Metropolitan Churches was recently [approved](#) for VOCA funding for the first time. It’s one of the few groups working directly

with African-American survivors of violence in South Los Angeles.

There is no national documentation of how many gunshot survivors receive VOCA support, but victim advocates and administrators have leapt at the opportunity to distribute federal resources more equitably.

“Okay, there are several billion dollars on the table. Maybe this is finally the moment when we can achieve racial equity and equal access for all underserved victims, without having to take dollars away from groups that have historically been funded and also need those resources,” said Shari Silberstein, executive director of Equal Justice USA, a national justice-reform organization that has been helping groups like Los Angeles Metropolitan Churches access VOCA grants.

These programs are not in peril — at least not immediately, as states have four years to spend each new victim-assistance grant. But the \$1.3 billion cut, coupled with the diversion of funds to other programs, signals a shift away from the original purpose of the Crime Victims Fund, according to Derene.

“It’s the longer-term policy implications that are worrisome,” he said.



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