

Identifying and Incorporating Core Principles of Victim-Centered and Trauma-Informed Response

Practices for Law Enforcement



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Practices for Law Enforcement

Introduction

Law enforcement personnel, both sworn and professional, respond regularly to individuals who experience traumatic events. This experience positions them to support and treat victims and co-victims with empathy; provide critical information, resources, and support; and empower them and involve them in decision-making. Victim-centered, trauma-informed approaches are vital to victims' short-term safety and long-term stability. These approaches give law enforcement the necessary tools to prioritize victim's needs, rights, and well-being. Culturally responsive practices are critical for building trust, promoting effective communication, and fostering positive relationships between law enforcement and the public. By implementing victim-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive practices, law enforcement can contribute to safer communities.

This publication, *Identifying and Incorporating Core Principles of Victim-Centered and Trauma-Informed Response: Practices for Law Enforcement*, provides a streamlined set of emerging practices from the field for first responders, investigators, evidence collection teams, supervisors, and agencies related to victim response efforts.

Terms to know

- **Victim.** An individual who is an independent participant in a criminal case under federal or state victims' rights laws.¹
- **Co-victim.** An individual who has lost a loved one to homicide, such as a family member, other relative, or friend of the decedent.²
- **Victim-centered approach.** An approach that puts the victims' priorities, needs, and interests at the center of all work with the victim including assisting in making informed decisions, placing a priority on restoring victims' feelings of safety and security, and safeguarding against policies and practices that may inadvertently retraumatize victims.³
- **Trauma-informed approach.** An approach that is delivered with an understanding of the vulnerabilities and experiences of trauma survivors, including the prevalence and physical, social, and emotional impact of trauma; recognizes signs of trauma in victims, personnel, and others; and responds by integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, practices, and settings.⁴
- **Culturally responsive approach.** An approach involving understanding, learning from, and interacting effectively with people of diverse cultures, including drawing on culturally based values, traditions, spiritual beliefs, customs, languages, and behaviors to plan, implement, and evaluate programs and services. Related terms are cultural accountability, cultural competency, or cultural humility.⁵ Culturally responsive practices for law enforcement involve a commitment to understanding, respecting, and effectively engaging with the diverse communities they serve.

1. IACP (International Association of Chiefs of Police), *Law Enforcement–Based Victim Services* (Alexandria, VA: IACP, 2023), <https://www.theiacp.org/projects/law-enforcement-based-victim-services-lev>.

2. IACP, *Law Enforcement–Based Victim Services* (see note 1).

3. OVC (Office for Victims of Crime), *Achieving Excellence: Model Standards for Serving Victims & Survivors of Crime* (Washington, DC: OVC, 2020), <https://ovc.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh226/files/model-standards/6/index.html>.

4. OVC, *Achieving Excellence* (see note 3).

5. Center for Court Innovation, Casa de Esperanza, and the Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence, "Cultural Responsiveness & the Courts," in *Building a Culture of Justice: How Courts Are Improving Access and Understanding in Domestic Violence Cases—Viewers' Guide* (New York: Center for Court Innovation, 2016), <https://www.innovatingjustice.org/publications/building-culture-justice-how-courts-are-improving-access-and-understanding-domestic>; Marie-Elena Reyes and Ann Curry-Stevens, *Protocol for Culturally Responsive Organizations: Literature Review and Standards for Performance* (Portland, OR: Center to Advance Racial Equity, Portland State University 2014), <https://www.coalitioncommunitiescolor.org/research-and-publications/protocolfororgs>; Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) Training and Technical Assistance Center, "American Indian and Alaska Native Populations," web module, 45 min., in *Specific Considerations for Providing Victim Services* online training, https://www.ovcttac.gov/views/TrainingMaterials/dsponline_vatonline.cfm?nm=wbt&ns=ot&nt=vat&rec=cd&nf=specificconsiderations.

Practices for First Responders

Law enforcement personnel typically provide support as the first response to acute or immediate crises. They are essential in building trust, helping victims feel safe, allowing them to express their thoughts and emotions, and informing them of what to expect and important next steps.⁶ The following victim-centered, trauma-informed, culturally responsive practices can help law enforcement to support victims:

1. Initial response

- Inform victims and co-victims—or, when appropriate, their guardians—of their rights orally and through written material.⁷ Ensure language barriers or accessibility needs do not impede interactions.
- Ensure victims and co-victims receive appropriate medical attention or referrals to resources for acute and emerging needs. Review options for medical forensic examinations, including information on where to obtain the examinations and the availability of crime victim compensation funding.⁸

- Be aware of how cultural identities (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, immigration status) may influence a victim or co-victim’s trauma response.

2. Investigation

- Avoid conducting comprehensive interviews immediately following the initial report to law enforcement unless public safety concerns make it necessary.
- Recognize that the experiences, responses, and needs of victims and co-victims may be impacted by a variety of factors, including identifying as a member of one or more cultural, ethnic, or historically marginalized communities.
- Whenever possible, conduct interviews in a private and safe location. Minimize external distractions and provide information about support services.
- Ask open-ended questions that encourage victims and co-victims to convey their experiences. Reassure victims and co-victims that it is common to recall new or additional information at a later time.

6. T. Woods, *First Response to Victims of Crime* (Washington, DC: Office for Victims of Crime, 2010), <https://ovc.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh226/files/media/document/2010firstresponseguidebook.pdf>.

7. DOJ (U.S. Department of Justice), “Victims’ Rights,” last modified August 22, 2023, <https://www.justice.gov/atr/victims-rights>; Woods, *First Response* (see note 6).

8. DOJ, “Victims’ Rights” (see note 7).

3. Communication

- Tailor communication to the needs of victims and co-victims. This may include using their preferred pronouns and names, providing translated written materials, and using objective interpreters to ensure language access needs.
- Avoid statements that minimize the trauma of victims and co-victims or compare their experiences to your own or others’.
- Provide victims and co-victims with information to make informed decisions about their case.
- Establish direct and continuing communication between first responders and victim advocates.
- Conduct death and trauma notifications in person and, if possible, with the support of victim advocates.⁹

4. Training

- Training topics may include the following:
 - Recognizing the signs of trauma
 - Effective communication and investigative strategies

- Assessing the safety of victims and co-victims and referring them to appropriate resources
- Supporting victims and co-victims in developing safety plans when needed¹⁰
- Death and trauma notifications
- Strategies to recognize and address biases

5. Collaboration and partnerships

- Familiarize yourself with information and resources to provide effective referrals to community-based organizations or other available systems-based assistance.
- Establish relationships with the community to better understand their needs and concerns. By engaging with community members and listening to their feedback, law enforcement can tailor their response to address local issues effectively.

6. Policies and protocols

- Offer feedback to agency policy and protocols based on experience and engagement with victims.

9. SAKI (Sexual Assault Kit Initiative), *Communicating with Individuals Impacted by Cold Case Violent Crimes: Strategies for Ongoing Engagement* (Raleigh, NC: RTI International, 2022), <https://sakitta.org/ovccc/docs/14668SAKIOVCCCbriefCommunicationWithThoseImpacted.pdf>.

10. HRW (Human Rights Watch), *Improving Police Response to Sexual Assault* (New York: HRW, 2013), https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/improvingSAInvest_0.pdf.

Practices for Evidence Collection Teams

Integrating victim-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive practices into evidence collection procedures can create an environment that respects and demonstrates empathy for individuals who have experienced trauma. These practices can contribute to victims' and co-victims' well-being while enhancing the quality and reliability of evidence collection efforts.

1. Initial response

- Respect victims' and co-victims' decisions related to evidence collection. Discuss the investigative usefulness of the evidence at the time of collection, considering when the crime occurred.¹¹
- Consider the effects of collecting items that may be emotionally significant or have replacement costs.

2. Investigation

- Build trust and rapport with victims and co-victims by adequately protecting and processing crime scenes and evidence.
- Respect victims' and co-victims' cultural or spiritual beliefs that might impact evidence collection. If cultural or spiritual beliefs cannot be honored because of investigative priorities (e.g., autopsy practices in homicide investigations), victims and co-victims should be provided with information explaining why not.
- Make every effort to return property in the time frames promised to victims and co-victims.¹² Whenever possible, return property in neutral packaging (e.g., remove tags or labels) and free from biohazard substances (e.g., blood).
- Create a safe and supportive environment for evidence collection and adapt procedures as needed while ensuring the integrity of the collection process. Clearly explain the purpose, methods, and potential outcomes of the procedures and any potential discomfort victims and co-victims may experience.

11. SAKI (Sexual Assault Kit Initiative), *Considerations for Optimal Timeframes for DNA Forensic Evidence Collection from Sexual Assault Cases: A SAKI Recommendation* (Raleigh, NC: RTI International, 2021), <https://sakitta.org/effective-practices/docs/Considerations-for-Optimal-Timeframes-for-DNA-Forensic-Evidence.pdf>.

12. SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration), *SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach* (Rockville, MD: SAMHSA, 2014), <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/SAMHSA-s-Concept-of-Trauma-and-Guidance-for-a-Trauma-Informed-Approach/SMA14-4884>; DOJ, "Victims' Rights" (see note 7).

3. Communication

- Explain the evidence collection process clearly, providing information about victims' and co-victims' rights and options. Allow them to make informed decisions about their involvement.
- Share how case status (e.g., active, inactive, closed, cases pending appeal) impacts return and retention policies.
- Provide realistic timelines for when items collected as evidence (e.g., clothing, cell phones) may be returned and how the return process works, including the return or destruction of personal property.
- If victims' and co-victims' preferences on evidence collection cannot be honored, explain why.

4. Training

- Include investigative support staff (e.g., crime scene specialists, property and evidence technicians, public records personnel) in victim-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive evidence collection training.

- Train personnel in a range of options for incorporating victims' and co-victims' input into decisions regarding evidence, property, and release of police reports.
- Provide training and information on the impact of vicarious trauma.

5. Collaboration and partnerships

- Make every effort to have victim advocates present during evidence collection and other interactions that may be especially difficult for victims and co-victims (e.g., violent crime scene processing, child death investigations, gunshot residue testing, forensic examinations that include photography of bodily injuries).
- When possible, incorporate victim advocates during property return processes to ensure appropriate support is available.

6. Policies and protocols

- Establish policies on returning personal property to victims and co-victims.¹³
- Establish policies specifying circumstances under which law enforcement may obtain photographs of victims and co-victims without the support of forensic examiners or trained crime scene specialists.

13. J. Jordan, "Beyond Belief? Police, Rape and Women's Credibility," *Criminal Justice* 4, no. 1 (2004), 29–59, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1466802504042222>.

Practices for Investigators

Victim-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive approaches should be integrated throughout all investigative stages. Research suggests that how law enforcement personnel engage with victims and co-victims during interviews can be important in determining investigation outcomes.¹⁴

1. Initial Response

- In acute cases and when there are no public safety concerns, attend to victims' and co-victims' immediate needs, including their physical, psychological, and personal needs (e.g., work, pets, children) before engaging in detailed interviewing or investigative activities.¹⁵
- Consider cultural differences, including nonverbal cues, personal space preferences, and other unique norms, as they may vary across cultures.

2. Investigation

- Ask victims and co-victims for input when scheduling interviews; choose locations that feel comfortable and safe.
- When appropriate, provide interpreters, victim advocates, or support persons during interviews.
- Use interview approaches and open-ended questions that allow victims and co-victims to discuss incidents at their own pace while supporting them through retrieval of their memories of events. Periodically remind victims and co-victims that they can ask for a break during interviews and stop at any time.

3. Communication

- Provide information and case updates regularly, even if the only updates available are that no progress has been made.¹⁶
- Provide culturally appropriate resources. This may include victim services and other support networks sensitive to the victims' and co-victims' cultural backgrounds.

14. J. Archambault and K.A. Lonsway, *Clearance Methods for Sexual Assault Cases*, rev. ed. (Colville, WA: End Violence Against Women International, 2021), https://evawintl.org/wp-content/uploads/Module-13_Clearance-Methods-Module.pdf; B. Milne, G. Shaw, and R. Bull, "Investigative Interviewing: The Role of Research," *Applying Psychology to Criminal Justice*, ed. D. Carson et al. (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2007), 65–80.

15. K. Rich, "Trauma-Informed Police Responses to Rape Victims," *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 28, no. 4 (2019), 463–480, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926771.2018.1540448>.

16. HRW, *Improving Police Response to Sexual Assault* (see note 10).

4. Training

- Provide training and information to personnel on using trauma-informed, victim-centered, and culturally responsive interview strategies.
- Implement training to address various types of victimization (e.g., intimate partner violence, physical assault, fraud, burglary, theft, elder and vulnerable adult abuse, child abuse).
- Emphasize the importance of not blaming or appearing to blame victims and co-victims for case investigation limitations, whether in verbal interactions or written documentation.
- Address the unique experiences and challenges underserved populations face and strategies to help bridge the knowledge gap to create increased awareness and understanding, fostering more effective communication and collaboration.

5. Collaboration and partnerships

- Collaborate early and often with victim advocates to identify and address victims' and co-victims' needs. Ensure resources and referrals are available and connections with victim advocates are made as soon as possible.

- Involve victim advocates regardless of whether victims and co-victims decide to engage in investigative processes. Victim advocates can help address victims' and co-victims' needs that are beyond the scope of the investigator's role.
- When multiple agencies are involved in the investigative process, such as in mass casualty events, coordinate to pre-establish interview and investigative protocols to minimize the impact on victims and co-victims.

6. Policies and protocols

- Consider the role victim advocates can play in agencies' established policies and practices for follow-up investigative activities such as controlled communications.
- Policies should address how to provide victims with the details needed to make an informed decision about participating in follow-up activities and any implications their decision may have.
- When suspending or closing cases, policies should establish communication expectations for informing victims of the following steps, regardless of the outcome. These steps may include providing supportive hand-offs to other justice system partners (e.g., prosecution) and community-based partners.

Practices for Supervisors

Supervisors are responsible for maintaining agency standards for victim response efforts. Supervisors are critical in providing accountability and mentoring personnel to use victim-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive practices consistently.

1. Initial response

- Ensure that personnel screen for and document signs of trauma.
- Conduct audits to ensure the initial response and case report align with emerging practices, including providing information to victims and co-victims about their rights, compensation, and available resources.

2. Investigation

- Review reports, case files, and—when available—body-worn camera footage to ensure investigative practices are followed, including evidence collection procedures. Offer victims and co-victims meaningful engagement and collaborative decision-making where possible and appropriate.
- Regularly assess investigative practices based on feedback from officers, victims and co-victims, and community agencies.

3. Communication

- Make every effort to ensure that personnel include victims and co-victims in decisions that directly affect their safety, well-being, and engagement with justice system processes and personnel.
- Conduct discussions of agency responses to incidents, spotlighting actions that align with victim-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive practices and lessons learned. Provide opportunities for personnel to engage in conversation and provide feedback.
- When appropriate, facilitate communication with personnel to discuss vicarious trauma, their experiences, and available agency resources for mental health and wellness.

4. Training

- Incorporate scenario-based training exercises to allow officers and investigators to practice trauma-informed, victim-centered, and culturally responsive approaches while providing feedback on their interactions.
- Provide training on vicarious trauma and its potential impact on the well-being of officers.

5. Collaboration and partnerships

- Strengthen partnerships with community organizations and victim service providers to ensure seamless coordination and provision of support services to victims and co-victims.
- Collaborate with organizations that serve communities of color; individuals with disabilities; Deaf or hard of hearing individuals; older adults; those with limited English proficiency; and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) communities.

6. Policies and protocols

- Incorporate behavioral expectations for victim interactions into performance review practices for all personnel.
- Highlight examples of effective victim-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive practice in agency newsletters, roll-call briefings, personnel meetings, and recognition ceremonies.
- Provide opportunities for personnel to discuss difficult experiences in their work with peers or supervisors.
- Set expectations and offer options for staff wellness support that enhance their ability to provide optimal victim-centered, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed services.

Practices for Agencies

Seek opportunities to integrate victim-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive approaches agency-wide. As a vital part of this integration, it is important to set clear expectations for sworn and professional personnel when engaging with victims and co-victims. Training should be provided to all personnel, while agency leadership should uphold these strategies, leading by example.

1. Initial response

- Ensure the initial response prioritizes victims' and co-victims' needs, rights, and well-being.
- Encourage and support community engagement between law enforcement and their community members. This allows opportunities to listen to the concerns of the community and implement tailored strategies that reflect community-specific needs.

2. Investigation

- Establish mechanisms for ongoing evaluation of investigative practices and identify strengths and areas for improvement in law enforcement response to victims.

3. Communication

- Create and disseminate agency-wide communications that convey the importance of and leadership commitment to victim-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive practices.

4. Training

- Provide personnel with ongoing training and education opportunities to reinforce victim-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive practices, keeping them aware of emerging research, best practices, and evolving policies.
- Train and provide guidance and oversight to personnel on incorporating victim-centered and trauma-informed responses into their assigned responsibilities involving interactions with victims and co-victims.
- Encourage personnel to engage in ongoing training addressing culturally responsive approaches, including how the influence of culture, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation impact trauma experiences and responses.

5. Collaboration and partnerships

- Encourage personnel to participate in multidisciplinary teams related to their responsibilities (e.g., child abuse, intimate partner violence) and promote victim-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive practices during team interactions.
- Develop formal roles, responsibilities, and agreements (e.g., memoranda of understanding) to ensure both system- and community-based victim advocates can support victims.

6. Policies and protocols

- Establish agency expectations and standards for developing law enforcement–based victim advocacy programs and integrating victim advocates throughout investigative processes.
- Develop or update policies and protocols to support victim-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive agency-wide practices.

- When possible, incorporate law enforcement–based victim advocates into agency planning and policy development, including large-scale emergency response plans.
- Develop policies to support personnel impacted by vicarious trauma.
- Consider assigning officers or creating roles for cultural liaisons who can bridge the gap between law enforcement and specific cultural or ethnic communities.
- Engage in positive interactions with the community, such as community events, mentoring programs, and outreach initiatives.
- Establish channels for community feedback on law enforcement interactions in support of identifying strengths and areas for improvement in community-police engagement.

About the IACP

The **International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP)** is the world's largest and most influential professional association for police leaders. With more than 30,000 members in more than 165 countries, the IACP is a recognized leader in global policing. Since 1893, the association has been speaking out on behalf of law enforcement and advancing leadership and professionalism in policing worldwide.

The IACP is known for its commitment to shaping the future of the police profession. Through timely research, programming, and unparalleled training opportunities, the IACP is preparing current and emerging police leaders—and the agencies and communities they serve—to succeed in addressing the most pressing issues, threats, and challenges of the day.

The IACP is a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) organization headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia. The IACP is the publisher of *The Police Chief* magazine, the leading periodical for law enforcement executives, and the host of the IACP Annual Conference, the largest police educational and technology exposition in the world. IACP membership is open to law enforcement professionals of all ranks, as well as non-sworn leaders across the criminal justice system. Learn more about the IACP at www.theIACP.org.

About the COPS Office

The **Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office)** is the component of the U.S. Department of Justice responsible for advancing the practice of community policing by the nation's state, local, territorial, and tribal law enforcement agencies through information and grant resources.

Community policing begins with a commitment to building trust and mutual respect between police and communities. It supports public safety by encouraging all stakeholders to work together to address our nation's crime challenges. When police and communities collaborate, they more effectively address underlying issues, change negative behavioral patterns, and allocate resources.

Rather than simply responding to crime, community policing focuses on preventing it through strategic problem-solving approaches based on collaboration. The COPS Office awards grants to hire community policing officers and support the development and testing of innovative policing strategies. COPS Office funding also provides training and technical assistance to community members and local government leaders, as well as all levels of law enforcement.

Since 1994, the COPS Office has been appropriated more than \$20 billion to provide training and technical assistance, enhance crime fighting technology, and add more than 136,000 officers to our nation's streets. COPS Office information resources, covering a wide range of community policing topics such as school and campus safety, violent crime, and officer safety and wellness, can be downloaded via the COPS Office's home page, <https://cops.usdoj.gov>.

Law enforcement personnel must be prepared to respond appropriately and supportively to persons who have experienced trauma. Victim-centered, trauma-informed approaches give law enforcement the necessary tools to provide this support. This publication, *Identifying and Incorporating Core Principles of Victim-Centered and Trauma-Informed Response: Practices for Law Enforcement*, provides a streamlined set of best practices from the field for first responders, evidence collection teams, investigators, supervisors, and agencies related to victim response efforts.



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