

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder following Murders and Drunk Driving Crashes

Of the approximately 176.3 million adults over the age of 18 in the United States, it is estimated that approximately 5 million have experienced the loss of a family member to either a criminal homicide or alcohol-related vehicular homicide.

Many of these survivors are suffering serious emotional problems, and available literature suggests that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) may be one of the major problems.

At the Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Medical University of South Carolina, our research team focused on determining how many adults in the U.S. have lost a family member to these homicides, and of these, how many family survivors are suffering from PTSD. The study was funded by the National Institute of Justice.

In Stage One of the study, we screened 12,500 members of the U.S. adult population. In Stage Two, 500 interviews were conducted with family survivors. Data from 214 of those survivors provided the basis for the study.

All subjects met the first criterion for PTSD, which is exposure to a traumatic event outside the range of normal human experience which would be expected to cause stress. To be classified as having PTSD, subjects had to have experienced either flashbacks, distressing dreams, or recurrent distressing recollections of the event. Also, at least three of the following symptoms had to be present: efforts to avoid thoughts or feelings associated with the event, efforts to avoid activities or situations that aroused memories of the event, marked decrease in interest in significant activities, feeling of detachment from others, and restricted range of affect. Two of the following also had to be present: sleep disturbance, irritability, difficulty concentrating, hyper-vigilance, startle response, and physiologic symptoms of anxiety when exposed to reminders of the event.

related vehicular homicides were strikingly similar, both in terms of their emotional reaction to the homicide and in their attitudes about the

The proportion of family members who developed homicide-related PTSD is substantial. The data suggests that 23.4% of family survivors developed homicide-related post-traumatic stress disorder, and 5.1% of the survivors had experienced PTSD symptoms during the six weeks before the assessment. We estimate that 1.2 million adults developed PTSD after the homicide of their family member and that about 165,000 have current symptoms of PTSD.

The study also focused on homicide survivors' reports on the legal disposition of cases, and their attitudes about various aspects of treatment by the criminal justice system. Subjects were asked to make recommendations for improving the legal system's handling of criminal and vehicular homicide cases.

Regarding the legal disposition of cases, 60.9% of criminal homicide and only 39.5% of alcohol-related homicide survivors reported that they knew an arrest was made in the case. Of cases where there was a known arrest, 80% of the criminal and 55.6% of the alcohol-related homicide cases reportedly went to trial. Guilty verdicts were reported in more than 70% of the cases in both groups. However, only 30.4% of the criminal homicide and 40% of the alcohol-related homicide survivors thought the verdict was fair. Only 19.6% of the criminal homicide and 30% of the alcohol-related homicide survivors thought the sentencing was fair.

Seventy four percent of the sample indicated that psychological or emotional counseling should be provided by the criminal justice system, but only 17% reported receiving adequate access to those services. More than 80% indicated that information about the status of the case, personal protection, legal assistance, social service referrals, and advocacy in dealing with the courts of police should be provided by the legal system. Both the criminal and alcohol-related vehicular homicide groups requested harsher penalties for all crimes.

The study concluded that the family survivors of criminal homicides and alcohol-criminal justice system. Researchers believe that their study confirms the need for specialized mental health services for family members.