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## Victim Advocates' Experiences of Challenges and Opportunities in Supporting Children of Homicide Victims

Ed Rahkeem Simmons  
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# Walden University

College of Health Sciences and Public Policy

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Ed R. Simmons

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Walden University  
2023

Abstract

Victim Advocates' Experiences of Challenges and Opportunities in Supporting Children  
of Homicide Victims

by

Ed R. Simmons

MPA, Walden University, 2019

BA, South Carolina State University, 2016

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy and Administration

Walden University

August 2023

## Abstract

Homicide is a preventable public health issue that has detrimental effects for victims, witnesses, and the broader society. Although a number of studies have substantiated the adverse effects on children when a parent dies by homicide, few studies have addressed how critical the support of victim advocates is in minimizing the adverse effects. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine victim advocate professionals' experiences of challenges and opportunities in delivering services to children of homicide victims. Policy feedback theory was the theoretical framework for the study. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 10 victim advocate professionals who were members of the South Carolina Law Enforcement Victim Advocate Association, which provides services to parentally bereaved children of homicide victims. The participants' experiences of challenges varied, including experiencing vicarious trauma and burnout due to the indirect exposure to trauma, feeling prepared but not ready when first encountering a youth, and having to establish trust to effectively deliver services. Opportunities also varied among the participants, such as several training opportunities through the South Carolina Law Enforcement Victim Advocate Association and expressions of appreciation from victims. Knowledge of the challenges and opportunities experienced by victim advocate professionals may inform policy and service provisions toward those most in need of preventive interventions and resources. Such efforts are pivotal for positive social change given the potential for unaddressed grief and trauma to affect the developmental trajectory of youth.

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## Dedication

This dissertation study is dedicated to my mother, the late Tara P. Simmons. She was the motivation behind my research topic and instilled in me the importance of education. I also dedicate this dissertation to my family; they have motivated and inspired me throughout this journey. Above all, much appreciation and praise are given to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for guidance, provision, wisdom, and the will to see things through this season of my life.

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I want to thank my sisters for always cheering for and believing in me. My prayer for all of you is that you continue to chase your dreams and never allow any obstacle to deter you because if I can do it, you can too. I would also like to thank my fiancée for her undying love, support, and prayers throughout this challenging but rewarding process. Lastly, I would like to thank all the victim advocates who participated in this study and who provide services throughout South Carolina.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Over 500,000 Americans have been killed with firearms in the past 2 decades, whether through homicide, suicide, or other circumstances (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2018). According to the CDC (2018), 1 in 14 children in the United States will lose a parent to homicide by 18. Homicide is a preventable public health problem that has negative effects for both victims and witnesses, most especially children directly affected by the death of a parent, and society more broadly (e.g., higher health care costs). Although many studies have provided evidence of the adverse effects on children directly impacted when a parent dies by homicide, few have addressed how critical support for child victims is in minimizing the adverse effects.

Although several researchers have focused on victim service compensation and adult victim service programs, few have examined child victim services from the perspective of the victim advocate (Globokar & Erez, 2019). Little is known about the challenges and barriers facing victim advocate professionals as they provide services to children who have lost a parent to homicide. Likewise, researchers have not examined how victim advocates perceive the opportunities in providing services to children to minimize the long-term implications of adverse childhood experiences, which is why previous researchers have only focused on the provision of services for adult crime victims and not children, based on my review of the literature.

This study is potentially significant because it addresses a gap in the literature on the identified social issue. The findings also substantiate the need for state officials to investigate the challenges and opportunities faced by victim advocate professionals in

providing services to the children of homicide victims. The findings may also raise awareness of this need among state, national policy makers, and field practitioners. The research background, problem statement, purpose, research question, theoretical framework, nature, study definitions, limitations, and significance are described in Chapter 1. In the chapter, I provide insight into why it was necessary to explore victim advocates' perceptions of challenges and opportunities related to the provision of support to children who have lost their parent(s) to homicide.

### **Background**

The death of a parent is consistently ranked as one of the most distressing life events a child or youth can endure. Many children worldwide, approximately 1 in 14, or 5.3 million, have experienced the death of one or both parents before age 18 due to various reasons (CDC, 2018). This number more than doubles to 13.3 million by age 25, CDC data show. According to the CDC, homicide is ranked as the third leading cause of parental death for individuals aged 0–25 at 11.7%. Scholars have also noted that the exposure to parental death increases the risk of depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) during the 1st year and persists into the 2nd year after the death (Melhem et al., 2011).

As scholars have noted, even nearly 2 years after their parent's death, bereaved youth have shown higher rates of depression, alcohol or substance abuse, more significant functional impairment, and higher self-rated anxiety (Hamdan et al., 2013). Furthermore, parental loss has been linked to social disengagement, academic problems, and increased stress in young people (Kailaheimo-Lönnqvist & Erola, 2020). According

to researchers, each child who suffers loss has distinct challenges to deal with inside their grieving, depending on the type of parental death experienced. Martin (2019) noted that sudden deaths are grieved differently than expected deaths. Often during the grief process, researchers have noted that parentally bereaved youth whose parents died by homicide have unique factors they must face, in addition to the already harrowing experience of grief, including an increased risk of trauma, unnecessary sensations of guilt, misinformation, lack of social support, and insufficient access to services (Burns et al., 2020).

Youth from rural communities frequently face additional pressures after parental loss due to a lack of access to crime victim services. Despite national attempts to eliminate such health inequities, rural areas have fewer resources to give to covictims of homicide than metropolitan hot zones of homicide (Office of Victims of Crimes, n.d.). This lack of resources has created significant barriers for victim advocates and parentally bereaved youth. For instance, victims of violent crime in remote areas often have nowhere to turn for practical aid and social support, leaving them alone to cope with unimaginable pain and complex grief, a demanding and merciless undertaking (Formica et al., 2019). Janoff-Bullman (1995) emphasized how death by homicide differs from other unexpected fatalities, leaving survivors with severe challenges. This finding is crucial because researchers have observed that the terror of a murder and the indignation over the intentionality of a loved one's homicide generates helplessness and traumatic grief among the many covictims, particularly parentally bereaved youth (Vaskinn et al., 2021).



### **Problem Statement**

Homicide is a preventable public health issue that has detrimental effects on both victims and witnesses, increases health care costs, and has significant adverse effects on children directly impacted when a parent dies. While a number of studies provide evidence on the adverse effects on children directly impacted when a parent dies by homicide, few studies have addressed how critical child victims' support is in minimizing the adverse effects. For example, data suggest that 1 in 14 children in the United States will experience the death of a parent from homicide by the age of 18; and in the state of South Carolina, the ratio is 1 in 11 (CDC, 2021).

Although several researchers have focused on victim service compensation and adult victim service programs, few have examined child victim services from the perspective of the victim advocate. Little is known about the challenges and barriers faced by victim advocate professionals as they provide services to children who have lost a parent to homicide. Likewise, researchers have not examined how victim advocates perceive the opportunities in providing services to children to minimize the long-term implications of adverse childhood experiences, which is why previous research has concentrated solely on the provision of services for adult crime victims and not children.

### **Purpose of the Study**

In this qualitative study, I examined the challenges and opportunities perceived by victim advocate professionals in delivering services to children of homicide victims. Prior researchers primarily focused on service compensation and adult victim service programs. To address this gap in the literature, I examined child victim services from the

perspective of victim advocates. Until now, little has been known about the challenges and barriers facing victim advocate professionals as they provide services to children who have lost a parent to homicide. Given the potential for unaddressed grief and trauma to impact the developmental trajectory of youth (Kailaheimo-Lönnqvist & Erola, 2020), understanding the challenges and opportunities among victim advocate professionals is important. This knowledge may import policy and service provisions toward those most in need of preventive interventions and resources.

### **Research Question**

What challenges and opportunities do victim advocates perceive in providing support to children who have experienced the loss of a parent to homicide?

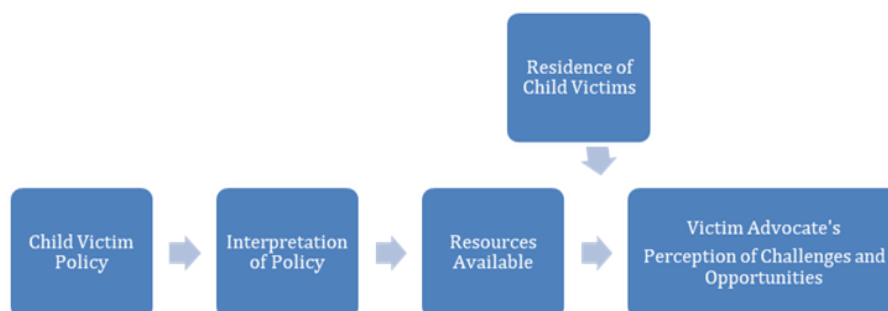
### **Theoretical Framework**

Policy feedback theory focuses on understanding public policy's "feedback effects." Since the early 1980s, policy studies scholars in the political science literature have garnered recognition for this concept. The approach has proven helpful in identifying policy feedback effects in a wide range of fields, including Social Security (Béland, 2010; Campbell, 2002), the G.I. Bill of Rights (Mettler, 2018), welfare reform (Soss & Schram, 2007), criminal justice (Soss et al., 2011), agriculture (Daugbjerg, 2009), and performance management in public administration (Wichowsky & Moynihan, 2008). Mettler and SoRelle (2018) stated there are four significant lines of inquiry in the policy feedback literature: how policies shape the meaning of citizenship, influence the form of governance, affect the power of groups, and influence political agendas and policy problem definitions.

Mettler and SoRelle's (2018) policy feedback theory provided a logical framework for this study. My research problem suggests that when a policy is established, and resources are allocated to programs, the policy implementation helps structure current activity and offers advantages to certain groups more than others. It was interesting to examine how child victim advocates' interpretation of advocacy policies influenced how they perceived the challenges and opportunities of providing support. A thorough explanation of the theoretical foundation is provided in Chapter 2. Figure 1 depicts the theorized relationships that influence victim advocates' perceptions of challenges and opportunities. The concept map depicts the overall trajectory of the study, illustrating how the interpretation of the policies regulating advocacy by child victim advocates influences how they perceive the challenges and opportunities associated with providing support.

**Figure 1**

*Factors That Influence Victim Advocates' Perceptions of Challenges and Opportunities*



### **Nature of the Study**

I conducted this generic qualitative research in the state of South Carolina due to the substantial number of youth who have lost their parents to homicide. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2021) and CDC (2018), 1 in 11 children in the state will experience the death of a parent from homicide by the age of 18, a higher number than shown by national data. In 2018, the state ranked 9th out of the top 10 states for the highest parental deaths (CDC, 2018). According to the CDC, homicide was the third leading cause of parental death in South Carolina for individuals aged 0-25 at 11.7%, followed by suicide at 9.5%. Data for this study were acquired through interviews with the approval of victim advocate director of the local law enforcement agency. I conducted interviews with 10 program administrators. This study aimed to examine the challenges and opportunities among victim advocate professionals in delivering services to children of homicide victims.

## Definitions

*Bereavement:* The experience of the death of a loved one (Shear, 2015a).

*Burnout:* The effects of high stress leading to exhaustion and tiredness for those in the helping professions (Helpingstine et al., 2021).

*Crime victim professionals:* Individuals with specific training to give emotional support and services to people who have experienced direct or indirect physical, mental, or financial harm due to the commission of a crime (Office of Justice Programs, Office for Victims of Crime, n.d.).

*Complicated grief:* A heightened mourning reaction marked by severe symptom intensity, protracted symptom duration, and significant impairment in daily activities (Jeffreys, 2005; Meyer-Lee et al., 2020).

*Grief:* The experience of psychological, behavioral, social, and bodily reactions to perceived loss (Rando, 1993).

*Homicide:* The murdering of someone on purpose (Parveen et al., 2018) or the deliberate killing of another human by another (Morales, 1995).

*Mourning:* A term used to describe culture-based grieving rituals exhibited by those emotionally connected to a departed individual (Schoulte, 2011).

*Murder:* One person's purposeful, nonnegligent death at the hands of another (Asaro & Clements, 2005).

*Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD):* A mental health condition acquired by those who have witnessed or gone through a distressful event whether from catastrophic weather, terrorism, severe accidents, wars, or sexual assaults in addition to being

confronted with severe harm, mortality, or other sexual, like an act of terrorism, a catastrophic natural event, severe accidents, military conflict, or sexual assault, or those who have faced mortality, severe harm, or sexual abuses (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

*Survivor*: Family, acquaintances, and significant others who have experienced the homicide or suicide death of a loved one (Vessier-Batchen & Douglas, 2006).

*Traumatic grief*: The psychological reactions following an unusually distressing event that can cause anxiety, tension, dread, and a profound sense of helplessness (Abi-Hashem, 2017).

*Vicarious trauma*: Exposure to other people's terrible experiences that elicit an empathetic reaction (Hallinan et al., 2021).

### **Assumptions**

Caelli et al. (2003) viewed a researcher conducting a generic qualitative study as one who generally focuses on understanding an experience or an event. I focused on a common experience; however, I assumed that the challenges and opportunities for victim advocate professionals varied. For example, an assumption was that their experience, age, sex, and training experience varied. Additionally, I assumed that all participants would have valuable insight into working with parentally bereaved youth and would remain honest and accurate in interpreting their experiences of their challenges and opportunities. Using qualitative research as a research design enabled participants to become subject matter experts. Therefore, I relied on the information compiled by these professional

victim advocates. I presumed that only professional victim advocates could accurately describe their experience working with parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The study focused on the perceived challenges and opportunities of 10 victim advocate professionals who provided service to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. Although additional mourning experiences, such as those involving siblings, children, and other causes of parental loss, are important, they are only briefly mentioned in Chapter 2's Literature Review section. The primary research focus for this study was on the challenges and opportunities of victim advocate professionals in providing services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. The participants in this study were victim advocate professionals with direct experience with parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. Participants were excluded if they had no direct experience working with parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims in South Carolina.

### **Limitations**

The limitations for this study stemmed from my need to have victim advocates with specific experience or training in working directly with parentally bereaved youth, and not just family members of the deceased. I had prior experience working for a cabinet youth-serving agency in South Carolina and had previously worked with one of the participants. To ensure that I addressed these limitations, I provided all victim advocates in the study with the same information and instructed them to read my research purpose. This required me to provide each participating victim advocate with a clear expectation of what I needed from each participant as a researcher.

## **Significance**

By examining the perspectives of victim advocates who provide services to parentally bereaved youth, I sought to address a gap in the literature regarding the challenges and opportunities faced by victim advocate professionals when providing services to children who have lost a parent to homicide. Researchers have found evidence of how losing a parent to homicide can lead to trauma and how a lack of services provided to youth immediately following their parent's death can lead to later delinquent acts by the youth (Vaskinn et al., 2021). The participants of this study were members of the South Carolina Law Enforcement Victim Advocate Association and were trained to provide services to parentally bereaved youth. (I obtained permission to name this organization in this study.) I probed what participants viewed as challenges and opportunities in serving children to lessen the long-term effects of traumatic childhood experiences. The perspectives of the victim advocates gathered in this study may improve understanding of the needs of parentally bereaved youth and victim advocate professionals.

## **Summary**

In this first chapter, I provided an overview of this study focusing on the challenges and opportunities faced by victim advocate professionals in providing services to the children of homicide victims. A parent's death is routinely ranked as one of the most difficult life situations a child or youth may go through (Melhem et al., 2011). Bereavement research focuses primarily on victim service compensation and adult victim service programs, leaving parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims excluded.



(Williams & Rheingold, 2015). I used policy feedback theory because this theory is helpful in validating when policies are established and resources are allocated to programs (Milliard, 2020).

I used a generic qualitative approach to gain insight into the challenges and opportunities among victim advocate professionals in delivering services to children of homicide victims, with the hopes of addressing the lack of research. To collect the necessary data, I interviewed victim advocate professionals to learn about their challenges and opportunities firsthand. In Chapter 2, I will further review the literature regarding homicide, parentally bereaved youth, and the adverse effects of youth losing a parent to a violent crime. The chapter also includes brief overviews of the history of victim advocates and related programs offered in South Carolina.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

In this qualitative study, I examined victim advocate professionals' perceived challenges and opportunities in delivering services to children of homicide victims. Although several researchers have focused on victim service compensation and adult victim service programs, few have examined child victim services from the perspective of victim advocates (Gillespie et al., 2021; Globokar & Erez, 2019; Griese et al., 2017). Little is known about the challenges and barriers facing victim advocate professionals as they provide services to children who have lost a parent to homicide.

Data suggest that 1 in 14 children in the United States will experience the death of a parent from homicide by the age of 18 (CDC, 2018). In the state of South Carolina, the ratio is 1 in 11 (CDC, 2018). Homicide is a preventable public health issue that has adverse effects for both victims and witnesses, especially children (Menezes & Borsa, 2020). Societal effects include increased health care expenses, among other costs. Researchers have also found that such profound traumatic loss necessitates a trained, empathetic, and trauma-informed service response (Blakley & Mehr, 2008).

After an exhaustive review of the literature, it became clear that researchers have not examined how victim advocates perceive the opportunities in providing services to children to minimize the long-term implications of adverse childhood experiences. This is because previous researchers have only focused on the provision of services for adult crime victims and not children. I begin this chapter by reviewing the literature search strategy and the study's chosen theoretical foundation, policy feedback theory. An in-

depth review of the literature on homicide, adverse childhood experiences, place of residence (i.e., rural vs. urban), and the purpose of victim advocate professionals follows. I reviewed the available literature on the influence of victim advocate professionals as well as demonstrate gaps in the literature.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I used the following databases to obtain the literature reported in Chapter 2: SAGE Journals, ProQuest Central, Criminal Justice Database, CDC database, and Dissertations & Theses @ Walden University. Keywords used to search for relevant articles were *victim services, homicide, victim compensation, gun violence, grief services, funding, rural, urban, firearm, emotional support of crime victims, parental death, children, adverse childhood experiences, generic qualitative inquiry, and policy feedback theory*. A search for studies on victim services provided the most literature. The majority of the research was found using SAGE Journals and ProQuest Central. Specific literature was not found using phrases like *homicide grief services*. Instead, I restricted my searches to the research topics of victim services, parental death, and homicide in much of the literature review. The theoretical framework was underpinned by Mettler and SoRelle's policy feedback theory. I included the name of the theory in my searches.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

For the study's theoretical framework, I used Mettler and SoRelle's (2014) policy feedback theory. The theory postulates that when a policy becomes established, and resources are devoted to programs, it helps structure current activity and provides more advantages for some groups (Mettler & SoRelle, 2014). The policy feedback theory adds

a new dimension to the policy making process known as feedback effects, providing policy makers with insight into the policy's efficacy that they can use to rectify and create better policies. As Béland (2010) noted, the theory rose to prominence in the 1980s and was influenced by historical institutionalism to investigate political behavior and policy making. It was not until the 1990s that it was used to initiate policy implementation and reform, specifically welfare reform (McDonnell, 2009).

Initially, the policy feedback theory was developed in response to policy feedback to influence political dynamics, serving as a significant component of the policy making process. Mettler and SoRelle (2018) later expanded the theory to better understand the outcome after implementing a policy, stressing resources and public consequences. Although previous research has shown that the policy feedback theory is primarily concerned with social welfare policies, the theory has become known for examining other policy areas, such as criminal justice and education (Mettler & SoRelle, 2014; McDonnell, 2009). For instance, Weaver and Geller (2019) argued that although the conventional view of policy feedback can be self-reinforcing: policies provide resources that enhance economic stability and well-being while encouraging beneficiaries to interact with the government. Moreover, criminal justice policies have historically had the reverse effect: They empower those who benefit from a punitive policy agenda while disempowering those most harmed by the policies. Because the policy feedback theory has been employed in other policy domains, it was an appropriate method for examining public victim service agencies. In addition, the theory has predominantly been used for

single-policy case studies employing interviews, statistical analysis, and historical data (Mettler, 2005), which aligns with the purpose and methodology of this study.

Given that policy feedback theory has a solid foundation for analyzing public assistance programs (Milliard, 2020; Square-Smith, 2017), its fundamental principles were appropriate to use to comprehend the distribution mechanisms of public victim service agencies. Milliard (2020) investigated the experiences of police officers serving as peer-support team members, focusing specifically on the effects of peer support. Policy feedback theory helped lay the groundwork for a change in police culture based on organizational and provincial adjustments for police officers participating in peer-support and mental health programs, Milliard stated. Moreover, Square-Smith (2017) used policy feedback theory as a lens to explore and gain an in-depth understanding of Richmond Police Department's and Richmond citizens' perception of community-oriented policing strategies in the city's neighborhoods.

As noted by Vannoni (2019), policy feedback theory supported the study. According to Vannoni, policy feedback gave discovery to the behavioral theory of policy feedback to introduce positive correlations effects of public policy. For example, tobacco control measures or strategies implemented to control tobacco produced direct experiential learning on tobacco users and smokers. In this example, the policies functioned as self-control modulators and devices for smokers, which is how the researchers in this study postulated the behavioral theory of policy feedback. Child victim advocates may be able to connect improved self-efficacy patterns in child victims from policies that are implemented from direct experience and learning. The theoretical

foundation for this research is further informed by the way public policy feedback may impact certain aspects of government and politics (Vannoni, 2019). For example, when child victim advocates meet barriers when providing support or services to child victims, they may be likely to think about ways to overcome these challenges based on their understanding of their perceptions of government policy or regulations. This understanding and policy perception could impact how child victims express themselves and their immediate needs.

Weaver and Geller (2019) indicated a need for change in public policy to refocus policies to discourage police surveillance and criminalization of young people. They discussed how criminal justice policies worked for the constituents who carried out or enforced the policies, even for the employees who worked against the ones who fell into them (Weaver & Geller, 2019). The researchers called for promoting youth civic engagement and belonging instead of incarceration and policing. In my research, public policy can be restructured to fill the gap in the availability of resources to child victim advocates. This research helped to inform the need for additional studies further to ensure policy engages the needs and support of the caretakers or caregivers, such as child victim advocates, to change their perception. Mettler and SoRelle (2014) indicated that policy feedback theory can provide information regarding the potential of a broad focus on the involved concepts, actors, and networks. The theory suggests that when a policy becomes established and resources are devoted to programs, it helps structure current activity and provides advantages for some groups more than others (Mettler & SoRelle, 2018)).

## **Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts**

### **Parental Death**

Losing a parent is inevitable, yet it has been linked to several adverse effects on children, including higher psychological issues and lower academic success (Kailaheimo-Lönnqvist & Erola, 2020). Researchers consistently rate the loss of a parent as one of the most traumatic life experiences a child or youth may experience. It has also been noted that losing a parent during childhood has both short- and long-term consequences (Meyer-Lee et al., 2020). Kailaheimo-Lönnqvist and Erola, 2020 posited that the impact of parental death is presumably different for each child. Researchers have observed that the child's age may modify the potential impact of parental mortality and the child's family history.

When a child loses a parent, they lose access to numerous resources associated with the departed. For example, parental resources lost consist of economic, social, and human capital (Kailaheimo-Lönnqvist & Erola, 2020). As noted by researchers, the most obvious resource loss is income because the income that the deceased parent potentially provided is no longer being provided. According to a 2018 CDC report, it was estimated that 1 in 14, or 5.3 million, children worldwide have experienced the death of one or both parents before reaching 18 due to various reasons categorized by the CD. By age 25, government researchers have noted this number more than doubled to 13.3 million (CDC, 2018).

In South Carolina, the ratio is 1 in 11, resulting in the state ranking ninth out of the top 10 states for the highest parental death (CDC, 2018). The CDC (2018) reported

homicide was ranked as the third leading cause of parental death for individuals ages 0-25 at 11.7% nationally and 9.5% in South Carolina, followed by suicide. These statistics are critical because premature deaths initiate bereavement for millions of children who must cope with the absence of an attachment figure (Burns et al., 2020). Individuals who experience a family member's violent or abrupt death, the loss of several family members, and ambiguous attachment ties with departed family members are generally at risk for normal, traumatic, or complex mourning (Meyer-Lee et al., 2020).

### **Normal and Traumatic Grief**

As noted previously by researchers, grief as a continual process is particularly critical to understand in parentally bereaved youth as they experience the long-term impact of their loss across various developmental stages (Meyer-Lee et al., 2020). Grief in parentally bereaved children and youth differs from mourning in adults in a number of ways. For example, youth may not comprehend the permanence of death (Koblenz, 2016; Meyer-Lee et al., 2020). When a child or youth experiences loss, they are at a developmental stage where they establish their identity and separate from their family. Meyer-Lee et al. (2020) stated the death of a parent can lead to a conflicting desire for reassurance.

Findings from a Harvard University study on child bereavement revealed that grief is a progressive and cyclical process with specific tasks that may arise at any given time: accepting the reality of the loss, adjusting to a world without the deceased, processing the pain of grief, and finding an enduring connection with the deceased person while establishing a new life (Meyer-Lee et al., 2020; Weiss & C. Murray Parkes, 2007).



Following the death of a parent, two types of grief may manifest: normative and traumatic (Burns et al., 2020; Paris et al., 2009). Normal mourning reactions typically happen when the remaining family member anticipates the death, such as from disease or natural causes, and the surviving family members can cope with the loss and move forward (Burns et al., 2020). Normal mourning experiences for young people who have lost a parent can include anguish, denial after the death, and emotions including depression, insomnia, melancholy, and difficulty concentrating. These reactions are all common grieving processes that may eventually pass (American Psychiatric Association, 2019; Burns et al., 2020; Miller, 2008).

Sharpe (2015) claimed traumatic grief may frequently develop and hinder the grieving process when death disrupts the normal course of events and occurs as a result of traumatic events like suicides, homicides, or tragic accidents. Researchers have repeatedly observed that violent deaths are always unexpected, intense, and devoid of forewarning for the survivor(s) (Burns et al., 2020; Nakajima et al., 2012; Sharpe, 2015). The survivor's vision of the world, as well as their bodily and psychological response to the loss, are all affected by traumatic grief (Wellman, 2018). Traumatic grieving in parentally bereaved youth may be exacerbated if there is a lack of support or unresolved disputes between the parent and the youth at the time of death (Wellman, 2018). Due to experiencing the homicidal death of a parent, some parentally bereaved youth may experience residual grief reactions and may continue to experience complicated grief (Wellman, 2018). Grief reactions, including complicated grief and PTSD, were documented to be more prevalent in parentally bereaved youth survivors of violent death

(Meyer-Lee et al., 2020). According to the CDC (2018), parentally bereaved children of homicide and suicide survivors were 52% more likely to develop PTSD and 78% more likely to admit to having experienced complex grieving.

### **Complicated Grief**

Grief typically subsides within the first few years following a loss. Individuals can typically return to their lives; however, this may not be the case for some, particularly youth who have experienced parental loss. Between 10 and 20% of the general population is affected by complicated grief, also known as prolonged bereavement disorder, which is defined by mourning emotions that continue at least 6 months or longer and have the potential to damage the survivor, making it difficult to overcome the impacts of the loss (Hard et al., 2018; Lund Orff et al., 2017). Meyer-Lee et al. (2020) defined complicated grief as an intense grief that can lead people who have lost loved ones to long-term grief, much like depression, but they may not be able to be treated for depression with conventional care. Those experiencing complicated bereavement may experience numbness, shock, insomnia, loneliness, suicidal ideation, substance misuse, and heightened health problems (Hard et al., 2018; Lund Orff et al., 2017).

It has been noted that children and youth who have lost a parent may commemorate the deceased, have frequent thoughts about it, and avoid reminders of the deceased (Shear, 2015a). Shear (2015a) claimed parentally bereaved children and youth who experience complicated bereavement may be in shock or numbness. They may ultimately isolate themselves because they believe happiness is no longer attainable without the deceased. In addition, it is not uncommon for colleagues, acquaintances, or

family members to become overly concerned about the survivor (youth who has lost a parent) and even walk away if they cannot help. Additionally, researchers have shown that several factors, such as substance misuse, anxiety, religion, depression, support, education, socioeconomic considerations, connection, cause of death, criminal justice process, loss of history, and media attention, may contribute to complicated grief (Meyer-Lee et al., 2020; Shear, 2015a).

Due to the increased likelihood of violent deaths, such as homicide, children and youth are more likely to experience complicated bereavement (Burns et al., 2020; Feigelman et al., 2017; Melhem et al., 2011; Meyer-Lee et al., 2020; Shear, 2015a). One study finding indicated that parental bereaved children and youth are more likely to experience short-term and long-term decreased subjective well-being (happiness), with more acute decreases in the short-term and limited improvement over time (Meyer-Lee et al., 2020; Moor & Graaf, 2015). Following a violent death, the grieving process can cause distress, tension, pain, disorientation, and confusion in surviving family members, particularly in the deceased child or teen (McDevitt-Murphy et al., 2012; Menezes & Borsa, 2020).

### **Childhood Bereavement and Adverse Effects**

The death of a parent is consistently regarded as one of the most stressful experiences a child or youth can endure. The death of a parent during childhood, according to Burns et al. (2020), is an adverse experience that raises the likelihood of future behavioral health, academic, and relational challenges, as well as early mortality. A considerable body of research investigates how early parental grief and loss shape a

child's development and basic competencies, resulting in long-term negative consequences (Bohnert & Sen, 2020; Burns et al., 2020; Dorsey et al., 2020; Feigelman et al., 2017). In sum, following the death of a parent, bereaved children not only face the prospect of a more significant number of life stressors, but their stress responses are also likely to be more intense, chronic, and health-threatening (Biank & Wern-Lin, 2011).

Children and youth differ in how they respond to the death of a parent. Responses to the loss of a parent include shock, grief, numbness, rage, emptiness, guilt, panic, anxiety, self-blame, melancholy, and disbelief (Menezes & Borsa 2020). Researchers have also identified somatic symptoms such as migraines, back pain, chills, weight loss or gain, hiatal hernias, insomnia, and gastric ulcers in children and youth (Fitzgerald, 2013). In addition, (Beckmann, 1990) noted a loss of concentration, anxiety, suicidal attempts and thoughts, academic problems, low self-esteem, an increase in family and peer relationship problems, and a possible increase in interest in delinquent behavior such as substance abuse, gang involvement, and criminal activity.

A parent's death due to homicide is more traumatic for children than one that is a natural death (Menezes & Borsa, 2020). Berg et al. (2016) stated that children whose parents died from external causes, such as homicide, suicide, or drug overdose, are more likely to experience long-term developmental problems than children whose parents died from natural causes, such as strokes, cancer, or heart attacks, which were associated with fewer negative long-term effects. Other past studies have also found that parental bereaved children and youth tend to experience various adjustment issues compared to their non-bereaved counterparts. They have been found to have a greater risk of suicide

attempts, premature deaths, depression, psychiatric difficulties, lower grades in school, lower self-esteem, increased youth delinquency, and increased criminal involvement (Menezes & Borsa, 2020).

Children whose parents died by suicide, homicide, accident, or abrupt natural death have higher rates of new-onset depression and PTSD during the first 9 months following the death (Brent et al., 2009). Brent et al. (2009) found not only an increase in depression during the first 9 months following the suicide or homicide death of a parent but also an increase in depression at 21 months within the same bereaved cohort. Not only did researchers observe an increase in psychological health issues, but Thomas (1996) found that women tend to experience more emotional problems, particularly depression, in response to the loss of a parent, and Stinson and Laser (1992) demonstrated that men tend to experience anger and are more likely to exhibit aggressive behavior.

Crenshaw (1990) stated that the grieving process can last between 24 and 36 months. Researchers have also observed that when a child experience disabling bereavement (Webb, 2003), they are overburdened by the duties of mourning and may be unable to maintain normal developmental progress. This process is important because, although the loss is permanent and immutable, the process is not: it is a part of the child's ongoing bereavement and reintegration experience (Worden & Silverman, 1996). It should also be noted that parental-bereaved youth experience socio-economic disadvantages due to increased school-related issues and premature withdrawals (Menezes & Borsa, 2020). Further, researchers have noted an increase in reports of

parentally bereaved youth being forced out of their parent's homes because of familial conflict and discord with the surviving parents (Menezes & Borsa, 2020). Furthermore, studies have found that children and youth are more likely to struggle if family and friendships are disrupted before parental death (Meyer-Lee et al., 2020).

### **Homicide**

Homicide is committed regardless of socioeconomic, ethnic, racial, educational, or religious background (Feigelman et al., 2017). The causes of death, according to DeMaio and DeMaio (1993), are homicide, suicide, accident, natural, and undetermined. Homicide, which is defined as the premeditated death of one human being by another, is a frequent tragedy that may occur practically anywhere (Aldrich & Kallivayalil, 2013; Armour, 2002; Feigelman et al., 2017) and is always abrupt and brutal. As they all result from the intentional use of physical force or power against a community, organization, or individual, violent deaths, homicide, suicide, and accidents are all included (Nakajima et al., 2012).

Homicides are classified according to the degree of premeditation or intent. For example, the offender might be charged with first- or second-degree murder; if the death was inadvertent, the assailant could be charged with manslaughter (Duhaime Canadian Law Dictionary, 2004; Vessier-Batchen & Douglas, 2006). Homicide is seen as a violent death that might advance severe individual and social ramifications due to its irreversible nature and climax in the total denial of rights (Costa et al., 2017). According to Costa et al. (2017), each homicide directly or indirectly affects the lives of at least seven to 10 people, including friends, family, and neighbors.

The U.S. Office of Justice Programs (1997) pronounced that homicide was the worst hell imaginable; the pain that goes with homicide is so strong that it is difficult to even breathe. The most torturous and tragic cause of death is homicide. Miller (2009) defined homicide as an ultimate violence form because it involves a cruel and intentional assault on an unwilling victim. Unlike other causes of death, such as old age or sickness, homicide deprives the family of the chance to say goodbye and prepare for the loss of a loved one (Aldrich & Kallivayalil, 2013; Feigelman et al., 2017). It has been said that homicide is an "untimely, unnatural, and unfair" cause of death followed by lack of financial resources; gang violence; war crimes; terrorist acts; domestic violence; and child abuse are among the factors that may contribute to its occurrence (Asaro & Clements, 2005, p. 101; DeRanieri et al., 2004; Vigil & Vigil, 2003).

### ***Homicide Statistics***

In 2019 there were 19,141 homicides, including 10,335 male and 1,408 female victims (Uniform Crime Reporting Program, 2019). Homicide is the leading cause of mortality among African Americans and Latinos aged 15 to 35, with nearly 68% of homicide victims being African Americans. In comparison to Caucasian Americans, African Americans have a tenfold increased risk of becoming a victim of homicide due to a rate of exposure that is 10 times higher (Burke et al., 2010; CDC, 2018, 2019; Hoyert & Xu, 2012; Kochaneck et al.; 2004; Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008; McDevitt-Murphy et al., 2012; Pachristos & Wildeman, 2014; Schoulte, 2011; Sharpe et al., 2013; Sharpe et al., 2014). Homicides are generally anticipated in the African American community; in 2019, African-Americans and Latinos accounted for 9,677 homicide victims, compared to

5,787 Caucasian victims (Sharpe et al.; 2013, Uniform Crime Reporting Program, 2019). In addition, weapon accessibility and gang activity significantly influence growing minority homicide (Fox & Zawitz, 2001).

According to the CDC (2018), South Carolina has the highest rate of gun homicides in the United States. Of all the homicides accounted for by the CDC, 78% involved some form of a gun. In an average year, 37,603 people die by firearms in the United States, and a whopping 859 people die by guns in the state of South Carolina. This equates to 36% for the entire country and 39% for the state of South Carolina (CDC, 2018). The U.S. Census Bureau also noted a 51% increase in gun homicides in the state of South Carolina from 2009 to 2018, compared to an 18% increase over the same period nationwide. It was highlighted as well by researchers that there was a 30% jump in homicide in 2020, causing the most significant 1-year increase in over a century. Across all states, South Carolina was ranked as the seventh highest state for gun homicides (CDC, 2020).

### ***Homicide Survivors***

Homicide devastates more than just the victims and perpetrators; there are also indirect victims. Researchers have noted that these "covictims" may also experience loss of income, responsibility, guilt, stigmatization, anxiety, and revenge, as well as media intrusion, all of which are stressors that contribute to PTSD and other illnesses (Connolly & Gordon, 2015; McDevitt-Murphy et al., 2012). Homicide survivors, also known as covictims, are the family and companions left behind after a homicide to mourn and represent the deceased. They are underserved (Asaro, 2001a; Clements & Burgess, 2002;



Spungen, 1998; Wellman, 2018). Despite prior research revealing the prevalence of homicides, survivors were not designated as covictims until after World War II (Vessier-Batchen & Douglas, 2006). Enduring a loved one's homicide is more challenging than anticipating loss because grieving emotions differ (McDevitt-Murphy et al, 2012).

Due to the unexpected nature of the homicide, survivors may experience traumatic grief, which affects them differently from individuals experiencing an anticipated loss (Armour, 2002; Dyregrov, 2006, 2010; Sharpe, 2015; Vessier-Batchen & Douglas, 2006). The survivor's world has been irrevocably altered, and they may spend days, months, or even years gathering their emotions and adjusting to their loss and a new way of life (Aldrich & Kallivayalil, 2013; Miller, 2008). Homicide survivors leave behind seven to ten devastated family members, friends, and coworkers, according to Redmond (1989), referenced by Sharpe (2015). Survivors of homicide rely on one another to surmount loss, endure victimization, and serve as a contact point for various subsequent events (Armour, 2002). Although the homicide stops the suffering of the victims, it is simply the beginning of the grieving process for the surviving. Many survivors may have amplified grief reactions while adjusting to their new lives without the departed (Aldrich & Kallivayalil, 2013; Menezes & Borsa, 2020). Given the unpredictability and savagery of homicide, survivors are more likely to suffer from PTSD, complicated grief, drug abuse, and substantial depressive difficulties (Feigelman et al., 2017; Menezes & Borsa, 2020; Meyer-Lee et al., 2020).

### ***Barriers for Homicide Survivors***

Survivors of homicides may get involved with and seek aid from various community-based groups (Williams & Rheingold, 2015). Furthermore, studies have discovered that aiding survivors in their varied local communities and with mental health services may function as a buffer against adverse mental health outcomes and encourage recovery from mental health difficulties. At various stages of the bereavement process, it has been observed that homicide survivors may find different resources useful. Survivors frequently benefit from the assistance of victim advocates or intensive case management to introduce families to various resources (e.g., financial benefits to assist with crime-related expenses) in the weeks and months that follow, more so than psychological treatment (Merrill et al., 2010; Raphael, Stevens, & CaDunsmore, 2006). Although politicians have appropriated federal funding to help with national and state victim aid and restitution programs to reduce financial obstacles, the application procedure is sometimes ambiguous, and survivors may be unaware that such programs exist (Kelly et al., 2010).

The Office of Victims of Crime (2001) stated that rural regions had less assistance accessible to homicide survivors than metropolitan hot zones of violence. However, several potential obstacles could prevent homicide survivors from accessing necessary services. Rynearson (1995), for example, discovered that only a few survivors use available services. The cost of treatments, the availability of information, and how interventions are delivered (e.g., individual vs. group therapy) can all impact a survivor's willingness and capability to participate in services (Raphael et al., 2006). It has also been noted that while urban areas have enhanced access to victims of crime services,

rural areas do not, and survivors may face added stressors, such as having to travel further to access specialized services.

As noted by Blakley and Mehr (2008), many victims of violent crime in rural areas have nowhere to turn for practical help or social support, leaving them to struggle alone with immeasurable grief and complicated mourning. Across studies, it was noted that rural programs might receive fewer grants from the federal and state level resulting in less stable funding and more concerns about funding for survivors. The most frequently indicated barrier for rural areas was lack or shortage of employees, language barriers, and insufficient community awareness regarding the available services (Blakley & Mehr, 2008).

### **Victim Assistance**

The victim rights movement of the 1970s and 1980s sparked the inclusion of victims in justice proceedings in the United States and elsewhere (Globokar & Erez, 2019), increasing roles in the criminal justice infrastructure and non-governmental organizations that provide victims with support, information, services, referrals, and advocacy (Globokar et al., 2016). Despite the development and diversity of victim labor in the United States, there has been little study on the occupational mosaic and victim workers' experiences across organizational contexts (Globokar et al., 2016). Much of the study to date has concentrated on the services provided, with little attention on the experiences of victim advocates (Globokar & Erez, 2019). It has also been noted that research has concentrated on underlying beliefs (Globokar & Erez, 2019), service

organizations (Mawby, 2016; Simmonds, 2016), and the effectiveness of services offered (Globokar & Erez, 2019).

Services that are provided to victims are typically offered by individuals that are called victim advocates. The National Network to End Domestic Violence (2017a) noted that victim advocates provide various services, including crisis intervention, counseling, shelter, and legal advocacy. Victim advocates are skilled individuals specially trained to assist victims of violence. According to Benuto et al. (2018), victim advocates can be volunteers or be employed through various agencies which support victims. Some victim advocates work for law enforcement agencies and are classified as government employees.

Victim advocates within the government and law enforcement agencies provide comprehensive and expert services to victims of various traumatic events, including homicide, suicide, and sexual assault. Their responsibilities include coordinating services with local agencies, including emergency shelters, health care, and meetings with law enforcement (Johnson et al., 2014). It has also been noted that victim advocates' primary roles are to respond to victims' needs and serve as their advocates within the community to improve the outcomes for all survivors (Johnson et al., 2014).

As noted by researchers, advocates must endure a lengthy process that includes screening them, conducting background checks, and receiving specialized training before working with a victim. For example, the number of required hours of training for an advocate may vary depending on the agency and the type of services that will be provided. A victim advocate's function, according to (Duron & Cheung, 2016), is to

support the victim during the numerous services that need the victim to recollect the case specifics. As previously stated (Lindahl, 2015), victim advocacy strives to empower victims by regaining the authority and control they lost due to their victimization. As a result, advocates can influence a victim's life and enhance the results of all victims in a community by pushing for system reform.

Despite these significant efforts, crime victims remain disregarded in the criminal justice system due to inadequate victim rights law implementation (Boateng & Abess, 2017). Critics have also raised concerns regarding the lack of enforcement techniques, the overloading of criminal justice professionals resulting in delays and higher costs, and the lack of resources for victims whose rights have been violated (Boateng & Abess, 2017). Lack of professional knowledge, absence of enforcement mechanisms, strict eligibility criteria for compensation, the existence of different definitions of victim across jurisdictions, and the limited scope of most crime victim legislations all undermine the effort to successfully protect victims and achieve global recognition of their status within the criminal justice system (Boateng & Abess, 2017, De La Rue et al., 2022). According to Benuto et al. (2019), victim advocates are highly likely to develop vicarious trauma and exhaustion. Stressors include victims' reluctance to use services or flee abusive relationships, the limited resources of victim assistance agencies, mistrust, and other obstacles to collaboration between victims and criminal justice professionals.

### **Effects of Vicarious Trauma**

Vicarious trauma is the normative response to recurrent exposure to traumatic content that alters service providers' perceptions of themselves, others, and the world

(Helpingstine et al., 2021). According to (Hallinan et al., 2021), professionals and researchers have observed for a long time that witnessing or hearing about the traumatic experiences of others can have a profound effect on the observer. Researchers have discovered that this exposure can result in countertransference, vicarious traumatization, or secondary traumatic stress (STS). A person may experience exhaustion, an increased risk for mental health conditions such as PTSD and depression, and an increased risk for medical conditions such as cardiovascular disease due to the severity of vicarious trauma (Hallinan et al., 2021).

Researchers have observed that although providers may receive the training necessary to provide services to victims, they are frequently inadequate to deal with the emotional side effects of working with traumatized populations, increasing vicarious trauma, exhaustion, and STS disorder. As noted by Helpingstine et al. (2021), Freudenberg (1974) described burnout as a feeling of exhaustion to characterize the effects of extreme stress in the victim service professions. According to a previous study on trauma professionals (Helpingstine et al., 2021), burnout is one of the detrimental mental health outcomes of repeated exposure to clients' traumatic material. STS, a more severe form of exhaustion, can develop when service providers are continuously exposed to secondary trauma. STS symptoms are similar to those of PTSD in which the individual experiences rumination, flashbacks, dread, hypervigilance, nightmares, sleeplessness, agitation, burnout, exhaustion, and other physiological responses following exposure to a traumatic account (Benuto et al., 2019).

## Summary and Conclusions

This chapter focused on the literature concerning parental death, adverse effects, and homicide-related bereavement. The section also focuses on one theoretical framework, the policy feedback theory, to explain when policies are established and resources are devoted to programs; it helps structure current activity and provides more advantages for some groups. Despite the plethora of research on parental death, there remains a discrepancy in parental death caused by homicide. Reactions to the loss of a parent differ depending on whether the death was expected or unexpected, and the reason for death can elicit painful or typical emotions. Although some individuals will have the ability to move forward, many will experience lasting adverse effects as they adjust to their new way of life.

Homicide makes survivors angry and uneasy because they must figure out why and how the murder occurred. As a result, survivors turn to a variety of coping techniques. Unfortunately, little information was uncovered on children who had lost a parent to homicide. However, many youths experience parental death due to homicide, and this underrepresented population often suffers from traumatic grief and adverse effects such as PTSD. Despite the seriousness of parental death due to homicide, it is the least researched in bereavement studies. In addition, despite the regular occurrence of homicides impacting teenagers in the United States, research on homicides committed by this population is scarce.

Homicide is a tragedy that affects a vast number of individuals in the United States. Therefore, the studies exploring challenges & opportunities of providing child

victims support following parental death are necessary to provide insight into how to serve bereaved youth better to ensure all populations are adequately served. Chapter 3 provides in-depth information on the research design, role as a researcher, methodology, and instrumentation, all used to gain insight into the challenges & opportunities of providing child victims support to homicide survivors. In addition, ethical concerns involving participant safety and sampling are explored.



## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

In this qualitative study, I examined victim advocate professionals' perceived challenges and opportunities in delivering services to children of homicide victims. Because prior research focused primarily on service compensation and adult victim service programs, I examined child victim services from the perspective of these victim advocates. I discuss the research methodology in Chapter 3. The research design and rationale are expanded as I review the research questions. Furthermore, I discuss my position and any potential biases or ethical concerns. The methodology section includes details on how participants were chosen and how data were collected and analyzed. Trustworthiness, which includes reliability, credibility, and ethical considerations, is the final subject of the chapter.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

To frame this qualitative study, it is first essential to formulate the research question. Researchers typically develop broad, open-ended central research questions, followed by subquestions that concentrate on a particular interest (Yates & Leggett, 2016). In addition, some researchers have argued that a broad research question is essential for revealing a wealth of information (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Therefore, it is common for the research questions to be revised throughout the dissertation process, especially when new information is revealed or when a dearth of research is uncovered in the literature review (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). The central research question for this

study was, what challenges and opportunities do victim advocates perceive in providing support to children who have experienced the loss of a parent to homicide?

I used a generic qualitative inquiry method to gather rich data to answer the research question. Caelli et al. (2003) stated that generic qualitative studies aim to understand the details of a particular subject, process, or human viewpoints. Unlike other methods like ethnography, which focuses on culture, or grounded theory, which aims to create a theory, the researchers who design such studies simply want to explore and understand something without any other specific focus (Caelli et al., 2003). Although this method has many of the characteristics of qualitative research, the researchers want to either combine several methodologies or disclaim any methodological viewpoint (Caelli et al., 2003). For example, data collection in generic qualitative studies includes structured and unstructured interviews (usually audiotaped), open-ended qualitative surveys, participant observations, and field notes (Charmaz, 2006). Data analysis in general qualitative studies involves reviewing the information gathered through field notes, interviews, and coding, and locating specific statements to identify themes (Caelli et al., 2003; Charmaz, 2006; Pereira, 2012).

Qualitative research can be connected strongly to social constructivism. Thus, it was most appropriate for my study. The objective was to clarify how reality is constructed through the contributions of individuals (see Korstjens & Moser, 2017; Polit & Beck, 2017). The scarcity of parental death in homicide-related literature and victim advocates' professional barriers highlighted the necessity of this research. Additionally, qualitative research, in this case, was used to gain an in-depth understanding of the

meaning of victim advocate professionals' perspectives of the challenges and opportunities of delivering services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims (see Korstjens & Moser, 2017).

A generic qualitative approach allowed participants to provide in-depth responses to questions about their professional experiences as victim advocates. This method was vital because it provided the participants the opportunity to expand on their experience of challenges and opportunities. With these in-depth responses, I was able to pinpoint key patterns and meanings among the victim advocate professionals regarding providing services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims (see Caelli et al., 2003, Korstjens & Moser, 2017). I aimed not only to highlight the differences in the challenges and opportunities but to explore the commonalities in the participants' experiences.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As a researcher, I was responsible for conducting interviews and acting as an observer while remaining impartial and offering direction to make the research worthwhile (see Webb & Welsh, 2019). According to Korstjens and Moser (2017), the researcher's purpose is to establish the research process through social interactions with the participants and connections made while collecting data. Due to the sensitivity of my research topic, anxiety or emotional distress could have arisen; therefore, it was essential to be empathetic to establish rapport with the participants (see Korstjens & Moser, 2017). My mission was to avoid any professional or personal relationships with participants. In doing so, I ensured that protocols were followed, ground rules were established, and

expectations were made clear while refraining from discussing personal bereavement experiences. I also strove to maintain objectivity throughout the interview process.

Researchers have noted that to avoid unintentionally projecting personal values onto participants and research findings, they as researchers must be aware of cultural bias (Karagoizis, 2018). However, it is also critical to note that researchers aiming to study various cultures with limited knowledge of the cultures can cause significant harm, especially if the researcher triggers debates or assigns negative labels (Blakley & Mehr, 2008), which could ultimately result in poor interactions between the participants and the researcher (Karagoizis, 2018).

Given my background as a parental bereaved youth who has lost a mother, I decided not to disclose any personal bereavement experiences and ensure that all ethical guidelines were discussed and adhered to. In addition, it was crucial that as a researcher, I avoided all judgment, remained objective, omitted personal beliefs/thoughts, and refrained from participating in the interview in any capacity other than as the interviewer. According to Korstjens and Moser (2017), the researcher's influence often occurs but can be controlled. Doing so allows the researcher to observe the participants naturally and understand their personal experiences. Furthermore, to ensure that all information gathered was reported correctly, all participants were provided a complete copy of all transcripts for accuracy.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

Although there is no predetermined population of service providers, the population used for this study was victim advocate professionals who are members of the South Carolina Law Enforcement Victim Advocate Association, with direct experience working with parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. The subjects will be victim advocate professionals who have undergone professional training and have at least 3 years of experience providing services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. The time frame of 3 years assisted in ensuring that the participants had adequate exposure to parentally bereaved youth and could articulate their experience due to the nature of the services provided. In addition, the victim advocates professionals that did not provide direct services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims and did not meet the 3 years of experience minimum were excluded from the study.

Qualitative studies focus on purposeful rather than probability samples (Patton, 2015). To ensure that my research was rich in data, this study employed a purposive sampling strategy in which identified participants met a predetermined criterion; a technique widely used in qualitative research to ensure that rich cases directly relate to the phenomenon being studied (Moser & Kortsjens, 2018; Polit & Beck, 2017). Following the prescreen questionnaire results review, the study participants were selected based on the assumption that they could provide insight and bring vast experience.

Small sample sizes are common when conducting qualitative research, according to Moser & Korstjens (2018). Still, the study's depth depends on several factors,

including data collection, the scope of the research question, and sampling techniques. When conducting a generic qualitative study, no set number of interviews is needed to ensure that the study displays rigor, trustworthiness, and rich data within my research. Therefore, I identified and interviewed 10 victim advocate professionals who provide services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims.

### **Instrumentation**

Numerous open-ended procedures, such as interviews, case studies, observations, and focus groups, are used to acquire data when performing qualitative research (Yates & Leggett, 2016). Researchers have highlighted that focus groups are characterized by their use of diverse individuals who respond to open-ended questions and converse with minimal researcher intervention (Yates & Leggett, 2016). Observation entails tracking people or groups throughout time (Polit & Beck, 2017). Interviews are a dialogue between the researcher and participants to gain an in-depth understanding of the meaning of the participant's experience (Moser et al., 2010). Interviews are the most common form of data collection when conducting qualitative research. In addition to email, in-person, telephone, and Skype interviews, various data collection techniques can be combined (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Interviews can help the researcher develop a deeper understanding and make the right decision when focusing on delicate topics (Heath et al., 2018). Researchers have noted that telephone interviews are often viewed as a less attractive method, even though they are deemed beneficial for geographical reasons. Thankfully, during data collection, a researcher can use various methods throughout the research.

Researchers have noted that interviews can be structured, unstructured, and semi-structured (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). On the other hand, structured interviews limit the participants' responses, whereas unstructured interviews are more conversational and are not planned ahead of time. Semi-structured interviews use open-ended questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Additionally, this study employed semi-structured interviews with a previously developed interview protocol. In addition, scholars have noted that semi-structured interviews are the preferred method for qualitative research because they permit victim advocate professionals to explore the experience from their point of view (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Although the order of the questions should be purposeful, it is common to go out of order to ensure a fluid dialogue throughout the interview (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). The information gathered throughout the interview was digitally recorded and transcribed along with field notes once consent was from all participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In addition, field notes were frequently taken during interviews to capture the interviewer's observed body language and nonverbal cues, according to Ngozwana (2018). Also, it is vital to ensure that the researcher's observation is accurate and without any bias (Yates & Leggett, 2016). Finally, all participant's direct quotes were used to ensure that all data was correctly interpreted from their words (Heath et al., 2018).

The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 min, and each participant was allowed as many breaks as needed. All interviews were conducted via FaceTime or Zoom, with each participant required to call from a quiet, distraction-free location. Most importantly, all

participants were informed of their right to terminate participation throughout the interview.

The selection of instruments to collect data was a crucial step in the research process (Bastos et al., 2014). Unlike quantitative researchers, who apply statistical methods to establish the validity and reliability of research findings, qualitative researchers aim to design and incorporate methodological strategies to ensure the ‘trustworthiness’ of the findings (Noble & Smith, 2015). To ensure this was achievable within my study, I accounted for individual biases that could impact findings. In addition, I included detailed and in-depth descriptions from participants to bolster findings, maintained meticulous records, established a clear decision-making process, and ensured that data interpretations were reliable and transparent. Additionally, I encouraged participants to provide feedback on the interview transcript and whether the final themes and concepts produced sufficiently reflect the phenomenon being examined as part of respondent validation.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

To ensure that all participants were properly identified, contacted, and recruited for this research study, I used the South Carolina Law Enforcement Victim Advocate Association (SCLEVA) database. The SCLEVA database is readily available to the public and allowed me to contact and recruit research participants. By using SCLEVA to identify the appropriate point of contact, I could call, email, and mail a formal letter explaining the purpose of my study and request to seek out willing participants. Once I gained approval from the appropriate personnel within each law enforcement agency, I



sent out emails, made phone calls, and posted flyers on various social media platforms and around their offices.

The developed prescreening questionnaire was distributed to all participants to determine whether the subject was suitable for the study. I was able to locate various subjects that include various ages, races, and amounts of experience providing services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. In addition, all the participants were required to have a minimum of 3 years of experience working with parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. The questionnaires were sent electronically through a Google Doc Link. The study included contact information and six questions to ensure all participants met the requirements. In addition, all participants were required to complete the prescreen questionnaire within a week of receipt.

Following the official participant selection, I scheduled and conducted phone interviews through FaceTime and Zoom. To ensure I obtained permission to record interviews and take notes, informed consent was provided to all participants and the prescreen questionnaire. In addition, during the interview, a copy of the interview procedure was used to take notes. Also recorded were the participant's response time, emotional state, and level of engagement. Using audio recording was critical for ensuring that information was transcribed accurately and that no vital information was missed.

By deciding to conduct semi-structured interviews, I was able to divulge into the victim advocate professional's perspective of the challenges and opportunities of providing services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. Although an interview protocol with at least 13 questions guided the interviews, they were open-ended

to allow the participants to express themselves freely. If the participants' responses required additional information, probing questions were asked (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 min and were transcribed within 1 week. The completed transcripts were emailed to the participants for approval to guarantee the accuracy of the information. In addition, the participants were required to review their transcripts within a week and provide me with any needed revisions. I documented and reviewed the findings once all interviews were reviewed for accuracy.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Data analysis is a critical component when conducting generic qualitative research because it aids in the process of identifying the research participants' experiences (Caelli et al., 2003). The transcribed data will be collected, reviewed, coded, and analyzed to reflect the participants' perceptions while allowing the researcher to clarify their experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), coding is an essential part of the analytic procedure since it enables the researcher to divide data into manageable portions. This study analyzes the prescreening questionnaire responses and completes all field notes and interview transcripts. Additionally, I used NVivo software to examine data and assist in identifying codes or themes. Moreover, as data was reviewed and themes became more evident, the study results revealed the challenges and opportunities amongst victim advocate professionals that provide services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims.

Analyzing the research findings was the most time-consuming aspect of the data analysis process (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). All interview recordings were uploaded to the

NVivo software and exported to transcripts to ensure that all codes and themes were properly developed. Once transcribed, I carefully listened to all recordings to ensure that all information corresponded accurately. This process will be conducted a minimum of 2 times. Listening to the recorded audio multiple times allowed me to quickly recollect what each participant stated during their respective interviews. Once the manual transcription process was completed, I repeatedly analyzed the transcripts to familiarize myself with the content. Then, I noted each participant's meaningful statements and phrases. Each transcript underwent three rounds of coding, during which I constructed themes from the critical statements and phases. Finally, I preserved my integrity by repeatedly reading and coding the contents to remove personal bias.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

According to qualitative research, trustworthiness focuses on the veracity of information and is strengthened by dependability, credibility, and transferability (Rule & John, 2011). Trustworthiness is enhanced by various tactics, such as member verification, informed permission, using different resources, and ensuring that the information being used is properly noted (Ngozwana, 2018). Before performing any interviews, participants obtained informed consent to confirm participation and to tell them of the study's risks, benefits, and overall purpose. Researchers note that when there are sensitive topics, they should establish a rapport with all participants to ensure their comfort level (Patton, 2015). Furthermore, it is critical to recognize that sensitive topics can cause trauma; however, it is also critical to recognize that participating in qualitative studies can benefit the subject (Lakeman & Fitzgerald, 2009).

## **Credibility**

Every researcher conducting research wants to ensure that the presented information is credible. According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2003), validity guarantees that a study's findings adequately address the proposed question and are consistent with the study's intent. Internal validity, used in qualitative research studies, is a concept equivalent to credibility in that it confirms that the findings make sense and are consistent (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). However, researchers have noted that credibility strategies include ongoing observation, member verification, and sustained engagement (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Prolonged engagement entails familiarizing yourself with the setting or participants, keeping the subject involved throughout the interview process, and building trust (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Focusing the researcher's attention on the elements most pertinent to the study constitutes persistent involvement. For instance, I communicated with participants via phone, email, and interviews. Lastly, using triangulation to include member checking is essential because it allows the research data to be strengthened by providing the information to the participants for their review and potential feedback, as well as thorough verification of additional data sources such as news articles and police reports to ensure the accuracy of the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Patton, 2015). I frequently debrief the dissertation committee to avoid any problems with bias throughout the procedure.

**Transferability**

To ensure that the sample is diverse, the findings of a research study must be transferable to other contexts and generalizable to a wide range of situations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). According to (Korstjens & Moser 2018), the research study's goal, in this case, is to confirm that a thorough description is given to enable the reader to judge whether the findings apply to the reader's setting. I confirmed that the participants, research design, and settings were adequately described for this research study to ensure that the research findings can be used in future studies.

**Dependability**

Researchers have noted that dependability ensures that research remains consistent and acknowledges the logical connections between the research questions and design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Furthermore, Shenton (2004) also pointed out that reliability is attained when data analysis methods have been well-defined to the point where the research study can be replicated. To ensure this, the researcher constantly reviewed transcripts, field notes, and audio recordings to ensure that all strategies and procedures were consistent throughout the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

**Confirmability**

It is critical to eliminate researcher bias within a study, and confirmability ensures that this is possible and that the findings are neutral and solely from the research study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). According to Moustakas (1994), the researcher should refrain from making inferences and shift one's focus to verbatim transcript analysis to ensure confirmability. This study's data was obtained directly from interview transcripts

and study participants. In addition, each participant received the data analysis for their review; researchers refer to this process as member checking to guarantee that all information is reported accurately. Furthermore, even though I have personally experienced parental loss, these experiences were not highlighted at any point during the study.

### **Ethical Procedures**

According to Meadows (2003), the ethics committee must approve the use of human subjects. In this case, the subjects in the study were victim advocate professionals employed through the local sheriff's office who have a minimum of 3 years of experience providing services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. I applied to the Institutional Review Board of Walden University for review and approval to conduct the study (01-03-23-0985552.). Participants, confidentiality, data protection, and data collection were discussed, and a copy of the research interview was provided.

Many ethical issues can arise when conducting research, including participants withdrawing from the study, maintaining confidentiality, and ensuring anonymity (Ngozwana, 2018). Before beginning the interview, each participant was provided with an explanation of the study's purpose, confidentiality, benefits, and risks to ensure they were willing to continue being active. Once each participant agreed to continue, their consent form was signed and returned to schedule their interview. In addition, each participant was reminded that their interview would be recorded and that notes would be taken throughout the interview process. The researcher and dissertation committee also notified all participants that their transcripts would be reviewed. Breaks were provided

throughout the interview, and participants were closely monitored for signs of distress. No distress was observed, and the right to withdraw from the interview was properly communicated to each participant.

The participants were informed that the information gathered throughout data collection would remain confidential, and pseudonyms will be used for anonymity. After the interview, all audio recordings were replayed and transcribed verbatim before being distributed to each participant for verification. In addition, each participant was required to review and return feedback within a week of receipt. All interviews were stored using a personal recorder and USB drive, and all printed transcripts were locked in a file cabinet to maintain confidentiality. All collected information saved on my computer was encoded to ensure that the participant's name was not attached to any file and was destroyed once the study was complete. In addition, all participants were informed that the collected data would be shared among the research committee members.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 3, I analyzed generic qualitative research and the approach needed to enhance understanding of the challenges and opportunities of victim advocate professionals who provide victim support services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. An overview of the methodology was presented, which included the design, tradition, sampling, data collection, and analysis of the research study. The generic qualitative research approach was determined to be the appropriate method considering the focus of the study is on understanding an experience or an event. The

research question crafted is also based on using generic qualitative research as my research approach.

Central concepts, including bereavement, grief, and parental homicide, were discussed, and the ethical considerations and the researcher's role were highlighted. Additionally, a purposeful sample was essential for the research study after identifying the sampling strategy and the study's population. In addition, a directory provided by the South Carolina Law Enforcement Victim Advocate Association will be used to locate participants. Following the prescreen questionnaire process, the selected participants will electronically receive the informed consent forms. The participants who consent to the study will sign the informed consent document via Google Docs.

To identify crucial information from victim advocate professionals, all participants will participate in a 60–90 min semistructured interview following the final selection. This interview will adhere to a predetermined protocol. Within a week of receiving the transcripts, all interviews will be made available for review by the participants. I will also perform manual data analysis to identify pertinent themes and codes. In addition, I discussed problems with dependability, credibility, transferability, member verification, and trustworthiness. Ethical issues and their resolutions were also discussed, and participants could halt or disengage from the interview at any time. Confidentiality issues were also addressed.

Chapter 4 will summarize the study's findings based on the participants' valuable contributions. The chapter will include the study's setting, participant narratives, and demographic information. Along with addressing the study's research question, this



section will provide an overview of data acquisition and analysis. In addition, the themes and categories will be discussed, which may lead to identifying quotations germane to each theme.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

In this qualitative study, I examined victim advocate professionals' perceived challenges and opportunities in delivering services to children of homicide victims, a preventable public health issue that has detrimental effects on both victims and witnesses, increases health care costs, and has significant adverse effects on children directly impacted when a parent dies. The following research question was explored: What challenges and opportunities do victim advocates perceive in providing support to children who have experienced the loss of a parent to homicide? In Chapter 4, I discuss the study settings, participant demographics, data collection and analysis, and the findings. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the study's trustworthiness.

### **Setting**

The participants in this research study were interviewed in my office by Zoom or phone on a day and time that was convenient for them. The interviews were conducted in a secured room to ensure confidentiality and a distraction-free environment. Every interview was recorded using an audio device and transcribed using NVivo. The victim advocates were at various stages within their professional careers, ranging from 4 years of experience to 33 years of experience. The participating victim advocates were from all over South Carolina; participant demographics are shown in Table 1.

### **Demographics**

Ten victim advocates participated in the interviews. I selected participants based on the predetermined criteria of being a victim advocate professional with at least 3 years

of experience providing services to parentally bereaved children of homicide victims. All 10 victim advocates were from various local and state law enforcement agencies throughout South Carolina. The 10 participants included eight women and two men; the small inclusion of men may have affected male voice in the study. None of the participants had any relational or professional affiliation with me. The participants varied in age from 23 to 60 years old, and their professional experience ranged from 4 to 33 years. Table 1 shows the participants' years of experience, geographic location, and type of law enforcement agency at which they were employed during data collection. Identifiers are used instead of participants' names to ensure confidentiality.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

Participant no.	Years of experience	Geographical location (South Carolina region)	Law enforcement agency
1	6	Lowcountry	Local police
2	4	Midlands	Local police
3	10	Lowcountry	Local office
4	20	Lowcountry	Local police
5	7	Piedmont	Local police
6	12	Lowcountry	Local police
7	25	Midlands	Solicitor office
8	32	Midlands	Local office
9	33	Lowcountry	Local office
10	21	Lowcountry	Solicitor office

**Data Collection**

After I obtained Walden University Institutional Review Board approval on January 3, 2023, I emailed the participant invitation and screening guide (see Appendix A) to victim advocates listed in the South Carolina Law Enforcement Victim Advocate Association database. My invitation was emailed to 50 victim advocates in South

Carolina, reaching a wide range of potential participants. I began analyzing the responses of the participants to ensure they met the criteria. Two participants were selected, and one was eliminated because they lacked at least 3 years of experience working with parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. A copy of the consent form, which included mental health resources should mental distress arise, was emailed to the selected participant to ensure their participation. The first interview was conducted on January 19, 2023, after I began receiving consent forms.

The recruitment process lasted 92 days and yielded 12 responses. Based on the responses to the prescreen questionnaire, one of the participants was eliminated from the study. Eleven participants were selected, and a consent form was provided to them. Eleven consent forms were returned, but one participant withdrew, and another did not attend the scheduled interview. Fortunately, I conducted 10 interviews with participants between January 19 and April 21, 2023, with the final interview occurring on April 21, 2023.

I conducted all the interviews over phone or via Zoom on my computer, which varied in duration. The shortest interview lasted 15 min, 22 s, and the most extensive interview lasted 50 min, 48 s. Even though a few interviews were shorter than others, all participants were asked the same questions, and extensive data were collected. However, some participants provided more information than others.

Some participants even expressed their experience as a victim and how it guided their career choice as a LEVA. All of the participants were only interviewed once, and I used probing questions to get them to expound on some of their responses. All interviews

were recorded on an audio device, and I took notes throughout the interview. I followed the interview protocol (see Appendix B) to conduct the open-ended interviews with all participants.

To ensure that all transcriptions and data analysis were conducted correctly. I used the NVivo software to transcribe and analyze the participant's interviews. In terms of transcription, by using NVivo for transcribing, I could relieve the emotion of the interview and add richness to the transcript based on the field notes and observation to ensure accuracy. By using NVivo to analyze the data, discovering the various connections within the data was made more accessible. Selecting NVivo for analyzing the data allowed me to remain connected to the data and the LEVA's experiences.

I listened to the interview several times to ensure that NVivo transcriptions did not require edits. However, once the interview transcriptions were properly edited and error-free, they were reviewed and emailed to participants for member verification to ensure accuracy. Nine of the 10 participants responded, indicating that their transcripts were correct or required revisions, while one did not respond despite multiple reminders. The process of data analysis commenced after participants confirmed the accuracy of the information. All victim advocates were permitted breaks if emotions arose; fortunately, none were required during the interview. There were only two male participants, and one of them was not as outspoken as the others, so I had to repeat often and probe questions to verify that he was providing useful information.

## Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed during each interview session using the NVivo transcription software. All recordings were replayed multiple times to cross-reference my field notes and transcriptions to ensure they were error-free and accurately transcribed. Once it was determined that the interviews had been accurately transcribed, they were sent to the participants to be reviewed for accuracy, and once they were returned, I examined the transcripts to identify codes and themes (Susilo et al., 2021). Described a four-step process for data analysis which included:

1. **Data Familiarization:** The researcher conducts qualitative data immersion in their mind by reading the transcription and listening to the interview recording delicately to capture the impressions and emerging new themes (Green et al., 2007).
2. **Coding:** Assigning descriptive labels toward sentences, phrases, or words that contain ideas that are considered relevant, important, or repetitive (Green et al., 2007).
3. **Categorizing:** In the coding process, the researcher can choose which codes are considered very important and relevant, and then those codes are grouped into categories or sub-categories if possible (Saldaña, 2009).
4. **Logically Connecting Categories and Subcategories:** by reading the pattern of relationships and the hierarchy of categories and subcategories as a basis for making plausible explanations (Susilo et al., 2021).

The four-step procedure was applied to the transcripts of all ten participants. A total of 49 codes were generated based on the content of the transcripts, and they were categorized into distinct themes and color-coded to make them readily identifiable. Five themes, each accompanied by supporting quotations, were identified and subsequently categorized. The identified categories were challenges and opportunities. The 42 codes extracted from the interview transcripts were as follows:

- managing family feud
- not being able to remove the youth pain of the trauma
- not enough services
- psychological effects
- mental trauma
- strict stipulation on services for victims
- talking from a place that you have not experienced
- there is a lack of resource collaboration with one another
- trying not to offend anyone during a conversation
- you have to be willing to learn the criminal process so you can dispute false claims
- lack of understanding regarding the process
- 24-hr service provider
- amount of cases handled
- burnout
- families trying to manipulate

- feeling prepared, but not ready
- have to be willing to encourage parental cooperation
- having to convince victims to participate in services
- having to encourage counseling
- having to establish trust
- you have to be a team player
- learning victim rights and laws
- challenging but rewarding
- number of years as an advocate
- being a victim prepared me for this job
- career advancement
- discovering an outlet
- you have to practice self-care
- feeling appreciated by victims
- grows faith
- it's ministry
- have to be diverse in the services offered
- have to be emotionally available
- having the opportunity to assist families achieve justice
- it forms relationships
- you have to rely on others in the field
- it strengthens your soft skills



- job satisfaction
- postsecondary education
- time management
- training
- you have to be teachable

Table 2 shows the specified categories and associated themes.

**Table 2**

*Categories and Associated Themes*

Category	Theme
Challenges	Vicarious trauma and burnout The feeling of being prepared but not ready The need to establish trust
Opportunities	Endless training opportunities Expression of appreciation from victims

**Evidence of Trustworthiness**

**Credibility**

The participants were contacted via email, telephone, and, in rare instances, text message. At the initial point of contact, all participants were instructed to contact me via the email address provided by Walden University. All participants complied with the protocol by completing the prescreening questionnaire and the consent form. All participants were informed that they could contact me via email with any questions or concerns throughout the process, and all participants confirmed that there were no further questions before the interview. The initial contact with the participants, prolonged

engagement (Shenton, 2004), was conducted exclusively via email to provide the participant with the required forms and scheduling options. Text messages were used infrequently to notify a few participants of their scheduled interviews. Email and telephone contact were the primary means of communication.

The participants' responses were evaluated and eliminated if they did not satisfy the study's criteria. The interviews were scheduled once the participants were selected, completed, and returned the consent form. However, before the interview started, the participants were verbally reminded that their participation was voluntary and they could terminate their participation at any time; according to Shenton (2004), this assisted in ensuring the study remained credible. All research participants agreed to proceed, and open-ended questions were asked using an interview protocol to allow LEVA's participants to freely express their experience in delivering services to children of homicide victims.

NVivo audio recorded and transcribed all interviews, which were reviewed for accuracy by repeatedly listening to the audio tape. Within a week of completion, the interviews were transcribed, and I emailed transcripts to each participant for approval, a process known as member checking. In addition, 9 of the 10 participants took part in the member-checking process; 8 acknowledged that all of the information was valid, 1 made minor modifications, and one did not reply to the member-checking process. However, the member-checking procedure did not affect the participants' responses.

**Transferability**

Transferability, as defined by Noble and Smith (2015), relates to the study's findings in ensuring that the sample is varied, transferable to different contexts, and the extent to which the conclusions may be expanded. For this study, as much information as possible was provided about the participants' demographics and settings so that future researchers may replicate or generalize the results to other populations. However, the participants in this study were not restricted to a single region in the state of South Carolina, and their varied career experiences helped to generalize the results.

**Dependability**

Dependability ensures the consistency of the study and highlights the connection between the research question and design (Noble & Smith, 2015). To ensure dependability, all participants were interviewed using the same questions and guidelines to maintain consistency. In addition, notes were collected, and the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Before having the participant evaluate the transcript, I listened to and reviewed it for accuracy one final time. Finally, I used NVivo to assist me throughout coding to identify each code and theme correctly.

**Confirmability**

To guarantee confirmability, the researcher should avoid forming conclusions and evaluate the transcripts directly, according to (Nowell et al., 2017). Instead of acting as more than an interviewer, I focused on ensuring that the study and the participants' experiences were free of bias. As someone who had lost a parent at a young age, it was crucial to maintain the interviewer role throughout the research. Before any participant

was interviewed, Walden's Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the interview protocol. The transcripts were sent to the participants for review after completing the interviews.

## **Results**

The results presented in this section will be derived from the responses of ten participants to my research study question. In addition, be advised that to maintain the confidentiality of my study participants; pseudonyms will be used for the participants. To help clarify the study's findings, I will identify and explain the categories and themes supported by participant quotations in this section. Finally, the results of the research question were highlighted.

### **Category 1: Challenges**

The 10 participants spoke about the challenges they encounter throughout their professional careers as they provide services to children of homicide victims. All the participants mentioned that this profession as a career could be described as challenging but rewarding. The majority of the participants revealed that they use various self-care methods, such as counseling, religious factors, vacation, and peer support, to aid them throughout their professional career as a Leva. Three themes were identified, vicarious trauma and burnout, feeling prepared but not ready, and the burden of establishing trust.

#### ***Theme 1: Vicarious Trauma and Burnout***

The participants mentioned experiencing vicarious trauma resulting in negative psychological (e.g., secondary traumatic stress disorder) as a result of delivering services to children of homicide victims. Some STS disorder effects described by the participants

were fatigue, anxiety, and feelings of re-experiencing various cases they had been exposed to throughout their professional career as LEVA. Additionally, the participants also expressed sadness that nothing could be done to make the traumatic experience of the children of homicide victims go away. As evidenced by the participants' tone and facial expressions throughout the interview, several participant interviews in response to specific queries revealed sadness.

Participant 1 is a LEVA employed through a police station in the Low-Country region of South Carolina. Participant 1 immediately started working as a LEVA after college and has had the opportunity to deliver services to children of homicide victims for the past 6 years. Participant 1 stated that the first homicide victim was a male who had been shot, left in a ditch, and later found by a police officer. Participant 1 noted that this victim had left behind one son and stated they had been assigned approximately 200 more cases since their initial case. Even though Participant 1 said they had been assigned to over 200 cases, each played an intricate part in their experience with vicarious trauma, resulting in secondary traumatic stress disorder.

As a victim advocate, you are exposed to so many traumatic experiences while providing services to victims that often, you become shattered, overwhelmed, and even left experiencing nightmares. I believe all these things have played a part in my battle with STS. .

High burnout is common for those suffering from vicarious trauma. Participant 2 experienced vicarious trauma after being assigned to a homicide that resulted in the death of both parents.

Throughout the process of this case, the only thing I wanted to do after work and on the weekends was lay in bed. I felt helpless and quickly became detached from work and my social life (Participant 2, 1/30/23).

Fatigue or illness was another symptom of vicarious trauma that was revealed during data collection. Participant 3 was assigned to a homicide where an ex-boyfriend shot and killed a mother of five children. Throughout this case, Participant 3 was required to assist in delivering various services to the victim's children while navigating the COVID pandemic.

As a mother of two children, my heart was broken to see five children lose their mother to such a senseless act. And I felt my duty was to ensure that all 5 children had adequate resources to assist them through their grief process. During this process, I began to work longer hours, and when I wasn't at work, I only thought about the victim's five children. As a result, I suffered from stress and headaches, resulting in a mild stroke. I eventually had to take time away from work to heal (Participant 3, 1/31/23).

Participant 4 also stated she felt constantly fatigued throughout the last 3 years due to the rise of homicide cases, ultimately resulting in her having a substantial increase in caseloads. However, unlike the prior years, pre-Covid pandemic participant 4 noted that delivering services to children of homicide victims was not in the top 5 services provided by her and her colleagues.

I felt overwhelmed. Every time I turned around, I was writing another death notification or on the phone trying to locate free services for the victim's children.

Whenever I experienced fatigued from my job, I go home, turn everything off, and sleep. I sleep for hours and sometimes days (Participant 4, 2/27/23).

Becoming paranoid is a common effect for those suffering from vicarious trauma. Participant 5 became a LEVA immediately after college and has been providing service to children of homicide victims for 6 years. Participant 5 noted that she was assigned a case where a father had been murdered due to gun violence and was discovered by his 18-year-old child. Two months later, his son was gunned down in the middle of the street due to gun violence.

I immediately felt guilty when I was notified of his death. As a result of experiencing cases like this, I have become very paranoid, and often it's difficult for me to make friends because they often can't relate to me (Participant 3/1/23).

The participants acknowledged their experiences with vicarious trauma and burnout by providing direct insight into their various challenges as they provide services to children of homicide victims. Symptoms include nightmares, avoiding people or activities, fatigue or illness, and guilt. All symptoms that participants noted were the direct impact of being a LEVA that provides direct services to children who have lost a parent to homicide.

### ***Theme 2: The Feeling of Being Prepared but Not Ready***

During the transition from training to becoming a certified LEVA, being assigned to one's first homicide case, and then providing services to children who have lost a parent to homicide. It was shared during data collection that many participants became overwhelmed due to feeling prepared but not ready to encounter the various factors that

arise when providing services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims.

Participant 7 shared the same sentiments and demonstrated much passion regarding her experience when asked about her first encounter providing services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims.

Oh, not good. I remember my first case like it was yesterday. I arrived at orientation, and as soon as orientation was completed. I was instructed to report to my designated office. As I exited the elevator, I was greeted by a supervisor with a folder and ordered to go and speak with my first homicide victim, wife, and child. I had received prior training, but it was my first time providing services to a child that had lost their parent to homicide due to gun violence. I immediately became overwhelmed with what I should do/say, even though my credentials stated that I was more than prepared to deliver services to children of homicide victims (Participant 7, 3/13/23).

Participant 10 was asked during the interview if she shared the same sentiments as other LEVAs regarding their experience of feeling prepared but not ready during their initial contact with a parentally bereaved youth of a homicide victim. Participant 10 noted that despite the required training provided by the South Carolina Law Enforcement Victim Advocate Association and their local police station. Nothing prepared her for the overwhelming emotional feelings that she encountered.

As the first victim advocate of a local police station, I believed that I was ready to encounter anything, such as providing services to children of homicide victims, because I knew I was adequately trained and received all the appropriate



certificates that were required of me. But it wasn't until I encountered my first parentally bereaved youth of a homicide victim that I quickly became overwhelmed with the daunting responsibility of providing victim advocate support to such a young and innocent child (Participant 9, 3/29/23).

Participant 5 provided insight into why she believes many LEVAs can relate to feeling prepared but not ready when encountering their first parentally bereaved youth of a homicide victim. Participant 5 noted that this is one of the reasons why she believes one must be called by a higher power to work as a LEVA.

As a LEVA, I have not been a victim of a crime nor experienced the death of any of my parents. Often, I feel that I'm not equipped to provide services to children of homicide victims. I can't say I know how you feel because I don't. And I can't say you will overcome this because I don't know that. So, this is why I believe that many victim advocates experience feeling prepared but not ready because I believe that no training can adequately prepare someone like firsthand experiencing it for yourself (Participant 5, 3/1/23).

The participants provided valuable insight regarding their direct experience of feeling prepared but not ready during their first encounter with providing services to parentally bereaved children of homicide victims. By using direct quotes from LEVAs, I was able to understand the magnitude of this challenge and how it affects the majority of the study participants. All experiences that participants noted were the direct impact of being a victim advocate who provides direct services to children who have lost a parent to homicide.

### ***Theme 3: The Need to Establish Trust***

Several research participants emphasized the challenges associated with establishing trust with parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. As noted by the participants, LEVAs frequently are tasked with the hardship of establishing trust with homicide victims' children during a transition caused by a traumatic experience. It has been a little over 32 years since Participant 8 was assigned to her first parentally bereaved youth of a homicide victim.

As a LEVA, unfortunately, I have had the task of providing victim support to roughly over a thousand kids throughout my professional career. As a LEVA, you encounter many challenges in this profession, but one of the biggest challenges I have always faced is trying to gain the trust of the children I have been assigned to. This is often challenging because, depending on the upbringing of their community, they are often taught not to trust the police (Participant 8, 3/13/23).

Participant 9 reports struggling with the same challenge throughout her career as a Leva. She has reported that it is still an ongoing battle when providing services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims.

As I enter my 33<sup>rd</sup> year as a LEVA, I can genuinely say there isn't anything I have not seen or heard. But one of the things that still pulls at my heartstrings is when I have to provide services to children who have lost a parent. Not only is this a sad task to do, but this task is often challenging. As an older person, they often don't feel comfortable telling me things because I don't look like them or may think

that I may not be able to relate to them. So, I try my best to establish trust with them, but I'm not always as successful as I would like (Participant 9, 3/29/23).

Participant 1 expressed frustration with the challenges associated with establishing trust with parentally bereaved youth and often feels that sometimes to accomplish this task, one must be willing to think outside the box. He later described instances when thinking out of the box did not suffice and he had to rely on colleagues for advice.

So, one thing, even though establishing trust could easily be in the top 5 most challenging things to do as a LEVA. It's one of the tasks I refuse to allow to defeat me because I genuinely love my job as a LEVA, and I believe it isn't just a job; it's ministry. One thing I always tell parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims when I'm trying to establish trust with them is regardless of how insignificant you believe it is or how little it may mean to others, creating some memory of something you feel strongly about is essential (Participant 1, 1/19/23).

Participant 4 also stated she constantly experiences challenges with establishing trust with parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims and often believes that this challenge will only get worse due to the many factors displayed in various communities.

I am working hard each day to overcome this challenge of establishing trust with parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. As a LEVA providing services to children for over 20 years, I acknowledge this is a significant challenge. As a director, it's my job to lighten the load by doing all I can to assist with this process for my employees (Participant 4, 2/27/23).

The participants provided awareness as they elaborated on their challenges of establishing trust with parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. A few participants mentioned their reasoning on why they believe this is a challenge for many and what methods they have used to help lighten the burden of this challenge. The individual's experience regarding establishing trust plays an intricate part in acknowledging this challenge for LEVAs. In the next section, I will discuss the opportunities for victim advocate professionals in delivering services to children of homicide victims.

### **Category 2: Opportunities**

The participants spoke about the various opportunities they have encountered throughout their careers providing services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. All the participants struggled with selecting what they noted as their top three opportunities throughout their professional careers; some described this process as challenging. Most participants stated their top three, and others provided up to 5 responses. Two themes were identified, endless training opportunities and receiving appreciation from victims.

#### ***Theme 4: Endless Training Opportunities***

The participants discussed in detail how they were offered countless opportunities to take advantage of training opportunities provided by the South Carolina Law Enforcement Victim Advocate Association and their employer (law enforcement agency). Although it was noted during data collection that there is a minimum number of hours, a LEVA must receive to remain in compliance with the SC LEVA Association. Participant

5 reported that despite continuous training opportunities, it's up to the LEVA to seek those additional resources.

As a LEVA that love improving their skills and always seeks training, I always ask my supervisor to send me to conferences and workshops. There are thousands of workshops, trainings, and seminars that take place each year. So, for example, there are many topics at the conferences we attend, such as how to be a better advocate and even self-care. I always tell people that being a LEVA is the best job in the world because this is one of the only professions I know that offers countless opportunities (Participant 5, 3/1/23).

In addition, Participant 5 also noted that her supervisor is an advocate for encouraging her and other victim advocates to take advantage of all of the training opportunities presented to them. Also, Participant 4 echoed a similar response regarding the endless training opportunities provided to advocates.

As a director with over 20 years of experience as a LEVA, I must ensure that the LEVAs under my leadership are properly prepared. So I'm always sending them to trainings, workshops, and seminars throughout the state. I also tell new LEVAs that being a LEVA is what you make it and that the best way to become a better LEVA is to take advantage of as many pieces of training as possible. My office even covers all expenses associated with them (Participant 4, 2/27/23).

Participant 2 stated that throughout his professional career, he has had endless training opportunities provided to him. He attended training and webinars through virtual platforms even during the COVID pandemic. In addition, he noted that he enjoyed

attending training and that all victim advocates should attend as many as possible (Participant 2, 1/30/23). Participant 1 appreciated the support received through his training opportunities. It forced him to form relationships with other LEVAs across the state and provided him with endless opportunities to learn and grow as a LEVA.

There are so many opportunities for training as a LEVA. For example, as a LEVA, we have training on advocacy and conferences to teach us about self-care, and my employer provides in-house training multiple times a year...Oh Yea, I almost forgot, we even attend some training provided by the Office for Victims of Crime (Participant 1, 1/19/23).

Participant 7 stated that she acknowledged that having endless training opportunities has been one of the most significant opportunities throughout her 24 years as a LEVA. Although Participant 7 describes herself as a veteran of the field, she never believes that one should ever stop taking advantage of training provided to them.

Receiving more than the required hours of training by the state is essential to do this job properly. As a director with over 23 years of experience, I ensure all my employees are constantly attending workshops, training, seminars, and whatever else I believe may benefit their role as a LEVA. I think that this is my way of providing them with endless training opportunities (Participant 7, 3/13/23)

The training opportunities provided to LEVAs are endless. To support this theme, participants provided insight into their own experiences regarding the opportunities surrounding training. As noted by participants, this is a critical component as it allows LEVAs to form relationships and gain needed tools to serve parentally bereaved youth of

homicide victims. All experiences that participants noted were the direct impact of being a LEVA that provides direct services to children who have lost a parent to homicide.

***Theme 5: Expressions of Appreciation From Victims***

The participants were asked to recall their top 3 most memorable moments as a LEVA providing services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. Many of the participants expressed their gratitude for the opportunities provided to them. The participants noted that receiving any form of appreciation from parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims is considered one of the greatest highlights of the various opportunities that have been presented to them throughout their professional careers. As expressed by Participant 1, during data collection, he provided insight into some of the opportunities provided to him while receiving appreciation from victims.

As a LEVA, frequently, we form strong relationships with parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims throughout working with them. As a result, many of them began to express their appreciation by inviting me to family events like cookouts. Once, I even got invited to attend the graduation of one of the parentally bereaved youths I was assigned to. As a LEVA, these are the moments, or should I say, opportunities I enjoy the most about my job (Participant 1, 1/19/23).

Participant 3 echoed Participant 1's responses and mentioned that throughout her 10 years as LEVA, she had been afforded the opportunity to receive appreciation from many of the parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims.

I love receiving calls from the parentally bereaved youth I have worked with throughout my career, expressing their appreciation. For me, receiving those types of calls is one of the many reasons I have dedicated the last 10 years to this work. I have had the opportunity to attend the High school and college graduations of the children I have been assigned to, and I can't even count the number of times I have been invited to family cookouts (Participant 3, 1/31/23).

Participant 4 recalled her experiences surrounding the opportunities provided to her as she received appreciation from parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. She felt that each opportunity provided to her played an intricate role in her professional career.

There are no words to adequately describe how it feels to receive a call from parentally bereaved youth months or years later expressing their gratitude by thanking you for what you've done for them or saying that they are graduating from high school or college. I've also had some come to my office years later to say thank you and bring their kids (Participant 4, 2/27/23).

Participant 5 also provided insight into her experiences with receiving appreciation from parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims:

I often tend to form lasting relationships with most of the parentally bereaved youth I am assigned to. I often receive appreciation calls and texts. I was recently invited this past year to one of the youths I was assigned to high school graduation (Participant 5, 3/1/23).



Participant 8 expressed extreme appreciation when asked about the opportunities surrounding receiving appreciation from victims. She informed us that throughout the 32 years of providing services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims, these encounters continue to encourage and motivate her as a professional.

My most memorable moment was being thanked and then asked to attend the wedding of one of the parentally bereaved youths I had been assigned to during one of my first cases as a LEVA. Not only have I attended the wedding of this youth, now an adult, but I've attended their high school and college graduation (Participant 8, 3/13/23)

Receiving appreciation is a critical component and provides the majority of LEVAs with the opportunity to be thanked for their diligent work as they provide services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. In addition, gaining insight into the various opportunities afforded each participant to elaborate on their experiences regarding the forms of appreciation. Furthermore, it was discovered through each participant's response how the opportunities to receive appreciation encouraged and motivated them during challenging times.

### **Research Question**

The research question that propelled my research study is what challenges and opportunities do victim advocates perceive in providing support to children who have experienced the loss of a parent to homicide? Understanding the severity of the findings of my research question is vital to the success of victim advocates who provide services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. With my research participants'

assistance, I identified three challenges and two opportunities during data analysis. They were vicarious trauma and Burnout, feeling prepared but not ready, and having to establish trust, and the two opportunities discovered were endless training opportunities and receiving appreciation from victims. Therefore, I concluded that even though resources have been devoted to victim advocates who provide services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims, there is still a great need for more resources, mechanisms, and policies that directly impact my research study's identified challenges.

### **Summary**

This study examined the challenges and opportunities among victim advocate professionals in delivering services to children of homicide victims. Participants hailed from throughout South Carolina, received professional training from the South Carolina Law Enforcement Victim Advocate Association, and had at least 3 years of experience providing services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. By exploring the commonalities in the participant's experiences, the study discovered three challenges and two opportunities that victim advocates encounter as they provide services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. The three challenges were STS disorder, feeling prepared but not ready, having to establish trust, and the two opportunities were endless training opportunities and receiving appreciation from victims.

As participants noted, vicarious trauma is a reoccurring challenge that many encounter throughout their career providing services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. In addition, the participants expressed experiencing various effects, such as sadness, fatigue, anxiety, and nightmares. Not only did the participants note their

experiences with vicarious trauma, but they also acknowledged the challenges associated with feeling prepared but not ready. Most participants reported feeling overwhelmed with the responsibility even though they believed they had received adequate training. In addition, the Participants also noted the struggles with establishing trust. Research participants indicated that this is attributed to various factors that arise within the communities they serve.

Unlike the challenges noted, many participants took pride in expressing the opportunities presented to them, such as being afforded endless opportunities for training. The South Carolina Law Enforcement Victim Advocate Association and their local agency provided many training opportunities, discussed through the participant's responses. In addition, participants repeatedly noted that receiving any form of appreciation from parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims is considered one of the greatest highlights of the various opportunities presented to them throughout their professional careers. Lastly, I concluded Chapter 4 by restating my research study research question and articulating its findings.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

In this qualitative study, I examined the challenges and opportunities as perceived by victim advocate professionals in delivering services to children of homicide victims. Because prior research primarily focused on service compensation and adult victim service programs, I examined child victim services from the perspective of victim advocates. I employed a generic qualitative methodology featuring open-ended interviews to enable participants to provide in-depth responses regarding their professional experiences as victim advocates. The study was based on the experiences of eight female and two male participants; the requirements for each participant were identical, as they all had at least 3 years of experience delivering services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. Analysis of the participants' experiences yielded multiple codes, contributing to the formulation of two categories and five themes. The identified categories were challenges and opportunities. The participant's experiences regarding the challenges varied in various ways, including experiencing vicarious trauma and burnout due to the indirect exposure to trauma, feeling prepared but not ready when first encountering a youth, and having to establish trust to deliver services effectively. Opportunities also varied among the participants, such as the perception of endless training opportunities through the South Carolina Law Enforcement Victim Advocate Association and receipt of appreciation from victims. In this chapter, I interpret the findings, discuss the limitations of the research, offer recommendations, and provide a conclusion to the study.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

Child victim support studies can contribute to a better understanding of service providers. This exploration into victim advocates who were members of the South Carolina Law Enforcement Victim Advocate Association substantiates the need for increased research into the barriers facing victim advocates who provide services to parentally bereaved youth. This information also fills a void in the literature regarding child victim services from the victim advocate's perspective. In this section, I expand on the study's findings and compare them to prior research.

From the perspective of the participants, who deliver services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims, the findings revealed that the challenges and opportunities that are experienced are not a recent phenomenon but are experienced daily due to the constant interaction with traumatized populations lack mechanisms, and lack of governmental resources. All interviewed participants confirmed the findings and were consistent with the literature results provided in Chapter 2. In addition, the literature indicated that while victim advocates may receive the necessary training to work with victims, they may not be as prepared for the potential emotional side effects of working with traumatized populations (Helpingstine et al., 2021). Understanding this is critical because the majority of the research participants noted during data collection that they all received adequate training to deliver services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims but quickly realized that they were unprepared for the emotional and traumatic exposure.

The trepidation they felt is crucial because victim advocates are tasked with assisting a person through what is often considered the most emotionally trying and traumatic experience of one's life, gaining a glimpse into the emotional turmoil that is the reality of the survivor's life (De La Rue et al., 2022). Work with victims has a documented high risk for the development of vicarious trauma and burnout due to this challenge, resulting in STS disorder (Globokar & Erez, 2019). As noted by each research participant, vicarious trauma is an aspect of the profession that most victim advocates will encounter throughout their professional careers resulting in a high burnout rate. As Hallinan et al. (2021) noted, exposure to vicarious trauma includes burnout and increased risk for mental health conditions, including PTSD and depression, as well as increased medical conditions (Helpingstine et al., 2021).

As repeatedly noted through the research, one aspect that is often explored by those who work with trauma survivors and parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims is burnout. Freudenberger (1974, as cited in Helpingstine et al., 2021) coined the term *burnout* to describe the consequences of severe stress in the helping professions and defined it as feeling exhausted. In addition, Maslach (1982, as cited in Helpingstine et al., 2021) further described burnout as a process in response great emotional stress of engaging deeply with other people, especially troubled people. Understanding this concept is crucial because previous research has affirmed that regular exposure to traumatic material from clients is associated with negative mental health outcomes, such as burnout.

Burnout is often noted to result in physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual exhaustion from providing services to vulnerable populations (Hallinan et al., 2021), which is vital because it acknowledges the responses gathered during data collection from participants who noted their experiences of feeling inadequate when delivering services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. In addition, the research participants also stated that they often encounter hardship in establishing relationships with victims.

As noted in the literature, researchers have stated that victims are not always accepting of the services provided by advocates when experiencing traumatic events (Globokar & Erez, 2019). For instance, according to the research participants, victims sometimes feared that communicating with victim advocates could have legal repercussions or that victim advocates would be insensitive to their plight. Understanding this challenge is essential for the success of victim advocates who provide services to parentally bereaved youth, as a victim advocate must build relationships with the local community so that crime survivors will trust them and be willing to access their office and the services that accompany it (De La Rue et al., 2022). During data collection, each participant acknowledged that gaining trust was one of their primary challenges within their community. In addition, victim advocates recognized the need to be immersed within the community to build better trust.

Understanding these three challenges and how they correlate with my theoretical research framework is critical to my findings because it highlights the significance of the need to implement adequate resources and how they positively or negatively impact the

world in which individuals live. Furthermore, understanding the three challenges and the correlation between policy feedback theories is critical because vicarious trauma & burnout, feeling prepared but not ready, and having to establish trust are all challenges that can be improved with the successful implementation of adequate resources.

According to Mettler and SoRelle (2018), policy feedback theory postulates that when a policy becomes established, and resources are devoted to programs, it helps structure current activity and provides advantages for some groups more than others. This theory is critical because even though policy makers have implemented policies and devoted resources to assist victim advocates who deliver services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims, the findings show that there is still a need. For example, the research findings call for the implementation of adequate mechanisms to help aid in the various challenges experienced as a service provider delivering services to parentally bereaved youth.

Understanding this growing need is critical because it would serve as a tool to help maintain and recruit victim advocates who can adequately provide services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. In addition, it will enable victim advocates to properly develop relationships with the community, allowing crime survivors to trust them and use the available services. De La Rue et al. (2022) reported that numerous organizations have devised laws, compensation programs, and other supports to meet crime victims' needs better. Furthermore, bringing awareness of victim advocates' challenges as they provide services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide



victims will be a tool for policy makers as needed resources and policies are initiated for victim advocates.

Unlike the challenges that have already been highlighted in this chapter, two opportunities emerged during the data analysis process. First, it was acknowledged that there are endless training opportunities. This theme was supported by prior research because, as previously noted, victim advocates must receive specialized training before working with victims, and the number of required hours of training for an advocate may vary depending on the agency and the type of services that will be provided (Boateng & Abess, 2017). According to, victim advocates can take advantage of over a thousand conferences, training, and other events each year due to the vast amount of governmental bodies developing policies and additional support to assist with the needs of victim advocates (De La Rue et al., 2022; *Events / OVC*, 2023).

In addition, the research participants noted one of the most significant opportunities presented to them was receiving appreciation from parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. Researchers indicate that when appreciation is displayed toward service providers for their care and work, they become reenergized for their jobs and lives in general (Tang et al., 2022). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that gratitude can improve the well-being of those who experience or express it and strengthen social connections between individuals and their benefactors (Tang et al., 2022). This quality is vital because it acknowledges this opportunity and its importance on victim advocates who deliver services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The research has several limitations. The fact that data was only collected from Victim Advocates who are members of the South Carolina Law Enforcement Victim Advocate Association using purposive sampling was perhaps the most significant. Thus, the research findings cannot be generalized to other LEVAs in other states that provide services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims.

Due to the limited sample size of 10 participants, the number of participants may be a limitation. However, I reached data saturation by the time I got to the 10<sup>th</sup> research participant; it would have been ideal if the study had involved many more local victim advocates from the SC Law Enforcement Victim Advocate Association who provide services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. The study's findings were only pertinent to qualitative and not quantitative methods. Qualitative research findings are accurate, applicable to other studies, convey the participant's contribution, and are free from researcher bias (Rudestam & Newton, 2015a).

### **Recommendations**

First, I recommend that further research be carried out on victim advocates perspectives on the challenges and opportunities of providing child victim support to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims, not limited to South Carolina but expanded to the other 49 states within the United States. Incorporating other states will aid in comprehensively evaluating the challenges and opportunities that impact current policies or the potential creation and implementation of new policies that address the

research study phenomenon. Secondly, I recommend applying a mixed-methods approach in subsequent research to have a broader and comparative view of the topic.

Through the participants' responses, I deduced a few administrative and governmental changes that involve implementing adequate mechanisms to aid the various challenges experienced by victim advocates who provide services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims; hence as part of my study recommendations. I recommend the following: First, I recommend an effective institutional collaboration, coordination, monitoring, and evaluation of the current mechanism that each law enforcement agency provides to victim advocates who deliver services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. Secondly, I recommend increasing resources implemented by the policy makers to help reduce the adverse effects experienced by victim advocates who provide services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims.

In addition, I would recommend creating more awareness regarding the various challenges that victim advocates encounter. To increase community engagement with community members and other professional support, it would be essential to raise awareness. Finally, I would suggest policy modifications that resolve identified obstacles to aid victims' advocates in performing their duties.

### **Implications**

The positive social change impact of my research study impacts both the individual and organizational levels. It allows the participants to articulate the challenges and opportunities of delivering services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. I also brought to the foreground the participant's assessments and appreciation of the

importance of adequate mechanisms and resources to address the challenges experienced by victim advocates who deliver services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims.

Implementing proper mechanisms will serve as a tool for recruiting and equipping victim advocates with the resources needed to handle the influx of parentally bereaved cases properly. Therefore, the study's findings will play a critical role by highlighting and creating awareness surrounding the challenges and opportunities that impact victim advocates who deliver services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. The research and interview appeared to be well appreciated by all of the research participants because of the potential opportunity to help direct policy and service provisions toward those most in need of preventive intervention and resources. Their capacity to convey their ideas and feelings and the opportunity to participate in the study as volunteers appeared to provide solace to many of them.

Most participants repeatedly urged that the research study's findings be published as soon as possible to assist government and law enforcement agencies in implementing additional mechanisms and resources for the victim advocates who provide services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. This positive drive and interest shown in the research by the participants is a positive social change that gets the respective organizations represented by these participants to take a second look at assessing the challenges and opportunities and their respective roles in its implementation to help the vulnerable in society, like parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims.

My research findings will further benefit strengthening institutions, policy drafters, academia, researchers, and other stakeholders addressing the challenges and opportunities of providing victim advocate support to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. In terms of practice, the study's findings could serve as a reference source for evaluating policies and mechanisms implemented to aid victim advocates. Thus, the study's findings may help policy makers adjust to the current or develop new policies that address the challenges and opportunities presented within the research study for victim advocates who deliver services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims.

Finally, the findings and recommendations will help provide future researchers with ideas regarding victim advocate research. From the participants' standpoint, it is imperative to understand how the challenges and opportunities of delivering services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims' impact those most needing preventive interventions and resources. Getting relevant information on the various challenges and opportunities of providing services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims could be of immense essence to improving the current challenges experienced by victim advocates. Hopefully, the research will contribute to the victim advocate literature, which can be used as secondary data or reviewed by prospective researchers and students for further or other empirical studies on victim advocacy policies.

### **Conclusion**

Homicide crosses all socio-economic, racial, ethnic, educational, and religious lines and is ranked the 3rd leading cause of parental death for ages 0-25 at 11.7% (CDC,

2018). This is crucial because the death of a parent is one of the most distressing life events a child or youth can endure, frequently resulting in both short- and long-term effects. Guided by Policy feedback theory, this research study attempted to fill the gap in the literature surrounding the lack of information surrounding the challenges and opportunities that victim advocate professionals encounter as they provide services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims.

Highlighting the challenges and opportunities is critical because it provides the knowledge needed to support victim advocates to better complete their essential duties (De La Rue et al., 2022). In addition, victim advocates play a crucial role in our judicial systems by providing services such as emotional support, in-person counseling, educational information, resource referral, assistance completing paperwork (e.g., restraining orders), and accompaniment to court and other appointments to sometimes forgotten or neglected victims of crimes (De La Rue et al., 2022). Yet, despite these admirable efforts, victim advocates are often overlooked, resulting in a greater need for more mechanisms, policies, and resources. As repeatedly mentioned, advocates have a challenging job requiring them to attend to the human reality of violent crimes, and even with all the challenges, many victim advocates note that their careers are mainly rewarding because they provide victims of crime with services that will hopefully improve their lives (De La Rue et al., 2022).

The participants' voluntary contribution to the study through various interviews revealed their commitment to assist in whatever way, motivated by their passion for serving the vulnerable, especially the parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims,

allowed me to discover the three challenges (Vicarious trauma & Burnout, feeling prepared but not ready, having to establish trust), and the two opportunities (endless training opportunities, and receiving appreciation from victims) that present themselves while delivering services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. In conclusion, my research on victim advocates perspectives of the challenges and opportunities of providing child victim support was more than research. It was an opportunity for personal growth and for LEVAs to provide insight through their perspectives. The result is a call for implementing adequate mechanisms, policies, and resources so that victim advocates can rightly deliver services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims.

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## Appendix A: Participant Screening Guide

Thank you for contacting me with your interest in the study on challenges and opportunities of providing child victims support. I have a few questions to ask you to ensure your experience matches this study. This will take about 10 minutes to complete.

### **Contact Information**

1. Name:
2. Phone Number:
3. Email Address:

### **Screening Information**

1. Are you over the age of 21?
2. Do you have a minimum of 3 years working with parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims?
3. Are you a member of the South Carolina Law Enforcement Victim Advocate Association?
4. Have you provided services to a parentally bereaved youth within the last year?
5. Are you willing to provide information regarding the challenges and opportunities of providing victim support to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims?
6. Are you comfortable with having your interview recorded?
7. Will you be willing to review and return your interview transcripts to the researcher to ensure the information is accurate?

## Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Introduction: Thank you \_\_\_\_\_ for agreeing to be a part of my doctoral journey and for sharing your experiences regarding the Challenges & Opportunities of Providing Child Victims Support. Let me start by acknowledging your bravery and thank you for the hard work you display each day. I want to inform you that the nature of the questions may be a bit challenging to answer, so take your time and respond to the best of your knowledge. This study is voluntary; you are welcome to take breaks. I also wanted to remind you that you can withdraw from this interview at any time without penalty. Additionally, this interview will be kept confidential; however, this interview will be recorded, and I will take notes throughout the interview.

I want to remind you the purpose of this study focuses on the challenges and opportunities of providing child victims support to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims. This project will address the research question, “What challenges and opportunities do victim advocates perceive in providing support to children who have experienced the loss of a parent to homicide?”

I want to take this time to review the informed consent you previously provided. I want to confirm you are still consenting to the recorded interview. Would you still like to participate? YES/NO, okay, great! Let’s get started or thank you for your time!

### Questions

1. How long have you been a victim advocate professional?
2. What training would you say is essential to provide service to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims?
3. Do you feel you were properly prepared when you first encountered your first parentally bereaved youth?
4. After \_\_\_\_\_ years. Do you still feel this way when encountering parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims?
5. How many parentally bereaved youth have you had the opportunity to provide services to?
6. Are there adequate resources for victim advocate professionals that provide services to parentally bereaved youth?
7. How would you describe providing services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims?
8. What challenges have you encountered providing services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims?
9. If you had to choose, what would be your top 3 challenges that you have encountered during the \_\_\_\_\_ years of providing services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims?
10. Have you ever experienced STS (Secondary Traumatic Stress) as a victim advocate professional? If so, what do you believe contributed to it?



11. What are your top 3 most memorable moments when providing services to parentally bereaved youth of homicide victims?

**Ending:** Those are all the questions I have for you \_\_\_\_\_. Thank you for taking time out of your schedule to participate in this study and sharing your experiences regarding the Challenges & Opportunities of Providing Child Victims Support. Just a brief reminder that this interview will be transcribed and forwarded to you, so I just ask that you return it within a week of receipt to confirm that the information is correct. Additionally, the information obtained will be confidential. However, your interview will assist in answering the research question: What challenges and opportunities do victim advocates perceive in providing support to children who have experienced the loss of a parent to homicide? Are there any questions that you may have for me?