



# VictimConnect Evaluability Assessment

## Toolkit Resource 3

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This brief is the third of seven toolkit resources supporting the Urban Institute’s formative evaluation of the VictimConnect Resource Center, a nationwide victims’ helpline operated by the National Center for Victims of Crime (NCVC).<sup>1</sup> The evaluation was conducted in 2019 and 2020 with funding from the National Institute of Justice (box 1). In this brief, we describe the activities that Urban’s researchers engaged in to assess VictimConnect’s evaluability, which entailed a multistep process to clarify the program model, assess its actual operations, agree on research-focused program changes, and determine evaluation designs and priorities—all in collaboration with NCVC staff.

## Introduction to Evaluability Assessment

The idea of “evaluability assessment” emerged 50 years ago when Urban Institute researchers were evaluating use of their own studies (Miller and Caracelli 2013). They found that findings from most studies were *not* being used by the people in charge of programs and policies they were evaluating. To correct this, they decided to pay greater attention to the *front end* of evaluations to ensure the approaches being planned would lead to meaningful and useful information for program directors and

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## BOX 1

### Overview of the VictimConnect Evaluation Toolkit

The VictimConnect Resource Center is a nationwide helpline that provides information, emotional support, and referrals to victims of crime and their loved ones through four technological modalities: softphone (phone calls via a secure, anonymous internet-based connection), online chat, text messaging, and the center website. In 2019, with funding from the National Institute of Justice, Urban launched a multiphase evaluation of the center, collaborating with research liaisons at the National Center for Victims of Crime. During the first phase, the evaluation team conducted a formative evaluation of VictimConnect through which it assessed the program's evaluability, used those findings to strengthen the program's research capacity, and developed a comprehensive plan for a future implementation and outcome evaluation. Findings from the first phase are summarized in *Formative Evaluation of VictimConnect: Preparing for Rigorous Evaluation of a National Resource Center* (Yahner et al. 2020) and are supplemented by the VictimConnect Evaluation Toolkit resources, which are briefs covering the following: (1) foundational theory and literature, (2) refining the logic model, (3) an evaluability assessment, (4) the implementation evaluation plan, (5) the outcome evaluation plan, (6) research capacity building, and (7) evaluation instruments. If funded, we anticipate that the next phases will begin in 2022 and will entail a comprehensive implementation evaluation and rigorous outcome evaluation of VictimConnect.

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policymakers (Miller and Caracelli 2013; Trevisan and Walser 2015). With this goal in mind, the concept of assessing a program's evaluability—or the likelihood that a study of its effectiveness could feasibly be done *and* would yield information of value to the program's developers or funders—was born.

Since then, evaluability assessments have helped researchers determine the extent to which subsequent summative evaluations—which judge program effectiveness—would be feasible and meaningful (Leviton et al. 2010; Wholey, Hatry, and Newcomer 2005). When included as part of a formative evaluation of a program, an evaluability assessment can identify improvements that may help the program better align its intended vision with its actual operations (Trevisan and Walser 2015). In response, organizations may embrace and integrate changes that improve a program's plausibility and its capacity for future rigorous evaluation of its implementation and outcomes.

As described by the [Center for Victim Research](#), an evaluability assessment of a victim services program, such as the VictimConnect Resource Center, may focus on developing the program's model by describing its services and expected benefits, assessing its operational reach, or strengthening its performance-monitoring practices (Bastomski 2020). Accordingly, researchers conducting an evaluability assessment will often review program materials, talk with key stakeholders, examine program data, inventory data sources, develop a quality-assurance plan, and summarize information to identify relevant research designs and any changes to the program's own design that would better support a future evaluation of program outcomes.

Wholey and colleagues (2005) outlined six critical steps (table 1) according to evaluability assessment theory in assessing the feasibility and usefulness of evaluation: (1) involve the intended users of the evaluation (e.g., program developers, leadership), (2) clarify the intent of the program and

its operations, (3) explore the reality of the program in terms of actual activities and clients served, (4) reach agreement with the program’s developer on any design changes needed to support the program’s evaluability and potential success, (5) explore alternative evaluation designs to build the program’s research capacity, and (6) agree a priori with the program’s developer and leadership on the evaluation priorities and dissemination of its results.

**TABLE 1**

**Evaluability Assessment Theory: Six Critical Steps in the Process**

Step in process	Application to VictimConnect’s evaluability assessment
Step 1: involve intended users	Urban worked collaboratively with NCVC staff to understand VictimConnect’s goals and operations and to determine research questions.
Step 2: clarify program intent	Urban clarified the program’s logic model, including links between VictimConnect inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes, and documented its goals, assumptions, visitor <sup>a</sup> needs, and existing sources of data.
Step 3: explore program reality	Urban explored VictimConnect’s program reality by interviewing staff, observing the platform, and documenting how operations and visitor characteristics aligned with staff perceptions.
Step 4: reach agreement on program design changes	Urban and NCVC reached agreement on feasible and planned program design changes to better achieve and evaluate VictimConnect’s intended outcomes.
Step 5: explore alternative evaluation designs to build research capacity	Urban explored alternative evaluation designs based on the most comprehensive and relevant data that could be collected, while prioritizing doing no harm to visitors, the types of rigorous analyses that could be conducted, the confidentiality protections needed to preserve visitor privacy, and implications for VictimConnect stakeholders.
Step 6: agree on evaluation priorities and use of results	Urban and NCVC agreed on evaluation priorities and the meaningful use and dissemination of future results to increase the evidence base supporting helplines, hotlines, resource centers, and victim services providers nationally that are considering similar technological approaches.

**Notes:** NCVC = National Center for Victims of Crime. Steps in the evaluability assessment process were derived from Wholey and coauthors (2005). Urban’s researchers interpreted and applied those steps in conducting an evaluability assessment of VictimConnect.

<sup>a</sup> Visitors to the VictimConnect Resource Center include victims of crime and members of their support networks.

## Evaluability Assessment of VictimConnect

The next sections of this brief describe Urban’s evaluability assessment of VictimConnect, as aligned with the six steps outlined in table 1.

### Step 1: Involve Intended Users

Urban’s researchers and liaisons from NCVC (VictimConnect’s developer) exchanged emails frequently and met biweekly throughout the formative evaluation, engaging in collaborative discussions that informed Urban’s evaluability assessment. Staff from both organizations reviewed methods and findings from other evaluations of hotlines, which informed VictimConnect’s evaluation planning and

which Urban's team summarized in a journal article.<sup>1</sup> Urban developed an understanding of VictimConnect's history, operations, and objectives, which helped clarify VictimConnect's theoretical framework and foundational literature (White, Dusenbery, and Bastomski 2020). Urban's team also reviewed previous NCVC reports and documents on VictimConnect summarizing its development and service reach.

Given the degree to which NCVC had already embraced research as a tool to improve the quality and extent of its victim services, reaching agreement on the multiphase evaluation's four research questions was relatively straightforward. These questions concerned VictimConnect's ability to increase victims' access to high-quality services, improve delivery of services that meet victims' needs, protect victims' rights and confidentiality, and make technology-based services more efficient. The fourth question was originally intended to involve comparison of Victim Assistance Specialists (VASs) with general expertise with those with specialized knowledge on certain victimizations (e.g., elder abuse), but it evolved into comparison of paid professional VASs and highly trained, volunteer VASs whom NCVC envisions engaging in late 2021. Once these overarching questions were settled, Urban's team worked to create detailed subquestions of relevance to VictimConnect's implementation evaluation or its outcome evaluation; these subquestions were also reviewed and approved by NCVC as meaningful to VictimConnect's purpose and future.

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Discussions about alternative research approaches, described under step five below, were also collaborative and involved mutual learning in this researcher-practitioner partnership effort; Urban's team gained knowledge on what was feasible given VictimConnect's actual operations and the flow of visitor interactions, and NCVC appreciated the importance of identifying valid, quasi-experimental comparison information for assessing VictimConnect's impact. In addition to reaching key decisions with NCVC research liaisons and leadership, Urban's team gathered perspectives from frontline VASs through interviews described in step three. Before that, however, we worked to understand key details of the program's logic model and existing data sources, detailed next.

## **Step 2: Clarify Program Intent**

To clarify the intent and activities of VictimConnect, Urban engaged in a series of conversations with NCVC's liaisons focused on identifying the most appropriate conceptual framework. Then, the partners worked to refine each element, including VictimConnect's goal, objectives, inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes.

When the formative evaluation launched in 2019, NCVC had already developed a preliminary logic model for the program, but it needed additional detail and a more refined structure that would better reflect VictimConnect’s diverse components so that it would be more useful to NCVC and to Urban’s research team. The process of refining the program’s logic model, through which the research team also identified key assumptions and external factors influencing the program (e.g., the importance of victim-centered and trauma-informed practices, and variations in crime trends and in victims’ access to technology), is described in the [second toolkit resource](#) (Dusenbery 2020). In addition to revising the logic model, Urban and NCVC realized the importance of developing a comprehensive [operations summary](#), which NCVC published during this evaluation phase with Urban’s review and encouragement (NCVC 2020).

Urban’s researchers also reviewed documentation on VictimConnect to identify existing sources of programmatic data, review those data elements, and describe what was known about visitors’ needs and experiences based on NCVC’s previous analyses. These existing data sources are presented in table 2, and more detailed discussions of each appear in the [fourth](#) and [fifth](#) toolkit resources (Bastomski, Yahner, and Dusenbery 2020; Dusenbery, Yahner, and Bastomski 2020). These efforts made clear the extent of VictimConnect’s national reach and its potential to undergo rigorous evaluation. Overall, the program has helped visitors from all 50 states, though the most frequent interactions come from California, Florida, Texas, New York, and Ohio (NCVC 2019). From January to June 2020 alone, the VictimConnect website had more than 125,500 visitors and served approximately 4,000 people, primarily through softphone calls and online chatting (few visitors connect by text messaging; NCVC 2019, 2020). In the next section, we describe how Urban’s researchers explored the realities of VictimConnect’s operations, specifically visitors’ needs and characteristics.

**TABLE 2**  
**Existing Data Sources Relevant to VictimConnect’s Evaluability, Collected by NCVC**

Data source	Description
Session statistics	Technological platform statistics measuring the volume of VictimConnect phone, chat, and text sessions; wait times for calls and chats; missed calls or dropped interactions; and whether a warm handoff occurred at the end of each phone interaction.
Visitor feedback surveys	Optional and voluntary feedback survey for VictimConnect visitors who engage via softphone or online chatting; asks five questions assessing overall satisfaction, likelihood of using the program’s services or advice recommended, satisfaction with VASs’ knowledge and skills, likelihood of recommending the program to others, and open-ended comments or suggestions.
Visitor demographics	Keyword demographic information captured manually by VASs after each interaction if freely shared by visitors; contains no identifying information and VictimConnect platform is anonymous; includes visitor age, gender, relationship to victim, location, race/ethnicity, crime experienced, special populations, crime type trends, services discussed, services provided, how visitor heard about program, type of call, frequency of access, and other keywords.
Website traffic data	Available through Google Analytics, includes real-time data and trends, such as number of page views and link clicks on VictimConnect website, bounce rates, session durations, devices users, and how users were acquired.

**Notes:** NCVC = National Center for Victims of Crime; VAS = Victim Assistance Specialist.

### Step 3: Explore Program Reality

To explore the reality of VictimConnect operations, Urban's team conducted interviews with program staff and supervisors, observed the technological platform and a sample of online chat sessions, and further reviewed NCVC documents summarizing visitor characteristics and needs. In this section, we describe each of these efforts and the information they produced.

#### STAFF INTERVIEWS

Although Urban's conversations with NCVC research liaisons and leadership were ongoing, we also conducted more than a dozen confidential semistructured interviews with VictimConnect staff at two points: in April 2020, we interviewed four VASs and two VictimConnect supervisors, and in August 2020, we spoke with four VASs and three VictimConnect supervisors (three staff members completed interviews at both points). Across both sets of interviews, we gathered information about staff members' professional backgrounds, training on VictimConnect specifically, and thoughts on the program's evaluation. We also asked staff about their perceptions of visitor needs and characteristics.

**Staff backgrounds.** The VictimConnect supervisors we interviewed had fairly extensive backgrounds in the victim services field, and one also had experience in criminal justice research. One supervisor had worked as a VAS for the DC Victim Hotline (which NCVC also operates) before moving into a supervisory position at VictimConnect. Another had been hired in March 2020 and a second had been hired in June 2020, both of whom had previous hotline experience. All four supervisors and many VASs had graduate degrees, which accords with the need for highly experienced professionals to effectively deliver crisis intervention responses (described in the [first toolkit resource](#)). Supervisors primarily managed day-to-day operations and oversaw VASs. They also worked with NCVC leaders to create and review VictimConnect policies and procedures and examine its data with a focus on performance monitoring and improvements.

Most frontline VASs had previous experience in either victim services or hotlines specifically. Although most had been hired in March 2020, some had worked for VictimConnect in 2019 or had worked on the DC Victims Hotline. As described in the [VictimConnect operations summary](#) (NCVC 2020), funding for the program had fluctuated at the end of 2019, affecting staff turnover. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, NCVC reverted to a remote working environment for operating the program and for training a new 2020 cohort of VictimConnect staff.

**Staff training.** The initial VictimConnect training for new VASs consists of 80 hours of content delivered during two weeks, followed by approximately 20 hours of ongoing education per year (see the [operations summary](#) for a description of the training). Newly trained VASs must also shadow experienced VASs and be shadowed in their first VictimConnect interactions during the three weeks after training (they are shadowed randomly by supervisors thereafter). The general topics covered in initial training in 2019 were similar in 2020, but by necessity (owing to staff turnover and the COVID-19 pandemic) more were delivered using predeveloped online modules (such as those from the Office for Victims of Crime Training and Technical Assistance Center) in 2020 than in 2019. Topics covered during the 80-hour initial training included the following:

- organizational policies and procedures (e.g., operations/systems overview, NCVC handbook and benefits, VAS handbook, technology systems, mandated reporting, professional resiliency and development, hotline philosophy, overview of NCVC programs)
- victim rights, services, and systems (e.g., criminal and civil justice systems, crime reporting, victim compensation, the National Compassion Fund, financial remedies to crime, the National Crime Victim Bar Association, torts)
- stages of a VictimConnect interaction, which are envisioned to apply to all technological modalities and encompass (1) required introductory topics focused on safety checks, callback information in case needed, confidentiality and anonymity, and mandated reporting; (2) listening and connecting with a victim-centered, trauma-informed, and strengths-based approach, following the evidence base for victim services; (3) problem solving and safety planning, including identifying and providing relevant, high-quality referrals and resources; and (4) summarizing and closing the interaction with a warm transfer or feedback survey as relevant, followed by staff recording of any demographics disclosed during call
- victimization-specific information and special population information (e.g., underserved and marginalized populations, older adults, culturally diverse survivors with disabilities, campus sexual assault, domestic violence and sexual assault, group/individual stalking, human trafficking, complex homicide, financial crimes, crisis calls/chats, suicide and self-harm protocols)

More advanced trainings are offered to staff after they acquire VictimConnect-specific experience, such as vicarious-trauma training and advanced responses to specific victimizations (e.g., human trafficking, group stalking, elder abuse). Leadership at NCVC is still refining the sequence of initial training topics and of subsequent advanced trainings.

Most of the VictimConnect staff Urban interviewed expressed positive perceptions of the breadth of topics covered and teaching methods used, which included opportunities for role playing and daily debriefings on training content. Staff found the training modules taught live by current experienced VictimConnect staff of greatest value, but understood the need to learn from preexisting online modules and were grateful for group debriefings after viewing these modules. One supervisor wished the training could be longer, though most staff felt it was the right length for introductory information given that all new VictimConnect staff arrived with some training, professional experience, and/or education in the same topic areas.

In 2020, NCVC leadership also worked to refine and develop a more intentional plan for using “quality-control rubrics” during the shadowed interactions that followed initial training. The rubrics they developed allow supervisors to score staff during training (and vice versa, when staff are shadowing supervisors) regarding how well interactions with visitors align with the four stages of a VictimConnect interaction outlined above. Urban’s research team encouraged NCVC to incorporate a system of checks for implementation fidelity in ongoing program training.



Lastly, although VictimConnect has not yet engaged volunteers, it has plans to do so in 2021, and NCVC leadership is currently clarifying the level of training and commitment to be required of volunteers and the supervisory oversight to be required during volunteer interactions with visitors. In the next phases of the program's evaluation, Urban's research team intends to examine and compare the implementation fidelity and effectiveness of paid professional VASs' interactions with visitors against those of highly trained volunteers to determine ways to strengthen the efficiency of victim services.

**Staff thoughts on evaluation.** VictimConnect staff provided thoughtful input and ideas about meaningful ways to incorporate evaluation into the program without interrupting the service process and while protecting visitors' safety, confidentiality, and choice. All VASs and supervisors supported the idea of evaluating VictimConnect's effectiveness; they genuinely wanted to know whether the work they were doing was helpful to visitors, as they had no way of finding out after their anonymous interactions. One VAS indicated that the most important outcome to her was whether visitors felt heard and supported. Another expressed concern about visitors who called in frustration because they were unable to find services to meet their needs; the VAS wondered whether that frustration (unfairly) affected VictimConnect satisfaction ratings. Listening to these thoughts and in discussion with the project advisory board, Urban's team understood that establishing visitors' initial needs, attitudes, and the degree to which they felt heard and supported by the VAS would be important to measure. These are among many components built into Urban's longitudinal visitor surveys; the use of these surveys is described in the [fifth toolkit resource](#) and the draft instrument is presented in the [seventh toolkit resource](#) (Dusenbery et al. 2020).

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In the paragraphs that follow we summarize staff thoughts on safe and respectful recruitment of study participants, how to reach warm-transferred visitors, and valid comparison groups against which VictimConnect's effectiveness could be measured. With regard to study recruitment, Urban's team considered multiple avenues for recruiting people interested in and willing to participate in the longitudinal visitor survey we intend to administer. These included adding a last option to the preexisting VictimConnect visitor feedback survey to learn about the study, adding a button to the VictimConnect website for the same purpose, and having VASs convey information about the study during interactions with visitors.



In discussing these options with VASs and supervisors, three critical issues emerged. First, it became clear that recruiting participants should only happen at the end of the VictimConnect service interaction. Although some staff believed it might be feasible to mention the study up front, others expressed concern about losing trust and disrupting visitors' initial interactions; the project's advisory board echoed these concerns. Second, staff believed it would be most fair to offer an incentive for participation and that doing so would benefit visitors (who are often financially unstable). Most visitors seek resources and empathy from the program, are not in immediate crisis, and are capable of making decisions about what actions to take while protecting their safety. As part of the program's victim-centered and strengths-based process, VictimConnect empowers visitors to make these types of decisions. An incentive would offset any time-related inconvenience and show respect for information that participants provide to evaluators.

Third, staff worried about missing the visitors who were warm-transferred to other providers, which happens when VASs offer relevant resources that a victim is ready to act on in the moment. Although one VAS suggested that most interactions end in warm transfer (anecdotally, she estimated 80 percent), other information from the VictimConnect technological platform suggested this is closer to 36 percent of all interactions. Regardless, Urban's team agreed it would be important to reach these people with an offer of study participation, and we decided to partner with the most frequently referred providers in the states from which most interactions originate. As described in the [sixth toolkit resource](#) (Yahner, Dusenbery, and Bastomski 2020), VictimConnect is integrating research capacity to track its referrals so that we can identify these potential partners more reliably in the next phase.

Regarding potential comparison groups against which VictimConnect visitors' outcome information should be compared, Urban discussed a few options with staff and the project advisory board. One idea that did not seem relevant enough was to compare visitors' experiences with those of victims who sought services from local on-the-ground providers. Staff and the advisory board believed these groups would be different in ways that might impact findings; many visitors who reach out by chat, for example, are interested in sharing their experiences but do not plan to speak with a provider.

The comparison group that staff and the advisory board felt was most promising and relevant was "after-hour visitors," or people who reach out to VictimConnect before or after its hours of operation (8:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. EST). The staff who had worked for the 24-hour DC Victim Hotline could distinguish no concrete differences between during-hour and after-hour visitors, except that after-hour callers tended to be from the West Coast or international time zones. Urban's team decided at minimum to focus on visitors who reached out to VictimConnect immediately before or immediately after its hours of operation.

Interviews with VASs and their supervisors also yielded insights into several other aspects of the evaluation process. Of particular note was staff support for NCVC's refinement of the demographic information VASs collected after interactions (if freely disclosed by visitors) as described in the [sixth toolkit resource](#), and staff suggestions on ways to ensure victims' safety was respected during the research process. The latter included ensuring that potential participants understood the survey would be confidential but not anonymous (given the need for following up and to provide an incentive);

allowing visitors to give whatever contact information they felt safe providing; ensuring participants were in a safe place before completing the survey; explaining informed consent in “layman’s terms” so that visitors of all educational levels could easily understand it; and emphasizing visitor choice and the voluntary nature of every aspect of the study. Urban’s team understood and agreed with these considerations. Our researchers benefit from decades of experience developing trauma-informed surveys for vulnerable and marginalized populations, including victims of crime.

## OBSERVATIONS OF VICTIMCONNECT

As the next step in exploring the reality of VictimConnect operations, Urban’s team observed the program’s technological platform and reviewed a deidentified sample of online chat sessions. Before observing the platform, Urban’s team signed a confidentiality agreement with NCVC assuring privacy of information viewed exclusively for the purposes of this formative evaluation. However, it was not Urban’s intent to observe live interactions during this platform tour; rather, we viewed components of the platform to understand how VASs were informed of and selected incoming interactions to respond to. Accordingly, NCVC’s research liaison provided Urban’s team with a secure, confidential link to the VictimConnect platform and spoke via conference call to lead our researchers through each component. We observed how VASs were notified of incoming softphone calls, online chats, and texts, and we learned about the process for “accepting” an interaction for response.

Essentially, any VAS online when on duty can respond to any incoming interaction. They do not know what type of call is coming in ahead of time and simply accept the next incoming interaction randomly when available to do so. In this way, from a research perspective, it became less relevant to think about randomly assigning incoming interactions to particular types of VASs (e.g., paid professionals, trained volunteers), because the systemized process was already essentially random. From this platform observation, Urban’s team also observed the structure of the referral sources that VASs draw on during each interaction, and the NCVC liaison described how the VictimConnect team was working to revise these referral sources for detailed tracking in 2021. Lastly, Urban’s team observed where and how the demographic information was recorded (by electronic checkmarks) after each interaction.

During this formative evaluation, it was not Urban’s intent to observe live interactions of visitors and VASs, nor did we seek approval from our institutional review board to do so. Rather, we planned to conduct such observations during the next phase. First, we would do so as a pilot test of the evaluation instruments included in the [seventh toolkit resource](#), and then as part of the planned implementation evaluation described in the [fourth toolkit resource](#).

In the meantime, the VictimConnect research liaison working on this evaluation obtained and deidentified transcripts from a small sample of online chat interactions. These were saved specifically for this evaluability assessment and in accordance with NCVC leadership and approval from Urban’s review board. To be clear, a VictimConnect supervisor read through each transcript and took great care to redact any possibly identifying information before allowing Urban’s team to review it. Recall also that the platform itself is anonymous, meaning there was no way to ascertain the visitor in any transcript reviewed.

From Urban's review of these online chat transcripts, we made a number of observations. The victimizations that visitors reported included financial exploitation, ex-partner stalking, stranger stalking, harassment, physical abuse, and sexual abuse. These experiences happened at various stages in visitors' lives; some victimizations were current or ongoing, some occurred in a previous relationship that had ended, some happened in secondary school, and others occurred during childhood. Almost all visitors were victims; others were victims' partners or family members. Visitors opened up about their experiences fairly quickly, and the average chat session lasted approximately 30 minutes. Many visitors expressed shame, embarrassment, or uncertainty about their victimizations, and VASs were quick to offer validation that they were not alone in having gone through these experiences, that the victimizations were not their fault, and that their feelings were normal and justified. Most interactions began with a safety assessment and information about the anonymity of the VictimConnect platform. Thereafter, VASs provided validation and empathy while listening and engaging visitors in a few targeted questions to understand their needs. Most visitors sought local providers, and each time a VAS provided resources, they included at least two referrals and accompanied the information with an explanation of what the service was and how it might help (e.g., what a protective order is, what a victim witness assistance office can do). This latter behavior deserves emphasis because it illustrates VASs' experience and professionalism in educating visitors with knowledge and awareness of what types of services were available and their relevance to visitor needs.

#### VISITOR CHARACTERISTICS AND NEEDS

The last part of exploring VictimConnect operations involved understanding the characteristics and needs of the program's visitors. The most comprehensive existing data source is NCVC's summaries of its visitor demographics, collected by VASs whenever freely disclosed by visitors (NCVC 2019, 2020).<sup>2</sup> In this section, we supplement these NCVC data summaries with anecdotal accounts disclosed in Urban's interviews of VASs and their supervisors.

As NCVC (2020, 7) notes, "Most helpline visitors find out about VictimConnect through an internet search, which often lands users on the website. In fact, in the first six months of 2020, 125,862 individuals visited the VictimConnect Resource Center website." From the website, visitors learn how to connect to VASs by softphone, online chat, or text messaging. In the future, NCVC plans to include searchable state resources on its website for visitors who wish to do their own VictimConnect-hosted help-seeking first. From January to June 2020, slightly more than 4,000 visitors connected with VASs, most by softphone (83 percent), followed by online chat (16 percent) and text messaging (1 percent). As a newer helpline, substantially more VictimConnect interactions occurred by softphone and fewer by online chat compared with more established hotlines (for example, the National Domestic Violence Hotline established in 1996 had 56 percent of interactions occur by phone and 41 percent by online chat in 2019; NDVH 2020).

Information on visitor characteristics was recorded only if disclosed by visitors, who disclosed varying information—for example, gender was disclosed for approximately half the interactions and age for only 10 percent (NCVC 2019). In interactions for which information was recorded, nearly three in four visitors were female, more than 9 in 10 were adults 18 and older, and almost half the callers came

from California, Texas, New York, Florida, or Ohio. Visitors reported a wide variety of victimization experiences, with the most frequent including stalking, identity theft and fraud, harassment, intimate partner violence, cybercrime, assault/attempted homicide, elder abuse, domestic violence, and mass events.<sup>3</sup> Many visitors were polyvictims with co-occurring crimes mentioned during their interactions. Most visitors were victims, though some were family members or friends of victims, and very few were service providers or other professionals.

With regard to visitor needs and referrals sought, most were seeking information about financial assistance or victim compensation, crime reporting, legal services, case management or victim advocacy, safety planning, hotline or related referral services, and other general VictimConnect resource information. According to interviews with VASs, some visitors were not looking for resources but for someone to talk with about their experience; others reported being stalked by a group of people, sometimes including the government. More chat users were youths than were adults. One VAS said that “on a typical day, it’s someone who found our helpline online or through a professional and is looking for victim resources, and it could be at the beginning of their journey toward empowerment or they could have tried a dozen prior resources and are at a loss right now.” In the interviews, VASs described softphone calls as lasting anywhere from 2 minutes to 30 minutes and longer, often depending on the level of safety planning involved to assist the visitor.

Staff reported having frequently identified needs for visitors other than those that they requested services for. For example, a visitor who reported having been sexually assaulted, having lost time at work, and having been behind on their rent may have initially sought victim compensation, but the VAS may also have referred them to social services to help avoid eviction. When searching for relevant local resources, VASs reported initially relying on the internal VictimConnect database of organizational information by state; however, they have also looked up information outside of this database. As mentioned previously, NCVC is in the process of developing the platform further to encompass tracking of referral information provided to visitors in 2021. With regard to serving non-English-speaking visitors, the program’s platform can accommodate translation services in up to 200 languages; however, the language other than English most frequently spoken by visitors was Spanish, and most visitors speaking Spanish were connected directly with a Spanish-speaking VAS.

## Step 4: Reach Agreement on Program Design Changes

In this section we summarize the design changes to VictimConnect on which Urban and NCVC reached agreement. Some changes were driven by NCVC’s efforts to grow the VictimConnect platform and improve internal performance monitoring, with new ideas emerging from the supervisors hired in March and June 2020. Other changes were prompted by Urban to facilitate a more comprehensive evaluation of the program’s effect on intended outcomes (e.g., by not missing warm-transferred visitors). Each of the following changes is further detailed in the [sixth toolkit resource](#) as examples of VictimConnect’s research capacity building:

- **Quality-control rubrics.** Quality-control rubrics were designed by NCVC to be used by VictimConnect supervisors when overseeing staff interactions; NCVC also intended for newly

trained VASs to use them while shadowing more senior VASs. The rubrics cover all aspects of the multistage VictimConnect response that VASs are trained to employ (e.g., safety assessment, listening and connecting, problem identification, client empowerment, referral information). They also cover the extent to which VASs interact in a victim-centered, trauma-informed, and strengths-based manner with visitors. The scoring process is being finalized to allow for differences in VASs' experience and training. Urban's team embraced this programmatic change given its ability to strengthen VAS learning and on-the-job improvements. The rubrics were also helpful to Urban's team in developing protocols for its session observations.

- **Expanded and refined demographics.** Moreover, NCVC supervisors expanded and refined the key demographics recorded by staff after each VictimConnect interaction based on information freely disclosed by visitors. These revisions were intended to make each term's meaning clearer, add new items, remove redundancies, and make each term consistent with the demographics recorded by the DC Victim Hotline. Furthermore, NCVC created an internal document defining each item and the protocols for logging it into the system. The more frequently these demographics are tracked, the stronger the quality of data analyzed by Urban in its implementation evaluation of VictimConnect.
- **Capturing data to track frequently used referrals.** Urban's team intends to partner with some of the most frequently referred providers in the five states from which almost half of VictimConnect interactions originate. To most reliably identify these, it is critical that VASs accurately capture data on the agencies and organizations they refer visitors to. This effort involves a comprehensive review of the existing referrals database and facilitation of referral tracking through the enhanced technological platform. The tracking is now technologically possible, but it involves a large effort underway by VictimConnect supervisors to set things up, which they intend to accomplish in 2021.
- **Integrated options for study recruitment.** Lastly, Urban's team discussed several programmatic changes that would not alter the visitor interaction experience but would involve integrating an option for study participation into the platform. This integration would facilitate Urban's recruitment of potential participants at the end of their interactions with VASs by adding an option to the existing visitor feedback survey, or by adding an option before such interactions by adding a button to the VictimConnect website. In addition, Urban and NCVC discussed the possibility of VASs offering information about the study verbally to visitors at the end of each interaction providing the visitor was not in distress.

## Step 5: Explore Alternative Evaluation Designs to Build Research Capacity

As the fifth step in our evaluability assessment, Urban explored alternative evaluation designs based on the most comprehensive and relevant VictimConnect data that could be collected, while prioritizing doing no harm to visitors; the types of rigorous analyses that could be conducted; the confidentiality

protections needed to preserve visitor privacy; and implications for stakeholders. These discussions were collaborative and included mutual researcher-practitioner learning by Urban and NCVC.

The evaluation designs focused on planning a future-phase implementation evaluation of VictimConnect's fidelity to the program model and an outcome evaluation of its effectiveness at increasing access and improving delivery of services to victims of crime. More specifically, the overarching research questions are as follows:

- Does VictimConnect increase access to victim services?
- Does VictimConnect improve delivery of victim services?
- How does VictimConnect protect victims' rights and confidentiality?
- Does VictimConnect strengthen the efficiency of victim services?

With the goal of employing multimethod, qualitative and quantitative research approaches, Urban's team identified subquestions for each of these research questions and developed evaluation plans, data collection and analytic strategies, and evaluation instruments for addressing them. Urban's plan for assessing VictimConnect's process and implementation activities in ways that operationalize its identified logic model outputs are described thoroughly in the [fourth toolkit resource](#). Furthermore, our quasi-experimental plan for evaluating VictimConnect's effectiveness at achieving its intended outcomes is described in the [fifth toolkit resource](#). The outcome evaluation plan involves comparison of VictimConnect interactions and subsequent changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors among visitors who connect with VASs and those who attempt to connect after hours but do not, and comparisons between visitors who connect with paid professional VASs and those who connect with highly trained volunteers. We will also conduct a series of interviews with service providers to assess the extent and value of VictimConnect's impact on their service provision and use of supportive technologies. Draft evaluation instruments planned for use in the implementation and outcome evaluations are available in the [seventh toolkit resource](#).

The aforementioned evaluation plans will rely on analyses of VictimConnect data from existing sources (see table 2), and on collection and analysis of data from additional sources (table 3). These additional data will be collected through VictimConnect session observations, interviews with and surveys of VASs, stakeholder interviews, longitudinal visitor surveys, and reviews of VictimConnect materials and platform performance. Additional details on each source—including the data collection process, sampling, and analytic approach—are discussed in the [fourth](#) and [fifth](#) toolkit resources.

TABLE 3

**Additional Data Sources Relevant to VictimConnect's Evaluability, to Be Collected by Urban**

Data source	Description
Session observations	Independent observations of a random sample of VictimConnect softphone sessions and chat and text transcripts collecting information on visitor characteristics and needs, services offered and provided, and VASs' alignment with VictimConnect protocols.
Staff interviews	Semistructured interviews with VASs, VictimConnect supervisors, and other NCVS leadership, covering topics regarding visitor characteristics and needs; VASs' knowledge; skills, and training; services offered/provided; and collaborations with service providers.
Staff surveys	Surveys of VASs via online evaluation forms collected after a random sample of their session interactions; contains closed- and open-ended questions about staff perceptions of overall helpfulness to visitors and activities during the interaction, including staff confidence that service providers they recommended or resources they offered were relevant, whether a warm handoff occurred and was suitable for the visitor's needs, whether and how VASs conveyed information about VictimConnect's anonymity and confidentiality protections, and any service-related difficulties and technological challenges during the interaction.
Stakeholder interviews	Semistructured interviews with community and national service providers to which VictimConnect refers visitors, recipients of VictimConnect outreach activities and TTA, and participants in the National Hotline Consortium (which NCVS coordinates), covering providers' knowledge about and use of VictimConnect, perceptions of its utility to the victim services field and their organization specifically, and receipt of and satisfaction with its TTA services, including services regarding technological innovations.
Longitudinal visitor surveys	Surveys of VictimConnect visitors and a comparison group of people who visit the website after hours but do not connect with VASs, collected securely and voluntarily by informed consent after the potential for VictimConnect interaction has concluded; will be collected at baseline (immediately after interaction) and at follow up (approximately two weeks later). Will assess visitor demographics; victimization experiences; knowledge and awareness of victim services and perceptions thereof; help-seeking behaviors and service-engagement intentions; extent of service engagement; satisfaction with VictimConnect; emotional needs and well-being; informational/resource needs and receipt of appropriate assistance; hope, empowerment, and self-efficacy; and perceptions of privacy.
Materials and platform review	Thorough review of internal and external VictimConnect documents, such as training materials, outreach materials, and website products, a review of the service referral database, and a technology-focused review of the platform.

**Notes:** NCVS = National Center for Victims of Crime; TTA = training and technical assistance; VAS = Victim Assistance Specialist. Urban's instruments are presented in the [seventh toolkit resource](#). More detailed discussions of these data sources are presented in the [fourth](#) and [fifth](#) toolkit resources.

## Step 6: Agree on Evaluation Priorities and Use of Results

As the last step in the evaluability assessment process—a step that emerged in conversations throughout this partnership—Urban and NCVS focused on establishing agreement for VictimConnect's evaluation priorities and the meaningful use and dissemination of its results. Foremost, NCVS wanted to understand the value of its efforts at providing victim-centered, trauma-informed, and strengths-based responses to crime victims and their supporters. All VASs and supervisors wanted to know whether and how their interactions had impacted visitors' lives. This focus on assessing visitor knowledge, recovery, and empowerment came from staff's desire to understand, learn more about, and



improve as needed their multistage response to visitors. As development of the aforementioned quality-control rubrics demonstrated, VictimConnect supervisors focused on being as consistent and effective as possible in addressing visitors' needs. More generally, Urban and NCVC wanted to use information from the evaluation to increase the evidence base supporting what works for helplines, hotlines, resource centers, and victim services providers nationally that are considering similar technological approaches.

Regarding dissemination of the evaluation results, Urban's team and NCVC's research liaisons and leadership agreed that the knowledge gained should be shared widely with the victim services field. Urban's researchers also hoped to provide a template (an evaluation toolkit) of resources that victim services practitioners and new researchers could use to better understand and apply components of this multiphase effort. Each toolkit resource supporting Urban's formative evaluation of VictimConnect begins with introductory information on the meaningfulness and application of that effort in the fields of program evaluation or victim services (e.g., the importance of establishing a program's foundational theory, of conducting an implementation evaluation, and of engaging in research capacity building). We hope these products can be examples that other victim services programs can replicate.

Urban and NCVC agreed that findings from each evaluation phase—formative, implementation, and outcome—should be finalized in a final report and a series of practitioner-accessible briefs. Accordingly, this formative evaluation resulted in an overarching report and seven toolkit resources. Moreover, NCVC developed its own products in support of this formative evaluation, including a summary of VictimConnect's operations and its logic model. Working in collaboration, Urban and NCVC presented results from the formative evaluation (which we will also do after the next evaluation phases) to an audience largely comprising victim services practitioners. Urban's team will also disseminate these findings to the field through a conference presentation at the American Evaluation Association annual meeting in 2021 and through a journal article. These products offer information about the operations of a growing national resource center focused on providing helpful resources and compassionate support to victims of crime nationwide.

## Conclusion

The multistep evaluability assessment described in this brief represents a core part of Urban's formative evaluation of VictimConnect. It involved close collaboration with NCVC to understand the program's operations and objectives; clarify its logic model and existing sources of data; explore program realities and challenges; identify helpful changes to program design; plan the most rigorous evaluation design feasible; and agree on use and dissemination of evaluation findings. Accordingly, Urban's team incorporated many of the activities described by the [Center for Victim Research](#) in conducting an evaluability assessment, including reviewing program materials, interviewing staff and examining summaries of program data, inventorying data sources, and developing evaluation plans that embrace the most rigorous feasible designs that protect victims' rights, needs, and safety.

The ability to conduct an exploratory evaluation (as evaluability assessments are sometimes called) of this level is an option not available to all researchers because of limited time and resources. The value gained through having such discussions with a program's developers and of assessing existing programmatic structure before evaluation is immense. In this case, the Urban team learned about VictimConnect's developmental process and its efforts to strengthen activities, its monitoring of those activities, and its impact on visitors as it grows. Moreover, NCVC's team has learned about and supported preparing its program to undergo comprehensive and rigorous assessment intended to provide meaningful knowledge that will also strengthen the evidence base for what works in technology-based victim services.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Malore Dusenbery, Jennifer Yahner, Sara Bastomski, Krista White, and Erica Henderson, "Advancing the Field of Hotline Evaluations: Review of the Literature and Introduction to VictimConnect's Formative Evaluation" (unpublished manuscript, December 21, 2020), Microsoft Word file.
- <sup>2</sup> Also, NCVC provided Urban with a copy of its January 2020 to June 2020 internal performance measures report to the Office for Victims of Crime, which summarizes the same demographic data described herein but more recently than the published [VictimConnect three year report](#).
- <sup>3</sup> VictimConnect's information is frequently provided by government agencies to victims after mass shootings.

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