Uncovering the Hidden Narratives of the Coping Mechanisms used by Families of Homicide Victims

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Uncovering the Hidden Narratives of the Coping
Mechanisms used by Families of Homicide Victims

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April 6, 2018
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Abstract:

Families of homicide victims are often a hidden group of co-victims whose voices are underrepresented in the criminal justice system. The lack of recognition given to these co-victims results in inadequate support and resources to help with the grieving process and any legal proceedings related to the homicide case. This Honors Thesis attempts to uncover the buried narratives of co-victims to better get an understanding of the challenges they face, the strategies used to cope with losing a loved one to homicide, and the ways in which resources can be improved to help resolve the shortcomings of the criminal justice system, victim advocates, and family and community members. Through in-depth interviews with seven participants, the three common coping mechanisms used are 1) criticizing the weaknesses within the criminal justice system, 2) responding to an identity disruption, and 3) adjusting to a new life post-homicide. These coping mechanisms are all chosen by the participants based on their own individual experiences and their own version of dealing with the absence of their loved one. The results of this study can be used to contribute to the literature on families of homicide victims, change policies and procedures in the criminal justice system to protect co-victims’ rights and improve communication, increase empathy and support from family members, friends, and other community members, and develop and improve resources to aid co-victims.
Chapter 1 Introduction

In 1960, there were approximately 9,110 murders. In 2016, this number increased drastically to 17,250 (United States Crime Rates 1960-2016). Unfortunately with the rise of murder rates over the past few decades, the percentage of homicides that have been resolved is on the decline. As of 2015, the homicide clearance rate is 61.5% (FBI-Clearances). This means that 38.5% of homicides in the United States are unsolved. Thirty-eight percent of families who have experienced losing a loved one to homicide currently do not have an arrested suspect. These families are left to wonder about the moments leading up to their loved one’s death, the circumstances and reasoning behind the murder, and are forced to face the challenges of solving a homicide. Even in cases where the homicide is solved, families of homicide victims still face similar challenges. These challenges can range from the criminal justice system to internal and psychological issues to finding ways to move forward in order to build a new life without their loved one.

Families of homicide victims can also be labeled as co-victims or hidden victims of crime. Though families of homicide victims may not have been directly affected by the crime (i.e. they were not murdered), families of homicide victims are still victims. Families of homicide victims are the victims left behind after the homicide. These co-victims or hidden victims of crime are forced to deal with the aftermath of homicide. This can include but is not limited to the investigation process; legal proceedings; financial obligations with funeral planning, probate, and closing bills and accounts; the psychological trauma; the grieving process; and finding ways to move forward after losing their loved one. Co-victims are forced to deal with logistical things that come with
death as well as all the emotional turmoil of losing a loved one. Since many of these things are dealt with privately, other family members, friends, and the outside community often do not fully understand or see the negative impact of losing a loved one to homicide has or they isolate themselves from the co-victim because they do not want to see the kind of dark side of humanity homicide illustrates.

The inability for the majority of criminal justice officials and community members to recognize families of homicide victims as co-victims often leads to the experiences of families of homicide victims being hidden away from the public, the lack of acknowledgement of co-victim rights, and inadequate and ineffective strategies used to aid co-victims through their grieving process and legal proceedings. The hidden narratives of families of homicide victims need to be brought to light and given the attention they deserve. There has been extensive and substantial research on processes to deal with the grief of losing a loved one, strategies to deal with the emotions of having a loved one die, and the importance of victim rights. However, the research on families of homicide victims is extremely limited. Losing a loved one to homicide differs drastically from losing a loved one to old age or disease. Thus, the grieving processes, the emotions, and the rights given by the criminal justice system are different from losing a loved one to natural forces. Since each individual deals with losing a loved one differently, there needs to be an individualized approach to aiding individuals. Unfortunately, since these hidden victims are not given as much attention as other victims of crime, the participants addressed the concern that the current criminal justice system and professional therapists are not given the appropriate training and/or do not have the qualifications to deal with families of homicide victims.
Society and the criminal justice system generally highlight the importance of convicting perpetrators of crime. The focus is removing the direct danger caused by perpetrators away from the community by isolating them in jail or prison. Unfortunately in the pursuit of confining a perpetrator in a restricted area, victims and co-victims of crime are often forgotten or not given as much attention as perpetrators. This is especially true for co-victims of homicide victims. Since homicidal crimes are the most dangerous and violent crimes, law enforcement officials and prosecutors are extremely attuned to convicting the perpetrator.

With the immense focus on conviction, narratives of families of homicide victims are not prevalent in the criminal justice system. There is a lack of voice and advocacy for co-victims. The purpose of this project is to look into the narratives of co-victims to get a better understanding of the ways in which they utilize coping mechanisms to grieve for their loved ones as well as ways in which organizations and departments within the criminal justice system can be improved in order to better serve the needs of this underrepresented population.
Chapter 2 Literature Review:

Establishing Victims’ Rights in the Criminal Justice System:

In the past, due to media scrutiny, community fear, and high-level and effective politicians and presidents, America’s tough on crime policy grew and became one of the foundations of the criminal justice system. The tough on crime policy focused on mass incarceration, the decreased use of parole, the reintroduction of capital punishment, and mandatory sentencing laws (Cullen, Clark, and Wozniak, 1985). The criminal justice system strongly emphasized the importance of punishing the perpetrator of the crime. The community heavily focused on punitive sanctions and wanted the perpetrator to pay for the crime that he/she committed. Since the focus on the criminal justice system was on the perpetrator, very few resources were actually devoted to the victims of the crime. The key players of the courtroom include the jury, the judge, the prosecutor, the defense attorney, and the offender. The victims of the crime and their families did not have voices.

Victim rights advocates decided that criminal justice should not only be between the perpetrator and the state, but it should also include the victims of the crime (Roach, 1999). In the 1970’s, the administration of justice by officials neglected and ignored victims of crime (Walklate, 2001). In the 1980-1990’s, laws were being developed and implemented to better protect the rights of victims as well as help potential victims of crime (Roach, 1999). Victims were now being defined as one of the key players in the courtroom. In support of victim rights, many states have dedicated a section of their respective state’s constitution to victim rights (Belof, 1999). Having victim rights acknowledgement in state constitutions is a huge step forward in victim advocacy.
However, these rights often infringe on the defendant’s rights. The notion of protecting defendant’s rights over victim’s rights will be later evaluated in the data analysis portion.

Victim’s ability to participate in the criminal justice system gives them the voices that they have never had before. Victim impact statements have been incorporated into court procedures. Victim impact statements have been seen to have therapeutic benefits for victims and to help with the sentencing of offenders (Erez, 1999). Victim impact statements are descriptions of the emotional, physical, or economic harm that the perpetrator caused the victim (Erez, 1999). Victim impact statements may be seen to be beneficial for victims because they give victims the opportunity to discuss the harm the perpetrator caused and insight to victim’s perspectives. These impact statements were previously not given when victims did not have rights in the criminal justice system.

**The Current Stage of Victims’ Rights in the Criminal Justice System:**

In 2004, congress passed the Crime Victims’ Rights Act, which allowed victims to have a more active role in the criminal process (Cassell, 2005). The Crime Victims’ Rights Act of 2004 also played a significant role in the “creation of a judicial enforcement regime” (Aaronson, 2007). This judicial enforcement regime helped transform victim rights into “meaningful [and] enforceable rights” (Aaronson, 2007). By having rights be enforceable and meaningful, all parties must adhere and follow victims’ rights. Legal reform can also be seen in victim restitution and compensation laws, and the use of Victim Impact Statements in court (Cassell, 2005). The Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme created in 1964 was developed with the purpose of providing compensation for the victim in response to the harm caused by the offender (Doak, 2008).
The Criminal Justice Act of 1972 further enhanced the idea of restitution by giving courts the authority to make offenders pay for any damage or loss to the victims (Doak, 2008).

With the increase in participation from victims in the criminal justice system, victims may suffer from some detrimental risks. Participation in the criminal justice system can have some negative impacts on victims’ mental health. In Victim Impact Statements, victims typically disclose the event of the crime as well as the harm it has caused them. By reliving these experiences, rates of re-traumatization may be high (Herman, 2003). The influence of mental health may play a significant role in whether a victim will participate in the criminal process (Herman, 2003). The victim of the crime has the right to participate or to refrain themselves from the process.

Since there are significant risks that can deter and/or negatively impact victims’ voices, victim support and advocacy groups have been developed to aid victims through the criminal justice system as well as guide victims through moving forward after the traumatic event. One key right given to victims based on the “Statement of the Rights of Victims of Crime” is the right for victims to be given emotional and practical support (Doak, 2008). Victim support in the criminal justice system can be volunteer based and can help the courts offer appropriate resources to victims of crime (Walklate, 2001). Victim support groups have a powerful influence on victims because victims are given the opportunity to voice their perspectives and their concerns (Bradford, 2011). Victims are able to confide in individuals who seem to value their opinions. Victim support has been correlated with higher levels of public confidence in the criminal justice system (Bradford, 2011). Along with higher levels of confidence, victim support has also been linked to more favorable views of the criminal justice system in general (Bradford, 2011).
A new restorative justice approach has been recently introduced into the criminal justice system. Restorative justice brings all involved parties (offender, victim, any community member affected, etc.) of a conflict/crime together to allow for all parties to voice their perspective on the conflict/crime as well as any harm caused by the act, collectively work on how to solve the conflict, and to discuss future implications (Dignan, 2004). This approach is victim focused and gives victims the opportunity to meet with the offender and talk through the situation (Dignan, 2004). Victims must initiate this approach. By having a collective conversation about the crime that has occurred, reparative efforts can be made by agreement by both the offender and the victim (Cavadino & Dignan, 1997). With the reparative agreement, the victim is giving the offender the opportunity to be accountable to the crime that he/she committed and perform acts that would benefit the victim. This restorative justice approach gives a voice to victims. However, since this is rarely ever used in homicide cases, many co-victims of homicide do not have the opportunity to address the alleged perpetrator of the crime.

Another intervention program that has been created in response to a restorative justice approach is the Victim Offender Mediation and Dialogue. This approach “gives family members the opportunity to address the damage done to them through a face to face dialogue with the offender” (Armour, 2002). This may be beneficial to co-victims because they are given the ability to speak about the harm they are experiencing and give the alleged perpetrator the chance to listen to their perspective about the situation.

In addition to fostering a conversation between the perpetrator of a crime and the victim (if he or she chooses), many victim advocacy organizations and departments have been developed to support victims through the criminal justice system and help to guide
victims as they cope with the crime in their lives. Victim advocacy programs have been incorporated in many police departments and university settings to actively aid victims. The type of quality of victim advocacy programs depends on the state and the organization. However, the Prosecution and Code Enforcement department within the Denver City Attorney’s office actively works with victims of crime. The most vital aspect of this department is the notion that victim advocates attend court hearings with the victim. This is powerful because victims have a support mechanism throughout court proceedings.

Co-victims of Crime-The Family:

Rights in the criminal justice system

Though there have been substantial movements toward improving the rights of victims of crime, it has been a very slow process in trying to advocate and fight for the rights of the deceased victim and co-victims/families of homicide victims. “Because murder is a crime against the state, [co-victims] often become bystanders whose needs are secondary to the state’s concern for fairness and justice in apprehending, trying, and convicting the murder” (Armour, 2002). The legal process has not offered any aid or the same level of protection of rights for co-victims of crime. Since the sole focus of the state is to convict the murderer, co-victims are often excluded from discussions with criminal justice officials and co-victims also do not receive adequate support from victim assistants.

Psychological Trauma

Holmes and Rahe’s 1967 study (as cited in Walsh and McGoldrick, 2004) found that the death of a family member is the most difficult life change that an individual could
ever endure. Death touches the lives of everyone and everyone needs to learn ways to cope with the emotional trauma following death. Rogers et. al’s 2008 study further emphasized the importance of intervention in order to help parents cope with lasting grief. Parents who lost a child experienced more depressive episodes and reported a poorer well-being (Rogers et al., 2008). In addition to depressive episodes, marital disruption may also occur (Rogers et al., 2008). The loss of a loved one not only directly affects the individual who had the relationship with the deceased, but it also affects the family members’ relationships with others. Attempting to handle the circumstances following a loss as well as performing regular day-to-day activities can cause strain on other relationships. This strain can push individuals who experienced loss to isolate themselves from others.

The loss of a loved one ignites an array of different emotions. The whirlwind of various emotions may be difficult for a bereaved parent or family member to cope with and understand. Negative emotions like “grief, shock, anger, revenge, loss, and horror” arise when loved ones are murdered (Magee, 1983). This intensified set of emotions causes families to feel alone (Magee, 1983). This disconnect between the individual and society may negatively affect individuals’ coping strategies. Individuals who are disconnected from society are not able to garner social support from others.

“The special needs of [co-victims] have been given less attention than other forms of victimization” (Amick-McMullan et al., 1991; Freeman, Shaffer, and Smith, 1996; Thompson, Norris, and Ruback, 1998 qtd. Armour, 2002). Co-victims’ needs are not taken as seriously as the needs of other victims of crime. Since co-victims of homicide are not given the same type of care as other, “mental health professionals…have not been
exposed to some of the unique aspects of their emotional devastation and are accordingly limited in their knowledge of how to help them” (Armour, 2002). Co-victims are not having their needs met because mental health professionals are not given sufficient training on dealing with homicide. Mental health professionals who are experts in grief still struggle to find ways to aid co-victims as “the experience[s] of co-victims of homicide [do] not support core assumptions inherent in grief work” (Armour, 2002).

Losing a loved one to homicide does not follow the same grieving path as someone who lost a loved one to old age.

**Lack of closure**

The grieving process is influenced by the experiences an individual had as well as who the individual is as a person. However, one commonality among co-victims of homicide is that they “do not expect closure” (Peterson, 2000; Spungen, 1998 qtd in Armour, 2002). “Instead of seeing their experience as transitory, they discover that their grieving is ongoing and takes different directions based on time and circumstances” (Armour, 2002). The continuous pain and grief co-victims experience is everlasting. There is no end to the grieving process for co-victims of crime.

**Isolation**

The continuous cycle of grief may lead the individuals around the co-victims to isolate themselves away from the co-victim. Co-victims “may be shunned by friends and family” (Armour, 2002). After homicide, the co-victims’ in-groups quickly become their out-groups. The new out-group members emphasize the salient differences between themselves and the co-victims (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). This may be a way that out-group members justify leaving the co-victims alone. Without any support from loved
ones, co-victims may experience more of a struggle to cope with the loss of their loved ones. “The lack of social validation uproots survivors from their communities and changes the basis for their belonging” (Armour, 2002). The strong connections that co-victims had prior to the homicide change post-homicide. Being isolated can prolong the grieving process because individuals do not have support from others. Individuals are forced to find new ways of living their life and to find their sense of community with other individuals. Co-victims tend to find a sense of community with people who share similar experiences with them.

*Using tragedy as a way to improve society and themselves*

*Society*

Homicide has detrimental effects on the victim’s family. However, some co-victims utilize all the negative emotions they are feeling and transform them into passion to improve the injustices in society. Parapully et al. in 2002 found that “the survivor parents have made and continue to make a difference in the communities in which the murders occurred” (Parapully, Rosenbaum, Daele and Nzewi, 2002). Co-victims “have become vocal and proactive on social issues” (Parapully, Rosenbaum, Daele and Nzewi, 2002). The homicide may have opened co-victims’ eyes to the injustices in society and empowered them to resolve those injustices.

*Transformation of self-identity*

In addition to making changes in the community, some individuals make changes within themselves post-homicide. This can be accomplished through joining support groups to help other victims who experienced similar tragedies to move forward (Parapully, Rosenbaum, Daele and Nzewi, 2002). By experiencing bereavement,
survivors found “strengths” within themselves (Parapully, Rosenbaum, Daele and Nzewi, 2002). They used those strengths to better cope with losing their loved ones. Additionally, some individuals turned to religion to cope with their loss. Although “the tragedy severely tested the religious faith of some participants…[the tragedy] ultimately…deepened and strengthened it” (Parapully, Rosenbaum, Daele and Nzewi, 2002). The religious aspect of an individual’s identity improved due to the individual’s experience with losing a loved one. This can be in response to sharing similar beliefs to members in the religious group or through the individual’s own faith. Parts of self-identity change in co-victims as they are going through the grieving process and finding ways to cope.

**Coping Mechanisms**

Coping mechanisms are vital to moving forward after the death of a loved one. Individuals who have utilized coping mechanisms reported higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction (McCrae and Costa Jr., 1986). Raitio, Kaunonen, and Aho’s (2015) study determined that greater social support is associated with stronger personal growth. Social support can be seen as one of the essential coping mechanisms used by individuals who experience the death of a loved one. Grieving family members who are surrounded by a network of support tend to heal better. Families who receive social support from their community members directly after losing a loved one to murder are in a better position to cope and heal after this traumatic event (Magee, 1983). Social support from the community ensures that individuals who are experiencing this loss are not isolated.

Having a strong social network of support gives more resources and help to individuals
who need to cope. Instead, these individuals are given different avenues and resources to better handle the aftermath of death.

National organizations have been created to accommodate families of homicide victims to help them cope with the loss of their loved one. An unknown proportion of families find support in a wide array of groups that have been created to assist families of homicide victims. One organization that uses a national homicide database to track unsolved homicides in Colorado is Families of Homicide Victims of Missing Persons (FOVAMP). Using the database, members will call families of unsolved homicides and ask if they want to join the group. Coping with the loss of a loved one sometimes includes joining individuals who share similar experiences.

Another national organization recognized for its efforts to provide support and resources for families and friends of homicide victims is Parents of Murdered Children (POMC). In Denver, Parents of Murdered Children is an organization that meets once a month to discuss co-victims stories about how their loved one was killed, how he/she is coping with the event, and the support he/she may need during this process. The open discussion allows individuals to support and give advice to one another. The social support developed in these meetings makes victims feel like their voices are heard and that their opinions and emotions are valued. Social support can be helpful in dealing with life stressors (Cobb, 1976). Experiencing the violent death of a loved one can lead individuals to a series of different mental health outcomes including “posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, and intense or prolonged grief” (Hibberd, Elwood, and Galovski, 2010). A strong network of support can alleviate some of the detrimental effects of losing a loved one.
Lack of knowledge about the experiences of co-victims of crime

With all of the attention placed on other forms of victimization, co-victims “are a hidden and sparsely researched group whose needs, as crime victims, are neglected and subsumed by the state’s agenda for retributive justice” (Armour, 2002). There is lack of research and knowledge about co-victims of homicide. Co-victims continue to be underrepresented in the criminal justice system. Their narratives are often hidden away and not given the attention, support, and empathy they deserve. Therefore, this research will attempt to uncover the experiences of co-victims post-homicide as well as get a better understanding of the coping mechanisms used during their grieving process to hopefully provide strategies on improving the aftermath of homicide.
Chapter 3 Methods:

Approval from Institutional Review Board

The Institutional Review Board at the University of Colorado Boulder is responsible for reviewing all research involving human subjects “undertaken by faculty, staff, and students” (What is the IRB?). The purpose of a detailed review of all research conducted and/or supported by the university is to ensure that all human subjects participating in the research are protected (What is the IRB?). Human subjects participating in research need to be treated with respect and dignity. They also need to be aware of the harms risked by the research. Lastly, participants are required to sign an informed consent form or give verbal consent before participating in the research. Informed consent is a vital component of the research process because participants are thereby made aware of their rights, the harms associated with the research, what the research entails, and the goals of the researcher. After reading or hearing the details of the research, participants can then volunteer to participate in the project knowing everything it entails.

The research project included seven participants. I received six signed informed consent forms from the in-person interviews. For the one over the phone interview, I emailed the participant a copy of the informed consent form prior to the interview and received verbal consent before beginning the interview. A protocol outlining the project’s goals, methods, and outlining existing literature relevant to the topic as well as supporting documents (informed consent, recruitment messages, or any other documents used during the project) must be submitted to the Institutional Review Board for approval before the
research project can begin. If the Institutional Review Board does not approve the submission, the committee members will suggest revisions.

The protocol took a total of three revisions to be approved as I needed to assure the Institutional Review Board that there were minimal risks associated with participating in the study and I needed to demonstrate that my advisor, Michael Radelet, had significant experience with my topic. The risks in the study included individuals being re-traumatized by the events of their loved one’s death, and an influx of depressive emotions. I mitigated these risks by recruiting only individuals who had previously publicly spoken about their experiences. Since I am only recruiting individuals in support groups, other members in the support group may shape the narratives and experiences the participants share with me in the interviews. Additionally, I was ready to provide information and resources that could help individuals cope with their situation. For example, I was prepared to recommend different support groups as well as contact information for those groups. Dr. Radelet also wrote a letter to the Institutional Review Board outlining his years of experience with homicide victims through Parents of Murdered Children and Families of Homicide Victims and Missing Persons. The letter also included Dr. Radelet’s supervision over the research project to ensure the safety and protection of the participants’ rights.

Participants

After getting approval from the Institutional Review Board, I began the recruiting process. Through Dr. Radelet’s connections with Parents of Murdered Children, I was able to begin attending their monthly meetings with approval from the Parents of Murdered Children Front Range Chapter Leader. During the two meetings that I attended,
I always started by giving a brief introduction about myself, and the research project. This brief introduction included my interest in criminal justice, victim advocacy, and my interest in the experiences that families of homicide victims have. I went on to explain that I was attending these meetings because I was writing an honors thesis about families of homicide victims and the coping mechanisms used to deal with the loss of a loved one.

I introduced myself in both meetings to ensure that all members knew my role as a researcher and understood my interest in attending these meetings. This is a method I used to build rapport so that the members within POMC could build a trusting relationship with me knowing that I am a researcher. I also did not want to make individuals feel like they were being watched without their knowledge. Three of the participants were recruited through these meetings.

**Referrals**

Participants in the research included Dr. Radelet’s contacts (n=6) and other individuals whom I met through Parents of Murdered Children meetings (n=3). Dr. Radelet referred a few participants to me based on his previous work with Families of Homicide Victims and Missing Persons. Dr. Radelet only referred me to individuals who had publicly spoken about the loss of their loved one. Six of the participants were recruited through their participation with Families of Homicide Victims and Missing Persons. Participants varied in race/ethnicity, gender, age, and location. However, all participants in the study lived in Colorado. There were a total of five males and four females. Two of the in-person interviews were spouses who shared the experience of losing their sons together.
Parents of Murdered Children

Parents of Murdered Children is a national organization with chapters all around the United States. “POMC makes the difference through on-going emotional support, education, prevention, advocacy, and awareness” (The Mission of POMC). Each chapter has monthly meetings where families and friends of homicide victims come together and discuss the loss of their loved one, their current emotional state, the support they need, and whatever else they deem appropriate. The monthly meetings are an open discussion and allow members to support one another and provide advice to one another from their own experiences. In addition to supporting current victims of homicide, some members are also serving as victim advocates. Victim advocates are the voices for the victims and guide families through the criminal justice system and through any personal hardships they may be experiencing. This organization proudly supports victims’ rights and continues to emphasize their importance in court proceedings.

Families of Homicide Victims and Missing Persons (FOVAMP)

Some of the participants that were recruited to the research project were members of Families of Homicide Victims and Missing Persons. The organization typically reaches out to families who can relate to the organization and sends them an invitation to join. Families of Homicide Victims and Missing Persons (FOVAMP) was founded by Don, Jerri, and Mark Reichert with the purpose of aiding law enforcement officials with unsolved murders as well as providing closure to victims’ families (About Us). This organization works with missing persons in addition to families and friends of homicide victims in cases where the homicide has not been solved by the investigating police agency. In terms of the missing persons component, FOVAMP works directly with
law enforcement and the community to bring justice to the families through advertisement, rewards, and improving communications between law enforcement and families (About Us). Families of Homicide Victims and Missing Persons also supplies miscellaneous services to its members that include support, advocacy, and accessibility to the unsolved cases database (About Us).

**Table 1: The Participants**

To protect privacy, names are pseudonyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Member Name</th>
<th>Victim of Homicide</th>
<th>Relationship of Victim to the Family Member</th>
<th>The Date of the Homicide</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Status of Homicide Case</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jared</td>
<td>Lauren</td>
<td>Daughter</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Parents of Murdered Children</td>
<td>Solved, Defendant has been released on Parole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rodger</td>
<td>Elaina</td>
<td>Daughter</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Families of Homicide Victims and Missing Persons</td>
<td>Unsolved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pablo</td>
<td>Anabelle</td>
<td>Daughter</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Parents of</td>
<td>Solved,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scott and Christina</td>
<td>Son</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Families of Homicide Victims and Missing Persons</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>Sister, Brother in Law, and Niece</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Parents of Murdered Children</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Families of Homicide Victims and Missing Persons</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel and Jessica</td>
<td>Son</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Families of Homicide Victims and Missing Persons</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interview Schedule:

To obtain the data for this project, I conducted one over the phone and six in-person interviews with individuals from seven families of homicide victims. The phone interview was arranged when it was not feasible for me to meet with the individual. Prior to beginning any interviews, I required that all participants sign a consent waiver (see Appendix A) and/or give me verbal consent.

Through the detailed responses I got from the participants, I was able to get a glimpse into each interviewee’s reality. Each participant has gone through his or her own physical, mental, and legal battles, and the purpose of this research is to get a better understanding of the challenging obstacles they have all had to overcome/are currently overcoming, the coping mechanisms used during this time, and the ways in which facing these obstacles have made them resilient. Interviews followed the interview schedule (see Appendix B) with room for probing (follow-up) questions depending on each interviewee’s response. Interviews allow for flexibility and the opportunity for the interviewer to be open “to new and unexpected phenomena” (Kvale, 1983). Interviews can provide new insight to interviewees’ lives that may not have been previously thought of by researchers. With the use of probing questions based on the responses, I was able to elicit new information from every interviewee. As interviews continued, I adapted the interview questions based on the timeline in which the participants’ answered the questions. The flexibility in the interview questions helped to develop rapport because the propping questions were personalized to the individual. The personalized questions allowed me to make each interviewee feel like their unique responses were respected and appreciated. This also gave the participants more time to elaborate on their responses.
Lastly, the flexibility gave the interviewees the ability to take me through their own personal narrative. Each person personalized their story and the timeline of their case. The timeline was important when answering the interview questions. Overall, the interview questions briefly covered the following:

- The story of the homicide
- The initial reactions by the family to the homicide
- Opinions on how law enforcement and the criminal justice system acted after the homicide
- The support mechanisms used upon learning of the homicide and thereafter
- The role of community members, family members, and coworkers
- The resources that could have been helpful that were not available

Since the interviewees have different experiences and ways of dealing with losing their loved one to homicide, “the qualitative research interview is theme oriented” (Kvale, 1983). I have been analyzing the data by first identifying common themes found within the interviews, taking care not to ignore or lose the individuality of each case.

Since the data were being analyzed qualitatively, the different timelines and the different ways each interviewee told his or her story did not affect the analysis. Instead, it underscored the point that all victims have different experiences and coping mechanisms to deal with the loss of their loved one. The shared experiences allowed me to further analyze the data in order to decipher common themes and patterns in the ways in which the interviewees have experienced a loss of a loved one.
Collecting the Data

Prior to conducting interviews, I wrote a protocol, consent form, and a tentative interview schedule outlining the purpose of the study as well as the methods I would be using to obtain the results and submitted them to the Institutional Review Board at the University of Colorado, Boulder. The Institutional Review Board is responsible for reviewing all research involving human participants to ensure their safety. After I received approval from the Institutional Review Board, Dr. Radelet began recruiting individuals he knows who have experienced losing a loved one to homicide. Additionally, I began recruiting members of the Parents of Murdered Children Front Range chapter. Individuals were only recruited if they had publicly spoken about their experiences. I chose to limit the participants to those individuals who had spoken about their experiences in a public setting to minimize the risks participants may experience through the interviews. After conducting six interviews, I realized that the questions asked during the interviews were common questions that are typically asked to families of homicide victims when they speak to the public. The narratives they share about their experiences were similar to the narratives they shared to the public. Since all of the participants were recruited using only two organizations, the sample is considered a purposive sample, meaning the results cannot be generalized to the overall population. All of the individuals who were recruited to the research project were given a brief introduction to the research purpose and the methods. Anyone who was willing to participate received an informed consent form and each participant was required to sign it and/or give verbal consent (see Appendix A) and we then proceeded to schedule an interview. All participants’ names have been changed to protect their privacy.
Interviews were conducted at the location and time of the participants’ choice. Allowing the interviewee to determine the location helped build rapport because the interviewee could find a place in which he or she felt comfortable while sharing intimate details of their experiences with me (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree 2006). All interviews were in-person interviews except for one phone interview. The interviews lasted between thirty minutes and two hours. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by me. The transcription of the interviews took approximately 21-25 hours. The purpose of audio recording the interviews was to ensure that I captured in detail what the interviewees were saying. All interviewees were asked the questions on the interview schedule as well as some follow-up questions and clarifying questions if need be.

**Analyzing the Data**

After the interviews were completed, I transcribed all of them to get a more “usable” record of the interview. By transcribing the interviews, I was better able to identify and evaluate common themes that occurred between the interviewees, as well as note the unique aspects of each. A transcribed version of the interview also gave me a more accurate depiction of the experiences and stories told by the interviewees than would have been available had I relied solely on my notes. By looking directly at the key events they mentioned in the interview, I was capable of gaining insight into their lives. After the interviews were transcribed, I analyzed each individual interview for themes that were reoccurring. After all interviews were examined for themes, I picked the top three themes that were present and consistent in all of the interviews. The three themes were then broken down into subthemes based on how each interviewee answered the questions. This analysis can be seen in more detail in the data analysis section. The
quotes used in the data analysis are representative of the responses from the interviewees. Since the quotes are representative, there are more quotes that could have been used during data analysis but were very similar to other responses. Thus, I picked out certain quotes that I felt were representative of the themes.
Chapter 4 Data Analysis

Generalizability

Although the analysis revealed similarities among the participants, each of the participants had vastly different experiences, and the differences are just as important as the similarities. These seven different participants are unique in their own way, but also hold certain commonalities. The seven different case studies also involved participants who came from different programs: Parents of Murdered Children and Families of Homicide Victims and Missing Persons. These individuals sought out help from those organizations and spoke publicly about their cases. The things I have learned in the research are no doubt similar to what an unknown number of other family members of homicide victims experience, but due to the small sample size and the individuality of the participants I cannot generalize their experiences to all families of homicide victims. The data analysis portion of the research is representative of the information I retrieved from the interviews. Each participant brought individuality and provided insightful information. It was interesting to learn about the wide range of grieving processes among the participants.

Individual experiences influencing the selection of coping mechanisms

As I previously mentioned, the participants varied in their experiences and the coping mechanisms that they used to move forward. The coping mechanisms that each participant chose are derived from their own history of how their loved one was killed as well as their own experiences with attempting to process the trauma they experienced. It is important to highlight and differentiate the different stories of the participants to get a better understanding of how they made personal and lifestyle changes after the tragedy.
Perhaps the best way to get a glimpse of the life of a family member of a homicide victim is to better understand the relationship between the family member and the loved one. The narratives that the participants tell are individualized and personal to them. The stories they shared with me are vital to understanding why specific coping mechanisms were used.

**Lack of closure as a driving force in determining coping mechanisms**

I conducted a total of seven interviews for this research project. These seven participants all had different experiences dealing with grief, the homicide, law enforcement, the community, and in their own struggles to find and use their own coping mechanisms. The times that the homicides occurred ranged from one to 31 years before the interviews. However, one commonality found among all participants is the lack of closure regardless of when the homicide occurred. The lack of closure in this research is defined as the continuing search for answers to remaining questions about the crime. Closure can be seen as an ending point to the nightmare of homicide, and the data suggest that no families ever completely find it. In all cases, the suddenness of a homicide leads individuals on a roller coaster of emotions through the grieving process into a spiral of questioning why the homicide occurred, and into an immediate challenge to develop and perfect ways to cope. None of the participants have ended their quests for complete closure.

Losing a loved one to homicide has an irreversible and lifelong impact on the participants’ lives. Pablo* states in his interview, “my world [after the homicide] will not change for the rest of my life…it doesn’t heal, it doesn’t get better, there is no closure, there is no justice…you have to learn to live with it.” The participants are all continuing
to find new ways to cope with their loss and to perfect their old ways. The number of years since the homicide is irrelevant, certain triggers may suddenly arise and bring each participant back to the day when they first learned that their loved one was gone. The endless cycle of grief requires constant tweaking of the methods that people use to cope with their loss. There is no one common or perfect method of dealing with grief because the homicides affect individuals differently. The unknown reasoning behind the homicidal act further perpetuates the cycle of grief. Although each family member is unique, the data from this study reveal three different commonalities: addressing the flaws within the criminal justice system, transforming identities, and creating a new normal life. I will address each of these themes.

**Discovering and Addressing Shortcomings within the Criminal Justice System**

The participants ranged in their opinions of the criminal justice system and their opinions on if or how justice was served in their cases. Some participants began the process unhappy with how law enforcement officials (police and prosecutors) handled their cases, but became more understanding and accepting once they developed a longer relationship with law enforcement officers and/or victim advocates assigned to their case. Other participants still hold resentment at the inability or limits of law enforcement officials to protect the rights of victims, and particularly to find and convict the perpetrators. All participants identified aspects of their case that could be improved to better assist the families in the aftermath of the murder. Families of homicide victims are co-victims of homicide, but their needs are too often unnoticed. “Co-victim” is the term used by families of homicide victims, law enforcement officials, and in some legal proceedings. Co-victims are not physically injured by the criminal act, but they still face
countless negative repercussions of it. In the research, I define “co-victims” as the families of the homicide victims. The trauma that co-victims endure requires support, advocacy, and empathy from those involved in the criminal justice system.

The Court:

Duration:

In most or even all states, there is no set deadline by which a criminal case needs to be processed and/or resolved. There are a seemingly infinite number of factors that can prevent or delay the “finalization” of a conviction such as the defendant waiving his or her right to a speedy trial, the lack of evidence, the inability to find the suspect, appeals, etc. The time that criminal cases take to process in court varies considerably. In addition to the variation in timeline, Colorado (like other states) also does not have a statutory of limitations murder charges (Colorado Criminal Statue of Limitations Law). By this I mean that, at least technically, homicides from 100 years ago are still open and law enforcement needs to follow any new leads. Since there is no statutory limit on filing murder charges, prosecutors can file murder charges at any time. This can prolong the legal procedure. Perceived delays in the case can re-traumatize co-victims and interfere with the grieving process. The criminal process involves trials that typically require co-victims to relive, in one way or another, the events surrounding their loved one’s death. Since there is no deadline, co-victims might have to listen to all the evidence in the case, how their loved one was killed, to hear the defense attempt to subtly or overtly discredit the victim, and to hear the defense support the perpetrator for years on end. Anguished caused by the length of the court proceedings was a reoccurring theme in the interviews. Pablo had to endure a “2-year process” with “11 court dates.” Pablo went on to describe
the court dates as times where he heard “about drug testing up to hearings of getting him checked for psych evaluations to make sure he can stand trial.” The long duration of the court cases negatively affected Pablo. Pablo described the legal system as “slow and painful.” He continued by saying “every time I would get an email or phone call from DA, I would flashback. I would be re-traumatized.” Grieving does not occur right away because there is constant re-living of his daughter’s death. Pablo had to repeatedly experience losing his daughter. Not only did he have to deal with the horrific experiences he had during the first week after his daughter’s death, he had to sit through multiple hearings that retold one of the worst days of his life. Sarah’s case had its own difficulties with the duration of the trial. Sarah believed that a key witness in the case was coerced into lying on the stand about his knowledge of the defendant. The prosecutor had to drop the case with prejudice. Sarah and her family “walked out of the courtroom crying.” Dropping a case with prejudice means that the case can be brought back up in court when there is substantial evidence to try the alleged perpetrator in court. Although the circumstances are different in Sarah’s case and the fault cannot be placed on the court system, Sarah’s pain clearly illustrates the negative repercussions of a continuous court battle with the defendant. Sarah is left wondering when her brother’s murderer will face the legal system. Perhaps unavoidably, the court process is creating distress and emotional turbulence in the co-victims. Infinite hearing dates and prolonged convictions distance the co-victims further away from closure. Closure begins to seem unreachable. Justice seems to be inaccessible.

Since there is no statue of limitation on murder charges, the duration of court can be continuous. In the case of Pablo, he had to endure numerous court dates with hopes
that the alleged perpetrator would be convicted. In Sarah’s case, after 25 years, she is still waiting for the alleged perpetrator to be face court. Since there is no set deadline on when cases need to be solved, families may be left wondering when the court process will be over. This can prolong the grieving process.

**Parole:**

The study involved some individuals whose cases have been solved (recently or many years ago) or are still pending trial. I define “solved” as the point where the perpetrator in the case has been convicted and sentenced for the homicide. Depending on the sentence, the perpetrator may be eligible for parole. Parole gives convicted felons the opportunity to “serve part of the sentence in the community after serving a prison term” (What is Parole?). After many hearings and days of uncertainty related to the issue of whether the perpetrator should be released on parole, the perpetrator in Jared’s case was eventually released on parole. While trying to untangle the complexity of the legal system, Jared started noticing issues in parole process. Jared elaborated in the interview by saying, “I pushed for everything that I found wrong with the system. I got laws changed.” Jared worked to challenge parole sentencing and changed a law regarding parole. Jared saw that the issue with parole is it did not require that offenders serve the majority of their sentence before being eligible for parole. One way that some people react is to attempt to change laws that they feel are unjust. Jared is an example of those individuals who are active in their community and work to fix what they see as unjust laws.

One example of a law that angers at least some family members of homicide victims involves parole eligibility. In 2004, a law was passed in Colorado that requires
that “a person who is serving a sentence for a crime of violence would serve a minimum of 75% of his or her sentence” before being eligible for parole (C.R.S. § 17-22.5-501). This law required that violent offenders must serve more of their sentence before being released into the community. Although forcing individuals to serve more of their sentence may seem to alleviate the pain of dealing with homicide, the interviews showed that sentencing does not heal the pain of losing a loved one and it does not provide closure. The impact of homicide is everlasting and not even a conviction can help individuals move forward. A conviction does not lessen the emotional aftermath of murder. In Pablo’s case, the perpetrator will be eligible for parole in the future. Yet, throughout the interview Pablo was not concerned about the perpetrator being released.

The end of the trial does not finalize or close anything. It may close the door on that chapter but the thing is you have to deal with everything you hear in trial, possible parole hearing, there are so many things that continue with you for the rest of your life. It doesn’t go away. It doesn’t stop once sentencing is done.

Pablo perfectly describes the experiences of some of the participants. The grieving and pain of homicide continues throughout ones’ life. Instead of being concerned about the perpetrator’s sentence, he was upset that “[the perpetrator] took something that can never be returned. [He] could never hear [his daughter’s] voice again or be with her.” Sentencing does not bring loved ones back nor does it heal the pain caused by violent offenders. Pablo only emphasized that he “want[s] his daughter back.”

*The lack of communication:*

The forces that are supposed to fight alongside the victims’ families are law enforcement officials, district attorneys, the prosecutors, and victim advocates. However,
throughout the interviews, it seems the participants see these “subsidiary forces” as not fulfilling their obligations. Law enforcement officials, district attorneys, the prosecutors, and victim advocates are supposed to be significant resources for families. However, many participants felt they either did not receive support at all or they did not receive it in the beginning of their process. “Going through the hearings as a victim, you really don’t understand all the things that are going on. You don’t understand all the legal questions, all the processes, and all the stuff you are going through. You have to rely on other people” (Pablo). The hurricane that is the criminal justice system can sweep individuals off their feet and place them in a state of dissonance. Specific officials are designated to aid in trying to tease apart the complex legal system. However, if these officials are unreachable, co-victims drown in the hurricane.

**Law enforcement:**

Cops are responsible for investigating the crime and finding the suspect. Their communication is essential because the work they do turns into a prosecutor’s case for court. The investigation conducted by detectives can influence how the cases are processed in court. Daniel and Jessica,* along with others, had issues with the detectives working on their cases. Daniel and Jessica’s son’s murder remains unsolved after 18 years. Jessica heard from an individual, who was present when law enforcement arrived at the crime, that law enforcement officials spent a total of 15 minutes at the crime scene. Jessica went onto describe her frustrations because she does not believe “they did their job.” She believed that the detectives on the case did not spend adequate time conducting a thorough investigation.
Many of their frustrations came from the poor investigative techniques implemented by the detectives. After the detectives left the crime scene without any evidence, Daniel and Jessica were determined to get the car in which the murder occurred tested for fingerprints and DNA. Unfortunately, the car was returned to them washed after Daniel and Jessica specifically told police not to wash the car. This lack of communication between the detectives and Daniel and Jessica impacted the trust Jessica and Daniel had in the detectives. Daniel goes on to say “I didn’t believe in the detectives. They weren’t doing their job. They still aren’t doing their job. They still don’t know what is going on.” The inability for law enforcement to work with Daniel and Jessica has affected their relationship with them. Jessica stressed in the interview that “if [the detectives] worked with us and come up dead, then that would be alright.” Jessica just wanted to be a part of the investigation into discovering the death of her son.

The lack of information provided to co-victims can become extremely frustrating and can impact their ability to obtain closure. Scott* relayed the same dissatisfaction with the lack of communication from law enforcement officials. Scott’s case, like Daniel and Jessica’s, is unsolved. It has been unsolved for 13 years. Scott was left in the dark because he was finding information through “word of mouth.” Law enforcement officials did not directly provide their knowledge of the crime to Scott. Instead, he found things out through different avenues like the coroner’s office. Scott’s wife, Christina,* stressed the importance of consistency. “Even if there is no new news, we still want to know because as the victim, we want to know that at least you are still invested and doing something or tell us it is dead but don’t leave us hanging because we are the ones
suffering.” Unsolved cases can be discouraging but it is reassuring to know that detectives are still working toward solving the case.

Barbara* found out about the murder of her sister, her brother in law, and niece through the television. Details of Barbara’s case reached media outlets before they reached her family. Some individuals were finding out more about the case than her through their own personal connections. Information was dispersed sporadically with some members of the family including Barbara not receiving news until hours or days later. The perpetrator in her case was on the run after he had killed his family. However, law enforcement did not notify her. This left Barbara and her family “worried that he was coming for the rest of the family.” Co-victims have every right to know the details of their case as they are continuing to suffer. In the majority of criminal cases, victim advocates are assigned to victims of crime to better aid co-victims through the criminal process.

**Victim Assistants/Advocates:**

When individuals become victims of crimes, victim assistants will generally reach out to the individuals and/or their families. Victim advocates work with victims and co-victims of crime. The purpose of victim advocates is to aid victims through the criminal process, provide any support to victims, and offer resources that may benefit them. Victim advocates are the voices for victims. Advocates are the victim representatives in the criminal justice system so it is vital that they continue to have communication with the victims. Throughout the interviews, the participants voiced many complaints about the lack of support from their victim advocates.
Christina has had limited communication with her victim advocate. “She doesn’t initiate anything. She doesn’t do anything. She is not doing anything for us.” In the interview, Christina complained about the lack of effort from the victim advocate, claiming that the victim advocate was not fulfilling her role. Barbara continues to struggle with contacting her victim advocate. She feels that “victim services … are really nice but they take too long to respond. By the time they respond, I have found out through another source [about] my question or through TV.” Any communication “must be [sought] out.” Instead of victim advocates being readily available, co-victims have to continue to reach out to victim advocates. Consequently, many co-victims struggle with having proper representation and adequate support. The lack of empathy and support from victim advocates continues to be an issue as individuals are attempting to gain knowledge about their case and support as they endure the challenges of the legal system and the obstacles of grief. Not only are individuals left alone to their own devices, they are forced to deal with the lack of progress in their cases alone.

**Lack of progress:**

The lack of movement in the victims cases can often leave the families alone and wondering when or even if justice will be served. This section will specifically focus on participants from Families of Homicide Victims and Missing Persons because their cases are unsolved. Generally, police departments do not allocate as many resources to cold cases as needed. Their resources do not meet the demands it takes to solve cold cases. Christina mentions that her “impression is they want to be on the cases that are fresh.” Scott and Christina’s case is 13 years old and their case is still unsolved. Similarly, other families experience the lack of progress in their cases as well.
Daniel and Jessica’s case has been unsolved for 18 years. The lack of progression is impeding their ability to find closure. When speaking about their case, Jessica emphasizes that “[she and Daniel] are still walking along in the dark…we don’t know anything. We don’t know who did it or why they did it or anything.” Every day, Jessica and Daniel, like other families, have to continue their lives without their son and without any explanation. The anguish they experience has detrimental effects on their overall well-being. The unknown leaves Daniel and Jessica feeling unsure about the events of what happened the night of the homicide.

In Sarah’s case, 25 years have passed and a suspect has yet to be identified, arrested, or convicted. Sarah attributes the lack of movement in her case to the lack of detectives working on the case. She continues to discuss her displeasure by saying “why do you have 100 cops on this cop’s case but you can’t give me one detective to work on my brother’s case, why is he any better than my brother.” In Sarah’s case, she believes that detectives were more concerned with solving homicides that take the lives of police officers than they were about solving her own brother’s case. Sarah’s case emphasizes the impact of the lack of resources.

The lack of progress in cases can drag out the grieving process. Individuals cannot fully grieve because they do not fully understand the circumstances that surround their loved one’s death. Individuals are stuck in the unknown. Detectives don’t seem to be adequately performing their jobs as investigators. The perpetrators who have taken innocent lives are roaming the streets, unharmed by their actions. This can bring forth more frustrations with the criminal justice system. The institution responsible for protecting its citizens from harm is not living up to its promises or mandate.
Addressing flaws within the criminal justice system as a coping mechanism:

Criticizing problems and shortcomings within the criminal justice system is an outlet for individuals to seek and create changes in what they see as an unjust system and to keep their loved one’s rights protected. By addressing issues in the system, some of the participants have transformed the passion they have for getting the perpetrator in their case convicted, into dedication and drive to make the criminal justice system more just. Jared is an inspiring individual who devotes his time to trying to fix the problems with the criminal system. As he described it, every time he “saw something wrong, [he] tried to change it.” Jared changed laws and fought legislation in pursuit for justice. Like Jared, many of the participants have become influential members in their community and have a strong desire for a just system.

Many participants spoke to the idea that the legal system protects the rights of the living, and not the rights of their murdered loved one. “[The legal system] backs up the defendant and they have more rights than the victims” (Pablo). Since the deceased are unable to represent themselves, most of the participants became advocates for their loved ones. The love they have for this person is the fuel that pushes them to continue every day. They continue to persevere through the challenges brought forth by the legal system and fight with vigor to redeem the dignity of their loved one. Losing a loved one has become so woven into the lives of the participants and many of their identities have transformed following the tragedy.

Identity disruption and transformation:

Traumatic experiences drastically alter individuals’ identities. After dealing with the aftermath of homicide, there was an identity disruption that occurred within the
participants. The participants either made adjustments to their lives or worked to preserve certain aspects of themselves. It is interesting to see what characteristics of their self-identities the participants wanted to keep and the ones they lost. Pablo speaks for all of the participants by saying, “part of me died when my daughter died.” Individuals are not the same after their loved one dies. A piece of them leaves with their loved ones.

Most of the participants in the study became their loved one’s advocate. Instead of completely removing their loved ones from their lives, each participant found a way to incorporate their loved ones into their new identity. All the participants wanted their loved ones to live on and continue to play a role on their lives. The legacy of those who they lost continues to live on through them. To this day, they continue to shape the individuals that the participants become or strive to be.

_The Everlasting Role of a Parent:_

For the parents in the sample, a huge part of their identity is being a parent. Despite losing their son or daughter, these individuals continue to find ways to be parental. They still find ways to embrace and preserve the characteristics of a parent. Being a parent is a huge part of someone’s identity and losing a child will inevitably change what it means to be a parent. Parental status is one aspect of the participants’ identities that they did not want to get rid of. It is such an important part of their identities that they will find ways to incorporate parental characteristics in other relationships. Many of the participants mentioned that in conversations between parents, everyone typically talks about their kids. Two of the parents in the sample spoke to the importance of speaking about all their kids. The death of their son and daughter does not change their parental status. Pablo and Jessica felt that it was important to continue to mention their
deceased child. Jessica echoed this in her interview by saying, “He’s still our son. He always will be.” The role of a parent never ends for these interviewees. Pablo and Jessica continue to find ways to be a parent to their other child as well as find other ways to display their parental characteristics. In a very real sense, their child is still living on through them. Their child is still shaping their identity. Three of the participants found different ways to continue to be a parent through becoming a grandma, becoming a guardian, or sharing lessons and experiences with others.

Throughout her interview, Jessica continued to express love for her son as well as bring attention to her son’s remarkable characteristics. It was evident by the way Jessica’s face glowed when she talked about her son that they had an extremely close and loving relationship. Since being a mother was such a big part of Jessica’s identity, she struggled with finding ways to continue to be a mother after losing her son. “No parent should outlive their kid” is the phrase that Jessica used during our interview. This phrase emphasizes how important being a mother was and still is to Jessica. “As a mother you need someone to take care of, you have to take care of something cause when they place them in your arm, that’s yours to take care of. And all of a sudden you can’t take care of it, you can’t take care of your kids.” After losing her son, Jessica experienced an identity disruption because she could no longer care for her son. However, she found ways to embrace her nurturing and motherly characteristics with her grandchildren. Her grandchildren are her second son’s partner’s children. Although they are not her biological grandkids, Jessica welcomed the grandkids as her own. Jessica continues to treat her grandkids with the same love and compassion as she did with her son. Though Jessica still has a son whom she cares and loves about deeply, she created a new label for
herself as a grandmother in order to feel like she has a more hands on parental role to play. Her grandkids call her “Grammy” because she wants them to. The relabeling of identity is crucial to Jessica because she likes the idea of having to look after and take care of someone. Jessica still wants to keep the mother part of her identity. When asked about the relationship between her and her grandchildren, Jessica responded with “if [my second son] didn’t have kids, I’d go crazy.” She has developed an intimate relationship with her grandkids very similar to the relationship between a parent and a child. The motherly role she played for her murdered son transformed into the grandmother role she plays for her grandkids.

Similarly, Jared added being a guardian to his identity. Jared and his daughter had a very special relationship. When asked about a special moment between Jared and his daughter, he mentioned the day she was born and the day her son was born. At the time Jared’s daughter was born, men were not allowed in the delivery room. However, Jared ended up delivering his own daughter on the hospital floor. Jared had the opportunity to see his daughter breathe her first breaths. Jared further goes onto discuss how he was present during the delivery of his grandson as well. One moment in his daughter’s delivery room forever shaped Jared’s life. Jared’s daughter had delivery complications that almost ended her life. The following morning after the delivery, Jared recalls a conversation with his daughter that started with “dad you have to promise you will take care of Brad. I am going to die and you need to take care of Brad for me.” After that moment, Jared knew that he would protect Brad for the rest of his life. He had a responsibility to his daughter, he “had to raise [Brad], that was a promise he made to her.” If his daughter died in that moment, he knew he would need to raise the child. “Two
years later unfortunately that came true.” Jared lost his daughter and took guardianship over Brad. Jared still remained “grandpa” to Brad because that’s how Brad knew him but he also became his guardian. The guardian role is a huge change for Jared because he had to take more parental responsibilities for Brad. Jared became Brad’s legal “father.” Jared continued his daughter’s legacy by providing for Brad’s needs. His identity transformed after losing his daughter. However, he still kept his fatherly characteristics and incorporated aspects of his daughter’s personality into himself. His daughter “was overprotective of [Brad].” The protective nature that was once in his daughter can now be seen in Jared. In his interview, Jared mentioned watching over Brad during the funeral when the alleged suspect in his case was present. Jared comforted Brad and did not let the alleged suspect try to touch or take Brad away. Jared also continued to monitor the relationship between Brad and the perpetrator’s family to ensure Brad’s safety. Jared embodies characteristics of his daughter and used that to raise Brad.

Despite losing a child to murder, all the parents who were interviewed for this project had another child or another individual who was dependent on them except for one. Scott had only one child. That only child was taken away from him right as he was strengthening his relationship with him and becoming a role model to him. Scott holds his identity as a father very close to him. Scott mentioned in his interview that after losing the child, he struggles (and still struggles) with developing a relationship with his wife’s kids. A child and parent relationship is a very exclusive and intimate relationship as described by Scott. “I don’t have a kid that I have an exclusive relationship with, so it affects my relationship with [my wife] too.” The role of a parent is so important that it influences how Scott interacts with other individuals. Although Scott does not have
biological children of his own, he uses his job to be parental. Scott works in a school district where he works with students. He describes his relationship with the kids as “more richer and more appreciative.” Scott developed a stronger and more intimate relationship with the children he worked with after losing his son. This was Scott’s way of continuing to be a parent despite losing his only child.

By becoming a parent figure, parents in the study were able to keep the parental aspect of their identity. This helps with coping because the participants are able to continue to care for others like they did with their son or daughter. In the interviews, many of the participants mentioned feeling guilt and shame for not being able to protect their child. By being a parental figure to others, they are able to protect others in ways they were not able to for their own child.

**Becoming a Representative:**

Today, continuing to advocate and fight for their loved ones is an important part of the participants’ identities. Since their loved ones can no longer voice their opinions, the participants became their voice. All the participants chose different ways to represent their loved ones. The diversity in representation can be seen in the investigation process, the legal process, and in the community. This is another way that participants continue to keep their loved one’s spirit alive. Being their loved ones’ representative gives them purpose because their loved one is continuing to make leave a footprint on the world.

The type of representation in the legal system changes after cases are solved. Cases that were either unsolved or still in the trial phase require more active participation from the families than cases that are resolved. More active representation during the legal process is required because the families are fighting and defending their loved one’s
rights in court as well as pursuing justice by supporting the prosecution. For example, Scott’s case is currently unsolved. He is actively involved in the investigation process and continues to be in communication with the Denver police department. Although Denver police are not as responsive, Scott continues to actively reach out to them. Scott describes himself as being “vigilant” because he continues to contact them. He continues by saying, “Denver county is where I focus my interest.” Scott’s continued dedication to solving his son’s case transforms him into being his son’s representative. Since Scott’s son cannot advocate for himself, Scott works harder to piece together what happened the night of his son’s death and to find the suspect. Scott is being his son’s representative to the law enforcement officials who are supposed to be working on the case. His persistence and devotion to finding the truth reflects the importance of representing his son and finding justice.

During trial, Pablo went to every single hearing to ensure that his daughter was being properly represented. “The reason I was there every time was because of Anabelle. I wouldn’t care to see [the defendant]. I was there as Anabelle’s representative.” Since his daughter could not be physically present at the trial, Pablo wanted to make sure her spirit was still there. Pablo did several things to ensure that Anabelle was present. For example, Pablo “asked the DA…[to] refer [to] Anabelle by her nickname because that was the name that [the defendant] knew her by.” He specifically did that because he “want[ed] [the defendant] to hear her name every time and get a little jab every time.” By constantly hearing Anabelle’s name at the trial, Pablo hoped that it negatively impacted the defendant. Pablo goes onto say, “I wanted him to hear Anabelle so that he couldn’t disassociate from [what happened] because that’s why they do. They lie to themselves.”
Since Anabelle could not be physically present, Pablo wanted to make sure that he was. He served as Anabelle’s representative by making sure the defendant knew all the hurt he had caused. Pablo’s presence was also used as a reminder to the defendant that he was charged with taking Anabelle’s life. Being able to represent Anabelle was (and is) essential to Pablo because he is fighting for justice for his daughter. This was one of Pablo’s way of coping because he knew that he was inflicting some kind of pain in the defendant. Throughout the interview, Pablo mentioned how he always taught his daughters to protect themselves from dangerous people. Although Anabelle has passed, he is still continuing to protect her in the legal system against the perpetrator. He is still her number one advocate and protector.

Sarah became her brother’s voice in a different way. She used the loss of her brother to find a new purpose in life. She found purpose in being actively involved as a volunteer caller for Families of Homicide Victims and Missing Persons. “Callers” are Families of Homicide Victims and Missing Persons members who call families of homicide victims whose cases have been unsolved for at least a year. Families of Homicide Victims and Missing Persons held forums in 2008 that open the communication pathways between law enforcement and victims. These forums gave co-victims the chance to actively speak with detectives about their concerns. This was also an opportunity for law enforcement officials to adjust their actions to better serve the victims. Sarah joined Families of Homicide Victims and Missing Persons on behalf of her brother. “I was fighting for my brother. I was his voice. I loved it.” She was fighting for justice and changes to the legal system, while still representing her brother. Her brother was being represented during the forums, where Sarah addressed the lack of
communication and involvement of law enforcement officials. This encouraged law enforcement officials to modify and improve their behavior. She wanted to make sure that her brother was being defended and treated respectfully by law enforcement. The volunteer work she did with Families of Homicide Victims and Missing Persons was for her brother. She wanted justice to be served in her case and other cases that were unsolved. Not only was Sarah being a representative for her brother, she was also representing others who also lost their lives to homicide. She was fighting to make changes to the legal system and actively reaching out to families of homicide victims and offering support. The quality of the communication between law enforcement and Sarah improved after attending the forums held by Families of Homicide Victims and Missing Persons. Opening communication between law enforcement officials and families of homicide victims can give each side the opportunity to understand each other’s perspectives. It can also allow for a collaborative effort in solving the homicides. Forums need to be readily available to address concerns from families of homicide victims and offer solutions. These forums can better the experiences that families of homicide victims have with law enforcement officials.

**Rediscovering self-identity:**

After the homicide, participants took a piece of the trauma they experienced with them, and the trauma they experienced will forever shape their identity. Many of the participants struggled to find themselves again after losing their loved one. A piece of their world was shattered and they are expected by others to pick up the pieces and become the same person. In the weeks and months immediately following the weeks of the homicide, most of the participants had to find out who they are as a person without
their child or sibling. Throughout the interviews, the majority of the participants described the difficulty of dealing with their loved one’s death and moving forward. Losing a huge part of yourself when your loved one dies can change individuals for the rest of their lives. The participants rediscovered themselves in different ways based on who they were before the homicide. Some participants tried to strengthen the individual characteristics they had before the homicide, while other participants found ways to accept the person they had become following the homicide.

**Religious Identity**

Two participants turned to religion to find themselves again after the homicide. Barbara and Sarah spoke to the notion that God got them through losing their loved one. However, each of them had different ways in which they channeled their relationship with God to grieve and cope. Sarah depended heavily on her relationship with God to get through losing her brother. Her relationship with God was strengthened after losing her brother to homicide. She started depending on God more during troubling times. When asked if she received support from others, Sarah immediately responded with “what really has helped is my faith. That’s the biggest thing for me. God has helped me through this.” Sarah’s religion as part of her identity became more visible as she was coping. This was a way to foster the growth of her religious identity and relationship with God.

Barbara had a different experience with her religious identity. Prior to the homicide, Barbara had a strong relationship with God. After losing her sister, niece, and brother in law, she became “really angry at God.” The relationship between her and her religious identity shifted initially. Barbara explained the shift in her relationship by saying, “I think at first I really doubted my faith for the first month…you doubt
everything and think how could this happen.” She began to question her religious identity. It wasn’t until she became involved with “grief share” and began a relationship with the “female mentors at church” that she began to redevelop her relationship with God. Barbara now believes that her “faith is stronger now.” Barbara was able to strengthen her religious identity after becoming involved with grief share and the mentors at her church.

Having a strong faith and belief that God has a reason for everything helped Sarah and Barbara cope with the loss of their loved ones. For Sarah, she felt that God would eventually prosecute the alleged suspect. Knowing that God will eventually punish the alleged suspect helped Sarah cope because the alleged suspect will get karma for what he did to her brother. For Barbara, turning to religion and understanding that God has a purpose for everything he does guided her as she coped with her loss. She gained trust in God and believed that he did everything for a reason.

Creating a New Identity

“The person you are talking to today is not the same person you would have talked to eleven years ago” (Pablo). Since many participants had identities that connected them to his or her loved ones, they lost part of themselves when the loved one passed. With part of his or her identity missing, many of the participants had to discover a new part of their identity to fulfill that missing piece. The trauma they experienced changed the type of individuals the participants became. The severity of their experience can forever shape their identity.

Part of Pablo’s identity shifted as he was trying to cope with his loss. During the interview with him, he briefly described his interactions with others after he lost his
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daughter. “People ask me all the time, you aren’t the same person anymore, you don’t smile, you don’t joke.” Individuals noticed that Pablo’s identity transformed after losing his daughter. Pablo is even able to notice the change in him. He continued the interview by saying, “I am not the same person.” The struggle to find who you are as a person after a huge part of you is missing is no small feat. Uncovering what you lost is easy, but finding ways to fill the gaps is difficult. Pablo further discussed how “parts of [his] personality came back but not all of it.” Pablo had to go through different avenues to find and build his new identity. This can be seen through his involvement in outside organizations, his continued efforts to spread awareness about domestic violence, and his dedication to assisting families of homicide victims. Pablo like many of the participants are finding meaning out of the tragedies that they have endured. The influence of external forces on shaping identity will further be analyzed below.

All the participants experienced a traumatic event that is almost unimaginable to others. The nightmare of murder continues to haunt the lives of the participants. Barbara specifically described the trauma she experienced as a “darkness.” “You have seen a darkness that is real” and “you just change as a person.” It is a darkness that engulfed every aspect of her life; a darkness that took half of her family away, and a darkness that forever changed the person she is. The trauma she experienced changed the ways in which she acts towards others because she has seen the worst side of humanity. Barbara saw how capable humans are of creating disaster and despair through murder. The darkness opened her eyes to the inhumane nature of human beings. Barbara further went onto say “in some ways, I am more compassionate because you don’t know what someone could be going through that day.” The darkness that shaped the ways in which
Barbara interacts with others has led her to be more understanding of others. Barbara knew how it felt to be surrounded by darkness and now she is more sympathetic to the experiences of other people. This discovery has fostered personal growth and aids in building future relationships with others as well as reacting to others’ tragedies in a more sympathetic way.

This notion of darkness and seeing the inhumane side of humans is evident in Sarah’s case. Unfortunately, the tragedies in Sarah’s life are not unusual. Sarah has had many interactions with murder, the legal process, and the coping process. Sarah has lost several family members to murder. Unlike the rest of the participants, Sarah has been repeatedly exposed to the “darkness.” The repetition of negative experiences has dramatically altered Sarah’s identity. Although Sarah has had many deaths in her family, her brother’s death made the most significant impact on her. During the beginning of the interview, Sarah described her brother as her family’s “protector.” “When he got killed, I was scared like who was going to protect us because he was the big one. If he had to fight, he would. He loved us. He was our protector.” For Sarah losing someone who she confided in and leaned on when she was scared, fostered a fearful mindset. She became “more cautious” and fearful of others. Without her protector, she had to become the protector for her own kids. When asked about lifestyle changes that were made after the death of her brother, Sarah responded with:

Now I am scared of life. You know, I have kids 23, 18, and 16. I have good kids but I am afraid like my brother, in the wrong place at the wrong time. I don’t let them go to parties because I am like some idiot kid is shooting in the crowd and its always the innocent bystander that is getting shot and losing their life. So I am
afraid. I am afraid of them getting shot or being in the wrong place at the wrong time because I had three family members that were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Losing her protector has forced Sarah to reevaluate and question the intention of others in fear that they may act violently toward her or her loved ones. The murder of her brother instilled a fearful and paranoid aspect of Sarah’s identity. It is disheartening to see the everlasting impact of murder on families and friends.

**Resisting an Identity Shift**

All the participants’ identities shifted after losing their loved ones except for that of one individual, Rodger. Rodger’s interview was quite different than the other interviews. Throughout the interview, Rodger seemed to have internalized all the trauma that he has experienced, which left him emotionless. The answers he provided to the questions also support this conclusion. When asked about how he copes with his loss, Rodger responded by saying, “I didn’t break into tears like everyone else did. Could hardly speak.” It is evident that losing his daughter hurt him immensely, as he described the homicide as “hit[ting] the heart.”

Rodger’s suppression of emotions is a way of coping. By not speaking about the murder of his daughter or about his own feelings, he is disassociating himself from the pain of losing his daughter. The disassociation is accompanied by hopelessness. Rodger ended his responses to the questions with “I don’t know” or “nothing I can do about it.” Since Rodger has disassociated himself, I concluded that his identity never transformed after losing his daughter. At the time of the murder, Rodger was working and was distracted by all of his duties so he was unable to focus on what had happened to his
daughter. He continues to distract himself today by “play[ing] on the computer.” Rodger still finds ways to distract himself and distance himself from the emotional trauma of murder.

There was no identity shift because he was so focused on internalizing the events of his daughter’s death as well as his own emotions. This can be Rodger’s way of coping with the loss of his daughter because by keeping everything the same (like his identity), he can keep big parts of his life before the death of his daughter. This may be due to Rodger’s reluctance to accept the death of his daughter or his own way of suppressing the recollection of it. By not changing his personality, it may allow him to cling to the idea that everything in his life is still the same. His daughter is still alive. By suppressing his emotions, he does not have to confront all the grief and pain that follows homicide. The emotions are so hidden that Rodger no longer shows physical emotions when he speaks about his daughter. This has become an everyday normal for him. This was not the case for the rest of the participants. Instead, the rest of the participants found ways to adjust to a “new normal” post-homicide.

A New Normal

The new normal is a concept that was continuously brought up in the majority of the interviews. Life after homicide is always drastically different than the lives the participants lived when their loved one was alive. After losing a loved one to murder, the participants had to find ways to adjust their lives in order to move forward as well as grieve in a healthy manner. The new normal is a coping mechanism because participants actively sought out organizations and activities that guided and assisted in their grieving process. The participants created a new life that helped them to cope with their loss.
Moving forward is challenging but individuals can incorporate new aspects of their life to better prepare them to live a happier life. The adjustment to their new life is a coping mechanism because it allows for individuals to accept what happened and find ways to continue to live on.

**Isolation**

Unfortunately, the majority of the participants had to experience isolation before they found new ways to live without their loved ones. From a young age, the majority of humans have been taught to be humane and to aid others through adversity. Society promotes the notion of strong relationships and relying on others when challenges arise. When challenges arise like losing a loved one, the majority of individuals expect an outpouring of love and support. Although this process begins with an influx of love, it typically ends with isolation. There is a false sense of support from others. Many individuals who promised the participants that they would be around for support ended up leaving the participants. The individuals who were once a part of the co-victim’s in-group become the out-group. These individuals further distinguish themselves away from co-victims. These individuals use their lack of experience with homicide as an excuse to isolate themselves from the co-victims. Without any support, the participants experienced isolation and start to drift from others.

Many potential supporters failed to recognize that adjusting to the loss of a loved one to homicide is a lifelong process. They failed to acknowledge the devastating psychological impact homicide has. “I just don’t think they knew how to deal with me” (Barbara). Supporters’ inability to fully understand the impact of homicide influenced how they responded to the co-victims. The failure to support individuals who have lost a
loved one to homicide led the co-victims into isolation with very few individuals whom they can share their grief and experiences with. The individual’s in-group dynamics shift drastically once the members realize what happened to the co-victim. Barbara implies that people try to isolate themselves from crime, especially from murder. She does this by saying:

There is this error with murder, and this is my word, but you are kind of white trash. They don’t want to be around you, that it only happens to lower level people, the bottom of society. Some of them wouldn’t even mention of it.

Some coworkers, family members, and friends in Barbara’s life immediately separated themselves and did not want to be associated with a homicide case. She thought that the individuals had a misconceived belief that crime only happens to the worst individuals in society. With this belief in mind, they do not want to be affiliated with crime so they distance themselves from the co-victim. They highlight the differences among themselves and the co-victims in order to justify the isolation. Many co-victims alluded to the notion that their “address book changes” (Jared). Some (or many) of the individuals who were in their lives prior to the homicide change or disappear.

Jared’s address book shifted almost immediately. Like Jared’s family and many other families of homicide victims, the suddenness and unexpectedness of homicide leaves many victims’ families unprepared to pay for the funeral services. “We couldn’t get the bank to lend us any money so we had to borrow money from friends.” Jared had to depend on his friends to help pay for the costs on the funeral. He continued by saying, “I use [the term friends] loosely because most of them wanted me to pay them double what they loaned me. People were very insensitive.” Jared’s friends provided him a false
sense of support by offering help, exploiting him, and then abandoning him. Some friends were not empathetic to Jared’s experiences and the ways in which he was trying to cope with losing his daughter.

“Blood is thicker than water” is a common saying that represents the importance of family relationships. However, I found in some of the participants that peers are not the only individuals who isolate themselves from the co-victims. Extended family members (i.e. not members of the homicide victim’s nuclear family) can also isolate themselves from the immediate family. Many of the participants in the study interpreted family isolation as a way for extended family members to escape the confusion and stresses that accompany homicide. Some family members do not fully understand the negative repercussions of losing a loved one to homicide so they leave or at least keep their distance.

Jessica experienced significant isolation from her sister whom she once confided in about the challenges in her life. Jessica is one of the participants who highlighted the importance of talking through the death of her son as a coping mechanism. However, as individuals began to isolate themselves, Jessica no longer had individuals to confide in and talk about her loss with. Jessica alluded to the negative repercussions of isolation by saying:

Young people, I think when you lose a child, the best thing you can do is cry or you would be crazy. You want to talk about it and its sometimes your own sister who says enough. And not being mean, but they are tired of hearing it.

Many of the participants were so isolated that they sought comfort from strangers. Isolation has pushed some individuals to want to talk about their loved ones more with
people who they did not know before the loss. This can be because they want to keep their loved ones’ legacy and memory alive or because this could be a strategy that the participants used to cope with their loss. Families of homicide victims need support because “you can’t survive [losing a loved one] alone” (Scott). Isolation makes closure seem even more inaccessible because co-victims are not given the support they need from family and friends.

The isolation leads some individuals’ left to decipher losing a loved one as well as finding their own ways to cope with the loss alone. Being isolated from people limits positive and negative exposure. Instead of experiencing positive aspects of life with others, individuals are stuck with their own thoughts. One of the participants, Rodger, experienced this impact in full effect. Rodger had little or no support after the homicide and therefore internalized all his emotions. One of the best ways to support a co-victim is to listen and be supportive through their grieving. This journey into a new life is much less challenging when individuals find communities that share common experiences and/or supportive individuals/communities.

**Finding a New Community**

Since there are not many individuals who have experienced losing a loved one to homicide, co-victims seek out organizations and individuals who share their same experiences. All the participants were identified for this study by their membership in organizations that support families of homicide victims. Families of Homicide Victims and Missing Persons and Parents of Murdered Children give co-victims the chance to meet other families who have experienced similar events as well as provide support. These organizations have become a huge part in the participants’ lives because these
groups listen to the stories of each co-victim. The members in the group also share similar experiences, which gives members the opportunity to provide advice to other members. The sense of community is huge in families of homicide victims, or at least those families that seek out and participate in organizations that can offer them support. Although many individuals have left their previous lives, co-victims need to know that they are not alone.

Pablo found his place in the community through dedicating his time to things that involved domestic violence, contributing to Parents of Murdered Children, joining the Crime Victim Advisory Board, and participation with other programs that attempt to help victims. Pablo used his own experiences to better the experiences of others who go through similar tragedies. He is also utilizing his own knowledge and experiences to try to prevent or reduce the number of incidences of domestic violence. Pablo goes out to speak to individuals and groups about the “warning signs of domestic violence.” Pablo’s daughter died because of domestic violence and he found a way to be invested in a domestic violence community to help others. He actively seeks programs that fit his experiences so that he can help other members as well as seek advice from others. Parents of Murdered Children is one of the organizations that Pablo joined after losing his daughter. Throughout this section of the interview, Pablo went on to illustrate the importance of finding individuals who share similar experiences by saying:

POMC helped tremendously because it was some place that we could talk about what happened to her without people freaking out. We had another group called compassionate friends. Compassionate friends are a support group for people who have lost a child. When we went to that group we never mentioned how she died.
If I did mention everything, I just said she was killed by her boyfriend because in that group, it didn’t matter how your child died.

By finding support groups formed by those who had gone through similar experiences, members can support one another and give advice to cope with their loss. Pablo mentioned that in the compassionate friends’ organization, the members are not concerned about the differences in their experiences with losing a child. Instead, the members focus on the commonality—losing a child or family member. This can be helpful for co-victims because it gives them the opportunity to grieve with others. It also lets co-victims know that they are not alone. All the members in the group have experienced similar trauma. Members can empower one another to move forward with their lives. Since some individuals have not experienced losing a loved one to homicide, they may not be as equipped to provide the support co-victims need. Individuals who have experienced similar tragedies can better relate their experiences to co-victims and provide the support co-victims need.

Like Parents of Murdered Children, Families of Homicide Victims and Missing Persons (FOHVAMP) works to bring together families of homicide victims. The difference in these organizations is Families of Missing Persons focuses on those with unsolved homicide cases in their families. Sarah was actively involved in FOHVAMP. She worked as a volunteer caller. The volunteer caller reaches out to other relevant families and invites them to join the organization. This was a way to expand support to other families. Sarah sought out a community that shares her experience. Getting “involved with Families of Homicide Victims…gave [her] purpose.” This organization helped her cope because she could help other families. The same effort Sarah put into
getting her brother’s case solved was the same amount of effort she gave to helping others.

**Speaking as therapeutic and leading force in change**

Although many of the participants emphasized the difficulty of reliving their loved one’s death, they also alluded to the importance of speaking about their experiences. Since most of the participants experienced isolation, it can be therapeutic to speak about their own experiences with other sympathetic people. This can be seen through their membership in victim support groups. An interesting thing to note is many of the participants preferred speaking to other families of homicide victims. Very few of the participants sought out help from a professional therapist and if they did, it was only for a short period of time. Barbara went to a therapist for a short period of time but she felt that “it wasn’t helpful.” However, Jessica contended that seeing a professional therapist helped her. Jessica went further to say:

I went to a therapist here in Denver or Lakewood and she was recommended to me by someone in POMC and she has dealt with her own loss of a child and that helped. I think it’s something that has to be. If it happened to anyone, they have to see someone that’s went through it to understand each other. Otherwise, they can say that you are hurt or broken, but they don’t know what you are feeling.

It seems that therapy only helped Jessica because she spoke to someone who had gone through similar experiences. This further emphasizes why all of my participants joined support groups with individuals who experienced similar trauma. The participants specifically sought out organizations where they could express their emotions and tell their own narratives. Families of Homicide Victims and Missing Persons and Parents of
Murdered Children gave the participants the opportunity to relate to others who share similar experiences with them.

In addition to seeking similar individuals, the participants were also willing to speak to others who were willing to listen to their stories. Jessica mentioned in her interview that her own sister gets tired of listening to the same story. Without being able to talk through her own experiences, Jessica is forced to internalize her feelings or limit speaking about her experiences to certain people, which is why Jessica stated in her interview, “its kind of nice to talk to you Kylie. Its real nice talking to you, glad I met you.” By allowing Jessica to speak about her experiences, she is better able to process her son’s death as well as keep her son’s legacy alive. Keeping the legacy alive is a coping mechanism used by many of the participants because it allows participants to remember their loved one. By speaking about their loved one’s death, it can also give individuals the opportunity to piece together what happened to their loved one.

Though co-victims’ voices are generally silenced in the criminal justice system, they still find ways to express their opinions. Not only can speaking about the incidents be therapeutic, they also spread awareness of victims’ rights, the negative impact of homicide, and the injustices within the criminal justice system. Many of the participants expressed their appreciation for this research project. Their gratitude about being included in the project implies that their voices were not otherwise listened to. Therefore, many of the participants addressed injustices within the criminal justice system, specifically victim rights during their interviews. From the participants’ perspectives, society and law enforcement officials felt it was unnecessary to bring families of homicide victims’ stories to the forefront.
On the other hand, Jared specifically emphasized the importance of speaking about his experiences as a way to “bring awareness.” Throughout the interview, Jared brought to light the lack of attention given to victims and victim rights. By speaking about co-victims’ experiences, others in the community, he hopes, will be able to see a glimpse of a co-victims’ realities. Jared mentioned in his interview:

One of the things that I have noticed is when there is a mass tragedy, people respond and help those victims a lot. Every individual whether it is one, and when you are a victim and there was only the killing of your loved one. [In cases with single homicides] people don’t respond and offer the help like they do when it is a mass [killing]. They need to realize that somebody from the Aurora shooting reached out to me and said I wish they would respond to every murder like they did [in this instance] to help the victims. That’s the one change I would like to see where people understand that whether twenty people were killed or one person was killed, they are individual families who lost a loved one and they all need the support from the community.

Jared specifically mentioned how speaking about experiences can help improve the lives of victims. By sharing their narratives with the public, individuals from the community can become more empathetic toward victims. It also gives individuals the chance to see the perspective of a co-victim, a perspective that is typically hidden from society.

**Coping Mechanisms**

The data analysis revealed that all the participants vary in their experiences as well as in the coping mechanisms that they use. However, I found one commonality among all the participants is the lack of closure that follows homicide. Though some of
the participants’ cases have been solved and the perpetrator has been convicted, like those co-victims whose cases that are not solved, all participants reported that they still experience a lack of closure. The homicide continues to affect the co-victims regardless of how long it has been since the murder occurred. There is nothing that can replace losing a loved one. The memory of the loved one continues. The loved one’s legacy is still present in the lives of the participants.

Although the participants have found ways to embody their loved ones, many participants struggled to find effective coping mechanisms during the first weeks after receiving news of their loved one’s death. Finding the best coping mechanism is a long endeavor because participants are attempting to process the death of their loved ones, determine logistics (funeral arrangements, probate, court hearings, etc.), notify family and friends, and grieve all at the same time. During this time, families of homicide victims need an influx of support and empathy from family, friends, community members, and criminal justice officials (lawyers, judges, and officials from the police department). It seems that the grieving process experienced by the participants is improved when participants turn their anger, depression, and resentment into passion to solve their loved ones’ cases, a commitment to help other families of homicide victims, and a fight against the flaws within the criminal justice system. Many of the participants become empowered and powerful once they see the positive ways in which they are impacting their community.
Chapter 5 Conclusions

Though all the participants in this study have had different experiences with the murder of their loved one, many participants used similar methods of coping. The most important commonality in the data is families of homicide victims strive to keep their loved one’s legacy alive. This legacy continues to live on through the coping mechanisms that their family members engage in. The data show that the common coping mechanisms used by the majority of the participants are 1) critiquing the weaknesses and shortcomings within the criminal justice system, 2) identity transformation, and 3) creating a new normal life post-homicide.

Because murder victims are not able to physically represent themselves in legal proceedings, many family members become their loved one’s victim’s advocate. By doing so, the co-victims still have a presence and influence over legal matters regarding sentencing. For individuals whose cases are unsolved, addressing flaws within the criminal justice system can influence change. Individuals who are frustrated with the system have the chance to advocate for changes to the criminal justice system such as the lack of communication between law enforcement officials, and between the professional victim advocates and the families of homicide victims. Critiques can lead to improvements. Many of the co-victims who were frustrated with the criminal justice system found ways to speak about their frustrations and suggest improvements. In many cases in which the homicide victims were still being appropriately represented in the legal system, it is largely because of their family member’s dedication and their strength to fight against injustices. Family members are making waves of change and in some instances, their impact on the legal system is giving them a sense of purpose.
In addition to representing their loved ones in the criminal justice system, participants are finding ways to embody some of his or her loved ones’ characteristics within themselves. Losing a huge part of your identity creates an identity disruption that causes the participants to find other roles that could fulfill the missing pieces of themselves. Since the participants all have different experiences and ways of coping, the ways in which the participants’ identities transformed varied. Some of the participants embodied the best characteristics of their loved ones such as trying to aid others in need, while others became their loved one’s primary representative. This identity disruption can also lead co-victims to attempt to construct new identities. This can be seen as a process of creating a “new normal” life.

The “new normal” is a concept mentioned multiple times throughout the interviews. The “new normal” is an idea that was used by the participants. The “new normal” is the notion that individuals must adapt to a new life post-homicide. The normal life they previously lived changes drastically. There are many aspects of life that change after losing a loved one and these aspects can force co-victims in to constructing a new life. In pursuit of adjusting to the new normal, individuals turn to external forces like joining organizations and finding new friends.

These mechanisms are typically used to fight for and advocate for victim rights, protect and support other community members, and foster personal growth following murder. Since the sample specifically included only individuals who actively joined organizations and spoke publicly about their experiences, their coping mechanisms cannot (necessarily) be generalized to others. All families of homicide victims have diverse experiences with the criminal justice system and with the coping mechanisms
they use. Due to the variation in participants’ cases, the grieving process also varies by individual. The common themes I found in the research are only representative of the sample.
Chapter 6 Future Implications

Throughout all the interviews, it was evident that families of homicide victims are susceptible to difficult psychological challenges including challenges associated with confronting obstacles prevalent in the criminal justice system. The struggles individuals have vary based on their case as well as their own connection with the homicide victim. However, there were many commonalities among the difficulties the participants experienced. The lack of a sense of community, the poor communication with law enforcement officials and victim advocates and the co-victim, the lack of progress in resolving in their cases, the inadequate protection of victim rights, and the inability to find closure were all discussed in the interviews. By listening to the challenges that arise as a result of the homicide, individuals can become more empathetic toward families, law enforcement officials and victim advocates can be more open, officials in the legislative branch can promote and advocate for legislation to protect victim rights, and more supportive resources can be corralled to aid families of homicide victims.

Family, Friends, and the Community

The community needs to be more attentive and sympathetic toward the experiences of families of homicide victims. There is no amount of time that can heal the pain caused by homicide. Regardless of whether the case was solved 31 years ago or is still pending trial (or even identification of a suspect), there still is no change in the immense amount of pain and grief felt by families. Family, friends, and community members need to be more understanding of the hurt the co-victims are feeling. In addition to being more understanding, other family members, friends, and community members need to provide more support and compassion. Instead of isolating themselves from the
co-victim, they need to strengthen their relationship with the co-victim because coping with a loss of a loved one due to homicide is something no one should have to experience alone. A big part of this challenge is simply showing up and being there.

**Criminal Justice System and Victim Advocates**

Many co-victims voiced their frustrations with the shortcomings with the criminal justice system, and, more specifically, the lack of victim advocacy through victim assistance. The flaws in the criminal justice system addressed in the interviews included inadequate protection of victim rights, the lack of progress in resolving their homicide case, and poor communication between law enforcement officials and victim advocates with the victim’s family. Many co-victims felt that their loved ones’ weren’t given as many “rights” as the defendants. Thus, the data from the interviews revealed feelings that co-victims need to have more rights within the criminal justice system. Many of the participants have voiced how they often felt like they were left out of discussions with criminal justice officials about the case. In some instances, law enforcement officials did not communicate with them about the status of their case or share information that they knew about the homicide. Many of the participants from FOHVAMP felt as though detectives were not working on their cases. Although detectives may not have any more information, it would be beneficial to check in regularly with family members. Another problem mentioned by participants is the lack of support and advocacy from their victim advocates. Many of the participants’ victim advocates did not communicate with them or support them as they were going through the grieving process and the legal process. Victim advocates and law enforcement officials need to be better trained on dealing with families of homicide victims. Through training, victim advocates and law enforcement
Officials will be better equipped to handle co-victims with their individual cases. They will help families of homicide victims as they are trying to cope with the trauma of losing a loved one and attempting to understand and work through the legal process.

**Improvements for Support Groups**

*Families of Homicide Victims and Missing Persons (FOHVAMP)*

“Since 2001, FOHVAMP has advocated for families of cold case homicide victims and persons missing under suspicious circumstances in Colorado” (You Can Help). Six of the participants were from FOHVAMP and all of them expressed appreciation for the organization. Based on the interviews, it seems FOHVAMP is no longer a functioning organization. The participants mentioned that FOHVAMP has an annual conference, but other than the conference, the organization operates a lot different. Two of the participants expressed how FOHVAMP is no longer reaching out or advocating for families of cold case homicide victims. FOHVAMP is also not currently holding forums for families of homicide victims to speak to law enforcement officers.

All of the participants in the interviews spoke highly about the work FOHVAMP was doing for co-victims during the time of their case. However, it seems that FOHVAMP is no longer making a significant impact on their life as the organization has shifted. In order to help families of unsolved homicide cases, FOHVAMP needs to play a more active role in the community by speaking to co-victims and opening communication between families and criminal justice officials. Families who have unsolved homicide cases need to have a big network of support from a large organization like FOHVAMP.

*Parents of Murdered Children (POMC)*
The remaining three participants in the project were from POMC. All of the participants expressed how POMC has helped them cope with the loss of their loved one. POMC seemed to play a large role in the grieving process for these participants. Since POMC is making a difference in their members, it is important to share this support with others in the community who are experiencing similar tragedies. It was apparent in the interviews that during the first few weeks of losing a loved one to homicide, many families are confused and lost, and often are not knowledgeable of the resources available to them. It would be beneficial if POMC developed a database like FOHVAMP that tracks families of homicide victims. By doing this, POMC can reach out to families who have lost a loved one to homicide and provide information about the organization to hopefully get co-victims to join. All co-victims should be given resources to help them through the grieving and legal process.
Chapter 7 Future Research

Since the sample only focused on individuals from Parents of Murdered Children or Families of Homicide Victims, future research should look into families of homicide victims who did not join support organizations. It is important to look at co-victims who don’t seek help because researchers can evaluate how their coping mechanisms differ from those who seek out help. This would also be an effective way to see if other coping mechanisms are effective. This research can also determine which types of people seek out support during difficult times.

In addition to looking for individuals who do not seek out support groups, future research should look into couples. There were participants in this study who were married and many of them spoke about how their relationship had some influence over the grieving process. It would be interesting to see the different variations of couple dynamics and to see how each couple grieves and copes differently. The coping mechanism used by one person may influence which coping mechanisms their spouse uses. This can be helpful in providing appropriate resources that could help couples cope with the loss of a loved one.

Future research will need to continue to bring attention to victim rights and highlight the importance of families of homicide victims’ experiences. The participants all shared intimate parts of their lives as well as expressed challenges to coping with losing their loved ones. These challenges need to be brought to light and solutions need to be developed to alleviate the pain the participants’ feel. Like families of homicide victims, others need to start fighting and protecting the rights of victims of homicide. Families of homicide victims’ stories are vital in solving the injustices within the criminal
justice system, providing more support for families of homicide victims, and protecting the rights of homicide victims.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My Honors Thesis project would not have been possible without a number of people who continued to give me support, encouragement, and advice throughout the year.

I want to first thank all of the participants in the research. Thank you for agreeing to participate in the interviews and giving me the opportunity to listen to your personal narratives. I am grateful to have gotten to know a little bit about your loved one during our conversations. Your ability to transform tragedies in your life into compassion and dedication to change the injustices in the world is admirable. The strength you have developed over time is encouraging. Your stories and experiences are vital in widening society’s perspectives of co-victims as well as implementing change in the world. Lastly, thank you for reminding me about the importance of this research and giving me the inspiration to make improvements to better the experiences of families of homicide victims.

I am grateful to all of the Honors Thesis board members for committing to helping me on the thesis, reviewing and editing the research, and meeting with me throughout the year. Special thank you to Professor Furman for your trips to Colorado to collaborate with me on the thesis. Despite you living in Arizona, your quick responses to my emails and dedication to improving the thesis made me feel like you were right next to me. Without Dr. Amy Wilkins, I would not have built the courage and analytical skills to deepening the understanding of the research. Thank you for always pushing me to go beyond what I
see as limitations. You have taught me to turn any limitations I face in research into advantages. I want to especially thank Dr. Radelet for agreeing to be the head advisor on my Honors Thesis, providing integral feedback, early morning meetings, and helping me overcome all of the challenges I faced while writing this thesis. The individuals you have introduced me to as well as the knowledge that you have shared has further inspired me to continue to pursue my dreams in the criminal legal system.

I would also like to thank Dr. Michaele Ferguson for your endless support and encouragement during all of the stressful events I dealt with throughout the year. All of the meetings we have had throughout the year have pushed me to become a better scholar. Thank you for giving me the confidence I needed to succeed as a student.

A special thanks to my Honors Thesis partners, Kaycee Morgan and Adam Szyszko for all of the hours we spent at the library and coffee shops, relentlessly listening to my research, providing me with suggestions on improvements, and most importantly, your unwillingness to let me give up. You both gave me the strength and will power to finish this thesis.

Nobody has been more important to me in the pursuit of this thesis than my family. Thank you mom for giving me words of encouragement and listening to my numerous breakdowns. Thank you dad for your endless text messages of love. Thank you to the rest of my family for checking in on me throughout the year and pushing me to preserve in
my days of doubt. You all have been driving forces in pushing me to be the best person
and student I can be.
References


Appendix A

Consent Form

**Title of research study:** Life after Homicide

**Investigator:** Kylie Ngu

**Why am I being invited to take part in a research study?**

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study that will examine some of the experiences that family members have as a consequence of the murder of a loved one. I am inviting you in particular to be interviewed because you have experienced the loss of a loved one and your insight can be beneficial to my research as I am looking to evaluate coping mechanisms used by families of homicide victims.

**What should I know about this research study?**

My research will ask you to tell your story with regards to your experience of losing a loved one to homicide. I have a list of questions, many just to try to probe you to talk as much as you would like to about your own experiences. These questions will be adjusted as we progress through the interview based on the way the interview is going. Whether or not you take part is totally up to you, and it is no problem if you chose not to. You can agree to take part and later change your mind, also with no problems. There is no compensation for your participation in this study. You can ask any questions you want before you decide, or during the interview itself. This research is for my undergraduate Honors Thesis. I am an undergraduate student who has no counseling experience. If you become upset with some of the questions, I am only prepared to provide you with resources as well as direct you to the Head of Parents of Murdered Children, Families of Homicide Victims and Missing Persons, and/or Dr. Radelet.

**Whom can I talk to?**

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, please talk with my faculty supervisors (research team) amy.wilkins@colorado.edu or michael.radelet@colorado.edu

This research has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board (“IRB”). You may talk to them at (303) 735-3702 or irbadmin@colorado.edu if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
• You want to get information or provide input about this research.

**Why is this research being done?**

This research will look into some of the consequences of losing a loved one to homicide and the different coping mechanisms used in order to move past this traumatic event. It is aimed at studying the ways in which people cope with losing loved ones. This study will hopefully add data and literature to the studies of coping with homicide and ultimately help others cope with their loss.

**How long will the research last?**

This research is for my honors thesis and will conclude in Spring 2018. I ask you to participate by being interviewed for roughly 45 minutes to 1 hour.

**How many people will be studied?**

We expect about 6-8 people will be in this research study.

**What happens if I say yes, I want to be in this research?**

I will interview you regarding your experiences with homicide as well as your coping strategies you use to move forward for roughly 45 minutes to 1 hour. Some questions I may ask include but are not limited to: Was the perpetrator in the case ever arrested/convicted, how was the first week after you received news of your loved one’s death, did you have support from others when trying to cope with this event, do you forgive the individual responsible for your loved one’s death, and what would have been beneficial for you during this experience? Of course, some of these questions may be upsetting, and you are totally free not to answer specific questions or terminate the interview. During the in-person interview, I will be hand writing notes and, if you agree, audio recording our conversation. During the phone interviews, I will have you on speaker-phone in the privacy of my own home with no one around. I will also be hand writing notes and, if you agree, audio recording our conversation. After all interviews, I will be transcribing the audio recording and uploading all related documents to a secure computer. You will not need to complete anything following this interview.

**What happens if I do not want to be in this research?**

You may refuse to answer any questions or terminate the interview at any time for any reason. You are welcome to end your participation in my study at any time and without penalty.

**What happens if I say yes, but I change my mind later?**

You can leave the research at any time and it will not be held against you.
**Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?**

I recognize that talking about what for most homicide survivors is the worst experience of their lives can be stressful. I foresee no potential additional risks to you regarding your inclusion in this study. Your interview is confidential and will only be reviewed by my research advisors and myself. In my thesis, I will use pseudonyms.

**What happens to the information collected for the research?**

My notes and recordings will be used only by me, and the only others who might seem them are my faculty advisors. In the unlikely event that unforeseen problems arise, the Institutional Review Board at the University of Colorado, Boulder will have institutional authority to review notes and recordings from the interview. All notes and recordings will be destroyed when the research project is completed.

Your signature documents your permission to take part in this research.

_________________________  _______________________
Signature of subject        Date

_________________________
Printed name of subject

_________________________  _______________________  ____________
Signature of person obtaining consent Date IRB Approval Date

_________________________
Printed name of person obtaining consent
Appendix B

Interview Schedule

Note: All questions under the “Interview Script for the beginning of the interview” will be read to all participants prior to the interview. However, I plan to have some flexibility on the questions outlined in the “tentative interview schedule.” Therefore, I may not pose all of these questions to everyone, and I will ask participants to clarify their responses to the questions below. I will also ask follow-up questions if appropriate.

Interview Script for the beginning of the interview:

1. After reviewing the consent form, do you have any questions?
2. Can I record the interview for transcribing purposes?
3. If the interview is a phone conversation, I will ask permission to have the conversation on speakerphone so that I can take notes during the interview. Any phone conversations will be done in the privacy of my own home and no one will be around me when I conduct the interview.
4. During our interview, please do not disclose or discuss any information about possible illegal activities other than the homicide event.
5. Do you have any last minute questions for me about the interview process or anything else pertaining to my research?

Interview Questions:

1. Please tell me a bit about yourself, your family, and your own upbringing.
2. Do you have close relationships with your family, peers, teachers, and other community members?
3. What was your relationship to the homicide victim?
4. Please tell me a bit about the victim- what were his/her special traits?
5. Tell me about a special moment between you and him/her.
6. Could you tell me about the death of your loved one?
7. How did you find out about his/her death? What was your initial response when you first found out?
8. How was the first week after you received news of your loved one’s death?
9. Did you ever avoid telling people what happened?
10. Did your job give you any time off? Were your bosses and co-workers supportive?
11. Did you have support from others when trying to cope with this event? Did you join others who experienced similar events? Did you try to isolate yourself?
12. Did you have a good relationship with the law enforcement officers working on your case? How was your relationship with the prosecutor’s office? Who did you turn to for support (church, close organizations, school, family, friends, co-workers, etc.)?
13. Was the perpetrator in this case caught? If so, did you get the verdict you wanted? Did you ever get an explanation for the killing from the perpetrator?
14. If you had the opportunity to say something to the perpetrator, what would you say?
15. How did this affect your relationship with others?
16. How did this affect your relationship with the community in general?
17. Before your loved one was murdered, did you experience the death of another loved one?
18. How does losing a loved one to homicide differ from losing a loved one to old age? Why?
19. Did this event change how you deal with death?
20. How did you cope with your loss?
21. Did you make any lifestyle changes?
22. Are there certain triggers that rekindle the horror you experienced at the time of your loved one’s death?
23. What would have been beneficial for you during this time? What did you really need to help with the pain?
24. Do you forgive the person who did this to your loved one? Why?
25. Did you fully move on from this event or are you still finding ways to cope? Why?
26. How can we improve the services that are available to families of homicide victims?
27. Is there anything else I should know?