

# Victim Support Europe Contribution

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A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO MENTAL  
HEALTH



## About Victim Support Europe

Victim Support Europe (VSE) is the leading European umbrella organisation advocating on behalf of all victims of crime, no matter what the crime, no matter who the victim is. VSE represents 70 member organisations, providing support and information to more than 2 million people affected by crime every year in 34 countries.

Founded in 1990, VSE has been working for 30 years for a Europe, and a world, where all victims have strong victims' rights and services, whether they report the crime or not. We work towards this missing through advocacy to improve European and International laws, through research and knowledge development and through capacity building at the national and local level.

## EC Initiative for a comprehensive approach to mental health

Victim Support Europe welcomes the Commission's initiative for a comprehensive approach to mental health. Mental health considerations should be mainstreamed into a wide variety of EU and national policies for the benefit of people across the EU and should clearly incorporate and prioritise mental health matters arising out of crime, in particular those affecting victims.

To effectively respond to current mental health needs and challenges, this initiative must address key socioeconomic and environmental risk factors of mental health problems and the needs of those at more risk of mental health problems, including victims of crime and perpetrators.

Within the EU Mental Health field, there has been an insufficient focus on victims and their specific needs despite victims being at high risk of suffering mental health problems, particularly where they experience traumatic events. VSE therefore recommends:

- 1) The mental health of victims of crime and those affected by crime should be clearly identified as a priority in EU and national mental health policies;
- 2) Investment in mental health action targeted towards victims should be commensurate with the scale and extent of the problem;
- 3) EU Funding on mental health should clearly include priorities that will benefit all victims of crime as well as priorities linked to different groups or thematic issues;
- 4) Mental health services should be accessible to victims and should be developed to provide specialist care that will address the specific situation of victims and their mental health issues;
- 5) Resilience of individuals and society should be incorporated into mental health objectives and pursued across different sectors;

6) Innovations in mental health practices for victims should be promoted including through use of new technologies, AI, distance support, new therapeutic practices and innovations in medication.

**1) The size of the victim population and those affected by crime makes prioritisation of victims within mental health objectives essential**

Every year, an estimated 75 million people in the European Union, 15% of the population fall victim to serious crimes. Crime and victimisation affect victims' physical state as well as having a severe impact on victims' psychological wellbeing. Moreover, mental health impacts are also experienced by victims of less serious crimes.

Not only does crime affect direct victims, it also has sizeable impacts on the loved ones of victims, those who help victims including first responders, justice officials and support workers as well as wider communities and society. This means a significant proportion of the EU population will have negative mental health experiences due to crime or their connection with victims of crime.

**2) The extent of mental health impacts on victims makes prioritisation of victims within mental health objectives essential. It requires that investment in victim mental health is commensurate to the large-scale costs**

Victimisation comes with a sense of powerlessness, vulnerability, mistrust and insecurity. From the initial shock, anger, fear and distress, to more long-term psychological consequences such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), eating disorders, anxiety and depression, mental health problems are a common consequence of victimisation. In instances of mass scale crimes such as terrorist attacks, these consequences are widespread with a much greater proportion of victims suffering PTSD.

In addition, those at greatest risk of victimisation due to a range of factors such as poverty, social exclusion, disability, institutionalisation etc. often experience the worst mental health outcomes. This can be due to numerous factors such as already suffering mental health issues, they may be the least resilient to trauma and they may have weak social support frameworks which can be essential to a victim's recovery.

Due to these extensive short and long-term impacts, the costs to victims, to the wider population and to our economies runs into the billions of euros. Importantly, early, specialised and targeted interventions as part of a comprehensive support system can significantly reduce impacts on mental wellbeing.

Investment and funding for mental health action for those impacted by crime should therefore be commensurate to the impact of crime and the costs of not taking action. This includes ensuring that any EU funding on mental health issues explicitly identifies priorities relating to the mental health of victims and those impacted by crime.

**3) Mental health action must address the mental health of individuals and the root causes of problems**

A multi-dimensional mental health action must be proactive and address the root causes of mental health problems. The psychosocial model frames psychosocial disability as a human

experience, caused by a variety of factors such as wider socio-economic issues (e.g., discrimination, social media, poverty) and challenging or traumatic life events (e.g., crime).

#### **4) Resilience of individuals and society should be incorporated into mental health objectives and pursued across different sectors**

VSE's mission to build resilient societies to be able to deal with trauma links directly to this need, as we encourage integration of these actions into education, institutions, and other environments (e.g. sports teams, religious institutions, workplace). Building resilient societies and the promotion of mental health literacy is essential to help prevent and mitigate mental health problems and, in these lines, the risks and consequences of victimisation.

For this, it is important to address and tackle stigma and misconceptions related to mental health and victimisation, normalising the conversation around mental health. This initiative should include awareness-raising and educational activities targeted to the general public and specific sectors (such as law enforcement or healthcare professionals) to ensure de-stigmatisation of victims, of mental health problems whilst fostering positive mental health environments.

VSE supports the call of Mental Health Europe for an EU Mental Health Strategy. Such a strategy is necessary to achieve systemic and structural changes and progress across the EU. Any strategy should be co-ordinated with existing strategies for victims of crime. In developing the strategy and mental health policies, all vulnerable groups including victims of crime and relevant actors should be consulted, together with experts in the field. This would ensure their experiences and needs in relation to mental health are fully incorporated into any action.

#### **5) EU action should support the development of mental health and psychosocial services with specialist capability to serve the needs of victims**

An effective victim sensitive response to crime requires a comprehensive, whole of society approach, which fully mitigates impacts and which includes mental health solutions. At the heart of this approach is a comprehensive victim support framework organised to ensure that responses address the impact of crime, meet the needs of victims and are victim sensitive.

This means that **mental health support services must be widely available to victims** and be:

- **Victim-centred care specialised for the situation of victims** through a trauma-informed approach, taking into account the specific needs different groups of victims – psychologists and other mental health workers should have specialist training to be able to properly support victims of crime;
- **Accessible** – including remote support, self-guided solutions and free or low cost for victims;
- **Innovative** – incorporating new technologies, AI, new therapeutic and medicinal solutions in the field of mental health support, combining with comprehensive wellbeing solutions focused on positive lifestyle choices.