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**Justice
Center**

Examining Equity in State Victim Compensation Programs: A Multilevel Analysis

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Summary of the project

The **major goals and objectives** of the proposed study are to develop an empirical portrait of victim compensation programs, measure their effectiveness in reaching different victim populations, and identify strategies for making sure victim compensation is meeting the needs of all types of victims. This work aims to provide evidence to the field, including policymakers, VOCA administrators, victim service professionals, law enforcement, prosecutors, medical/mental health providers, and technical assistance providers, regarding victim populations with the greatest unmet needs and offer best practices for ensuring accessible compensation for all victims.

The project addressed **three research questions**: (1) Who applies for victim compensation? (2) Who receives victim compensation? (3) Who receives compensation for lost wages? (4) What policies and practices are states implementing to address possible disparities in who applies for and receives victim compensation? Research activities included:

- Conducting a national assessment of the financial health and stability of state/territory victim compensation programs and how funds are distributed, using survey and administrative data across all 50 states.
- Evaluating who requests and receives compensation within a sample of states, analyzing how community and individual characteristics shape victim compensation application and approval, and interviewing service providers and survivors to identify facilitators and barriers to equitable access.

The study utilized a **mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis**. The research design is a multi-level analysis, examining overlapping domains of influence.

The qualitative data collection was specifically designed to help refine the quantitative models by generating hypotheses and understanding possible mechanisms explaining patterns observed in the quantitative data. Both quantitative and qualitative components received IRB approval.

Data Sources Quantitative Data:

- Victim compensation claims data from two states, Pennsylvania (PA) and New Mexico (NM), for claims opened between 2015 and 2019 were a main source. PA provided 62,101 claims and NM provided 16,491 claims for analysis.

- Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) Performance Measurement Tool (PMT) reports provided national and state-level data on victims served, demographics, victimization types, and services.
- Census and American Community Survey (ACS) data provided demographic and socioeconomic information at state, county, and zip code levels.
- FBI Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Summary Reporting System data were used for county crime rates.
- FBI National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) state-level estimates were used for state-level crime data by demographic characteristics.
- Incident-level crime data from police departments in major cities in PA (Philadelphia, Scranton, Allentown, Pittsburgh, Reading) and NM (Farmington, Rio Rancho, Santa Fe, Albuquerque) were collected.
- Data on the availability of Victim Service Providers (VSPs) came from the 2017 BJS Nationwide Census of Victim Service Providers (NCVSP).
- An original survey of victim compensation programs of states, territories, and the District of Columbia, identifying their policies and practices related to who applies and receives victim compensation. The survey was responded by 31 states, territories, or District of Columbia.

A significant portion of race data was missing in the claims data (40% in PA, 11% in NM). This missing data was imputed using the Bayesian Improved First Name Surname Geocoding (BIFSG) method.

Qualitative Data: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 practitioners and 10 survivors. Practitioner interviews included compensation program staff, victim advocacy coalition staff, attorneys/DA victim witness services, and advocates from various VSPs (immigrant-serving, rural, Native American-serving, neighborhood-serving). Survivor interviews aimed to understand experiences, facilitators, barriers, and satisfaction. The 10 survivor interviews were conducted in Pennsylvania.

Analytical Approach Quantitative analysis was performed separately but analogously for Pennsylvania and New Mexico due to differences in data structure and program policies. The analyses used longitudinal linear random effects models to examine victim compensation application rates by count, and random effects models with claims nested within counties (or cities) to examine victim compensation claim outcomes. Variables included victim characteristics (race and/or imputed race, age, sex), victimization type, and neighborhood characteristics (proportion below poverty, distance to nearest VSP).

Qualitative data analysis involved taking analytical notes during and after interviews, highlighting evidence for/against hypotheses and generating new ones.

A separate descriptive analysis was made for each of the 50 states about (a) their trends in their applications and approvals, overall and by victimization type; and (b) about their applications by sex or gender, age, and race and ethnicity in comparison with the victims and population of each demographic category. The descriptive analysis does not have specific findings but is reported in a toolkit that was delivered in a national webinar for state actors to visualize the specific results for their state.

The survey was analyzed to highlight to practitioners what policies and practices states are implementing that may reduce disparities in terms of who applies or receives victim compensation.

Results and Findings

Victims of violent crime often incur thousands of dollars in expenses. While victim compensation programs exist to offer some financial assistance, they face limitations. These limitations include restrictions on who is eligible, what expenses and how much are covered, challenging application processes with short time limits, and a widespread lack of knowledge about the program. Addressing these barriers and ensuring equitable access to compensation is a critical need.

The study identified disparities and variations in who accesses victim compensation programs, based on analysis across the stages of the process: victimization, application, approval, and compensation for expenses.

Victimization and Needs Criminal victimization is not equal across sex, race, age, income, and geography. Needs for services and compensation vary across groups. Violent crime victims may have thousands of dollars in expenses.

Research Question 1: Who Applies for Victim Compensation?

Victim compensation is significantly underutilized nationally, with applications made for less than 5 percent of violent crimes. In 2022, about 15 percent of violent crimes nationally had an associated application, while in Pennsylvania it was about 15 percent and in New Mexico about 23 percent. Figure 1 shows the underutilization in each state by dividing the applications in the PMT data by the NIBRS estimates of violent crime. The HTML files in the self-assessment tool for state victim compensation programs show the level of utilization for each state and how they compare to the possible applicants by demographic and victimization type in each state.

- In Pennsylvania: a 1% increase in Black population correlates with 6 fewer applications per 1,000 violent crimes (though this effect disappears when controlling for violent crime rate); violent crime rate significantly reduces applications (2 fewer per 1,000 crimes for each additional crime per 10,000 people); provider availability increases applications (10 additional providers correlates with 3 more applications per 1,000 violent crimes); and significant random effects suggest unobserved county-level factors.
- In New Mexico: provider availability has a stronger effect than in Pennsylvania (increasing applications by about 30 per 1,000 violent crimes); counties with larger urban populations have lower application rates (1% increase in urban population correlates with 15 fewer applications per 1,000 violent crimes); larger counties by total population have higher application rates (1,000 additional people correlates with 2 more applications per 1,000 violent crimes); percent Black population shows a negative but non-significant effect (likely due to the small Black population averaging just 1.3%); and significant random effects suggest unobserved county-level factors.

The qualitative interviews put findings into context:

- Black interviewees in Pennsylvania cited several reasons for lower application rates, including cultural stigma around therapy, lack of Black providers, inaccessible services, and normalization of violence in some communities—with one interviewee not realizing she qualified as a trauma victim after witnessing shootings until well into her 30s.
- Geographic variations in application rates can be attributed to: inconsistent victim notification practices across police departments and district attorneys' offices; differing definitions of who qualifies as a victim; varying outreach efforts by compensation programs and victim service providers (VSPs); and limited knowledge about compensation programs among VSPs themselves—while the presence of VSPs remains crucial since most survivors learned about compensation through them rather than healthcare providers.

Research Question 2: Who is Approved or Denied Victim Compensation?

The next set of analyses examined claims-level data to understand how different groups are receiving compensation.

- In Pennsylvania, we found racial disparities in payment approval: Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, and multi-racial victims had approximately 5% lower approval rates compared

to White victims, while Hispanic victims had 6-8% higher approval rates than White victims. Male victims had 7% higher approval rates than female victims, and victims of homicide, sexual assault, and domestic violence had 19-25% higher approval rates than other crime victims. Additionally, neighborhood poverty was associated with lower payment likelihood (19% decrease per 1% poverty increase in large cities), and neighborhood random effects were significant.

- In New Mexico, we found no racial disparities in approval rates, but we did find that older victims had lower approval probabilities than younger victims. Victims of homicide had 14% higher approval rates and sexual assault victims had 5% higher approval rates compared to other crime victims. Distance from service providers decreased approval likelihood, and neighborhood random effects were significant.

The qualitative interviews put findings into context:

- Language barriers, fear of law enforcement, and challenges navigating bureaucracy contribute to approval disparities: non-English speakers struggle with application follow-up unless assisted by bilingual victim service providers (VSPs); Black, Hispanic, and domestic violence victims often face denials due to lack of police reports or cooperation with law enforcement; and elderly victims may have more difficulty with technology and gathering required documentation.
- Local factors create neighborhood disparities in application success: compensation programs' heavy reliance on police reports may replicate existing biases when determining victim status (particularly in ambiguous cases like fights or domestic violence); quality of local VSP support varies significantly across locations, with some advocates being more persistent and better trained than others; and some VSPs pre-screen applications based on perceived eligibility, with rural areas served primarily by district attorneys' offices potentially seeing higher approval rates due to pre-selection of cases with appropriate documentation.

Research Question 3: Who Receives Compensation for Lost Wages?

The final set of models examine victim compensation for lost wages.

- In Pennsylvania, we found racial and gender disparities in lost wages compensation: Hispanic victims had 9% lower probability (14% less in major cities) and Asian/Pacific Islander victims had 12-17% lower probability of receiving lost wages compensation compared to White victims, while Black victims were more likely than White victims to be compensated. Men were more likely than women to receive lost wages compensation. Victims of homicide or sexual assault were less likely to receive lost wages compensation than other crime victims, and applications from higher-poverty

neighborhoods had increased likelihood of compensation, suggesting lower availability of sick days increased compensation need.

- In New Mexico, we similarly found racial and gender disparities: American Indian, Black, and Hispanic victims were less likely than White victims to receive lost wages compensation, while men were more likely than women to receive compensation. Older victims had decreased probability of receiving lost wages compensation. Unlike Pennsylvania, victims of homicide, sexual assault, and domestic violence in New Mexico were more likely to be compensated for lost wages. Applications from higher-poverty neighborhoods also had increased likelihood of compensation, and neighborhood random effects were significant in both states.

The qualitative data provides insight into why this might be occurring:

- Undocumented immigrants face significant barriers to receiving lost wages compensation due to documentation requirements: they typically cannot provide standard proof of income like pay stubs, though some compensation programs may accept alternative evidence (such as letters from employers) or default to minimum wage calculations in trafficking cases—however, these accommodations depend heavily on individual investigators' knowledge and discretion.
- Systemic factors create disparities in lost wages compensation: compensation programs may deny specific expenses (like lost wages) rather than entire claims in cases with perceived contributory conduct, disproportionately affecting Black and Hispanic victims; neighborhood variations in compensation rates are likely due to inconsistent information provided by victim service providers (VSPs) about eligible expenses; and many survivors remain unaware they could receive compensation for lost work time, with application forms sometimes creating additional barriers by requesting medical documentation for psychological trauma.

Research Question 4: What policies and practices are states implementing to address possible disparities in who applies for and receives victim compensation?

Figures 2 and 3 summarize key policies and practices implemented by the compensation programs that responded to the survey that may be affecting and addressing eligibility and access to victim compensation. While more questions were included in the survey, the figures highlight those where there was variation in terms of how many states are implementing them—excluding those already implemented by all or by none—and that were highlighted as important in the interviews.

Figure 2 highlights policies regarding eligibility, required information, and protection. Nearly all responding programs are waiving filing deadlines. Most are allowing residents victimized

in another states to apply, can waive the requirement of reporting to and cooperation with law enforcement, and have a law or policy that requires victims to be notified about the program. A substantial minority allow the reporting requirement to include a medical professional instead of just law enforcement and protect victims against collection processes while deciding about compensation.

Regarding strategies used to increase accessibility (Figure 3), almost all responding programs had more than one option to apply. A majority had information in other languages, a toll free information line, and targeted outreach. Only a minority, albeit a substantial one, had some form of advertisement about the program.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The study's findings underscore that accessing victim compensation is a multi-step process, and disparities can occur at each stage. Quantitative results revealed statistical associations between victim, victimization, and neighborhood characteristics and application, approval, and compensation outcomes. The qualitative data provided crucial context and possible explanations for these patterns. For example, disparities in application rates and approvals may be linked to inconsistent or inadequate information dissemination by system agencies and limited language accessibility. Difficulties with documentation and the reliance on potentially biased police reports also appear to contribute to disparities in the approval process. Disparities in compensation for specific expenses like lost wages may be related to victims' lack of awareness that these expenses are covered and challenges in obtaining the necessary documentation. The results suggest significant unobserved differences between geographic units. Traditional claims-based models may need supplementation with direct service approaches to better serve disadvantaged victims.

Based on the findings, several policy implications and recommendations are proposed to improve victim compensation distribution across victim groups.

(1) Improving Access and Information

- Focus outreach efforts on areas needing more information, particularly zip codes with high crime rates and low application rates.
- Ensure police and DA witness services consistently inform all victims about the program and connect them with victim advocates or VSPs. Track how well system agencies are informing people.
- Make the application process easier or relax stringent reporting or documentation requirements.

- Emphasize expenses providers may not think about, such as mental health counseling, lost wages for survivors, and transportation costs, particularly when discussing the program with funeral homes.
- Enhance access by providing technology to support online applications in places where victims receive treatment (e.g., hospitals, CACs, SANEs). Public transit facilities, bus stops, bulletin boards, billboards, and hospitals were suggested advertising locations. Social media platforms used by young people were also suggested.

(2) Considering New Policies

- Follow OVC's recommendations from the 2024 proposed rulemaking. This includes recommendations to:
 - Not require victims' cooperation with law enforcement. Pursue legislative change to eliminate the cooperation requirement or allow waivers for "good cause factors" (age, physical condition, psychological state, cultural/linguistic barriers, health/safety concerns).
 - Not consider immigration status to determine eligibility.
 - Expand acceptable forms of documentation for proof of income. Examples include notarized letters from employers or labor contracts. The expectation of standard documentation makes it difficult for those working informally.
 - Not deny based on criminal history.
 - Not consider contributory conduct. In New Mexico, this was removed for homicide cases via statutory change in 2022.
- Have denials reviewed by a team instead of an individual.
- Seek statutory provisions requiring medical providers to write off remaining balances after compensation is paid.
- Seek statutory provisions protecting victims from collections actions by providers when compensation decisions are pending.

(3) Training

- Ensure police departments, DA witness services, and VSPs are adequately trained on how to inform victims about the program and how to obtain required documentation, including alternative forms.

(4) Outreach Strategies

- Develop targeted outreach efforts for underserved communities, particularly those with high victimization rates.
- Actively reach out to connect victims applying without an advocate to an advocate who can better ensure they receive needed services and compensation.
- Support comprehensive service models that combine compensation assistance with other victim services, ensuring victims are informed about needs whose costs could be reimbursed.

(5) Data Collection and Evaluation

- Improve monitoring and evaluation of program outcomes by race and ethnicity to identify disparities and track progress. This includes tracking application and approval rates, compensation for needs applied for and identified in surveys, and victims' experiences.
- Work with VOCA Assistance State Administering Agencies and victim service programs to use existing modules in the Measures for Providers Responding to Victims Experience (iMPRoVE) tool and gather feedback on program awareness and referrals. Work with stakeholders to add new iMPRoVE modules on victim compensation experiences (navigation assistance, customer service, decision-making understanding).
- Enhance data systems to track expenses people apply for to more thoroughly evaluate outcomes.

Limitations

Limitations of the study include challenges with data availability, such as missing race data, although imputation methods were used. Crime data aggregated at the county level from UCR files has limitations. The survivor interviews were only conducted in Pennsylvania, as no calls were received from victims in New Mexico despite outreach efforts. Estimates for city and neighborhood claims were based on available data due to the lack of public sources reporting claims at these levels. Omitted variables are a general concern in modeling, though random effects were used to account for unobserved differences. A major limitation of the survey was that only 31 programs responded and some did not complete all questions or the respondent did not know the answers about some policies and practices; however, there is no strong reason to believe that non-responding programs would have different responses, on average, than those that responded.

Deliverables

The project deliverables aim to disseminate findings to a broad audience. These included:

- A final research report for NIJ.
- Relevant datasets and documentation will be submitted to the National Archive of Criminal Justice Data.
- A self-assessment tool for state victim compensation programs.
- A webinar for state victim compensation professionals.
- Strategic briefings for state partners.
- Presentations at the American Society of Criminology's 2024 Conference.
- A research manuscript for publication in a peer-reviewed journal.

Appendix: Tables and Figures

Table 1. Longitudinal linear random effects models predicting county application rates

	PA (Entire State)	PA (Major Cities Only)	NM (Entire State)	NM (Major Cities Only)
Population (in thousands)	0.779 (0.844)	1.234 (0.951)	19.374* (8.645)	12.820 (9.501)
% Foreign Born	9.323 (6.745)	9.021 (7.107)	59.213 (33.081)	58.010 (34.135)
% Black	-6.481* (2.760)	-3.756 (2.667)	-26.828 (95.954)	-12.758 (100.751)
Providers per 1,000 Violent Crimes	0.316*** (0.032)	0.298*** (0.030)	29.433*** (2.240)	29.749*** (2.078)
% Urban Population	-1.460 (0.949)	-1.570 (0.956)	-15.916** (5.851)	-16.485** (5.895)
% Below poverty	-5.039 (4.490)	-2.504 (4.536)	-27.944 (19.387)	-31.767 (19.083)
Violent crime per 10,000 people		-2.364* (1.196)		0.060 (0.038)
Year 2019			-285.878 (159.543)	-285.387 (149.621)
Constant	334.371*** (62.272)	339.431*** (63.302)	546.823 (449.941)	373.004 (463.596)
Observations	335	335	157	156
p(F)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 2. Random Effects Linear Probability Model Predicting Approval (Payment in PA and Application in New Mexico)

	PA (Entire State)	PA (Major Cities Only)	NM (Entire State)	NM (Major Cities Only)
American Indian	-0.128 (0.078)	-0.115 (0.100)	0.012 (0.039)	0.057 (0.065)
Asian & Pacific Islander	-0.070*** (0.021)	-0.050* (0.024)	-0.036 (0.058)	-0.087 (0.071)
Black	-0.039** (0.013)	-0.027 (0.021)	-0.000 (0.026)	-0.034 (0.037)
Hispanic	0.061* (0.024)	0.080* (0.034)	-0.013 (0.010)	0.018 (0.012)
Other	-0.089*** (0.026)	-0.107** (0.035)	-0.008 (0.020)	-0.018 (0.039)
Age	-0.003*** (0.000)	-0.003*** (0.000)	-0.002*** (0.000)	-0.002 (0.001)
Male	0.073*** (0.009)	0.093*** (0.014)	0.027** (0.009)	0.053*** (0.015)
Homicide Victimization	0.186*** (0.013)	0.233*** (0.018)	0.196*** (0.021)	0.186*** (0.035)
Sexual Assault Victimization	0.198*** (0.015)	0.286*** (0.032)	0.074*** (0.017)	0.097** (0.035)
Domestic Violence Victimization	0.260*** (0.011)	0.245*** (0.021)	0.023 (0.019)	0.029 (0.027)
Neighborhood % below poverty	-0.057 (0.059)	-0.187* (0.090)	-0.098 (0.081)	-0.076 (0.133)
Miles from nearest VSP to victim's zip code logged	0.016* (0.006)	0.016 (0.015)	-0.013 (0.007)	-0.011 (0.011)
Constant	0.613*** (0.018)	0.575*** (0.034)	0.777*** (0.027)	0.740*** (0.068)
Observations	16577	7043	11724	5345
p(F)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000

Standard errors in parentheses

Note: Models only look at complete applications.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 3. Random effects Linear Probability Models Predicting Payments for Lost Wages

	PA (Entire State)	PA (Major Cities Only)	NM (Entire State)	NM (Major Cities Only)
American Indian	0.015 (0.069)	-0.017 (0.121)	0.068* (0.033)	0.064 (0.042)
Asian & Pacific Islander	-0.117*** (0.027)	-0.174*** (0.035)	-0.152* (0.063)	-0.107 (0.075)
Black	0.084*** (0.013)	0.043* (0.021)	0.091* (0.042)	0.083 (0.057)
Hispanic	-0.087*** (0.021)	-0.141*** (0.034)	0.061** (0.019)	0.059* (0.024)
Other	0.025 (0.036)	-0.029 (0.054)	0.075 (0.043)	0.092 (0.051)
Age	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.002*** (0.001)	-0.003*** (0.001)	-0.003** (0.001)
Male	0.023* (0.009)	0.036** (0.014)	0.065** (0.021)	0.068* (0.026)
Homicide Victimization	-0.273*** (0.014)	-0.315*** (0.022)	-0.211*** (0.029)	-0.221*** (0.037)
Sexual Assault Victimization	-0.212*** (0.015)	-0.201*** (0.042)	-0.142*** (0.031)	-0.178*** (0.037)
Domestic Violence Victimization	-0.029 (0.015)	0.004 (0.034)	-0.057 (0.031)	-0.080* (0.036)
Neighborhood % below poverty	0.193*** (0.057)	0.201* (0.101)	-0.255* (0.114)	-0.528*** (0.145)
Miles from nearest VSP to victim's zip code logged	0.011 (0.006)	0.038** (0.014)	0.023* (0.012)	0.028** (0.010)
Constant	0.312*** (0.019)	0.397*** (0.040)	0.473*** (0.045)	0.529*** (0.059)
Observations	9991	3918	2535	1351
p(F)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000

Standard errors in parentheses

Note: Models exclude applications where the only payment was for stolen cash benefits and only look at applications with payments.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Figure 1. Applications as a Percent of Estimated Violent Crimes, 2022

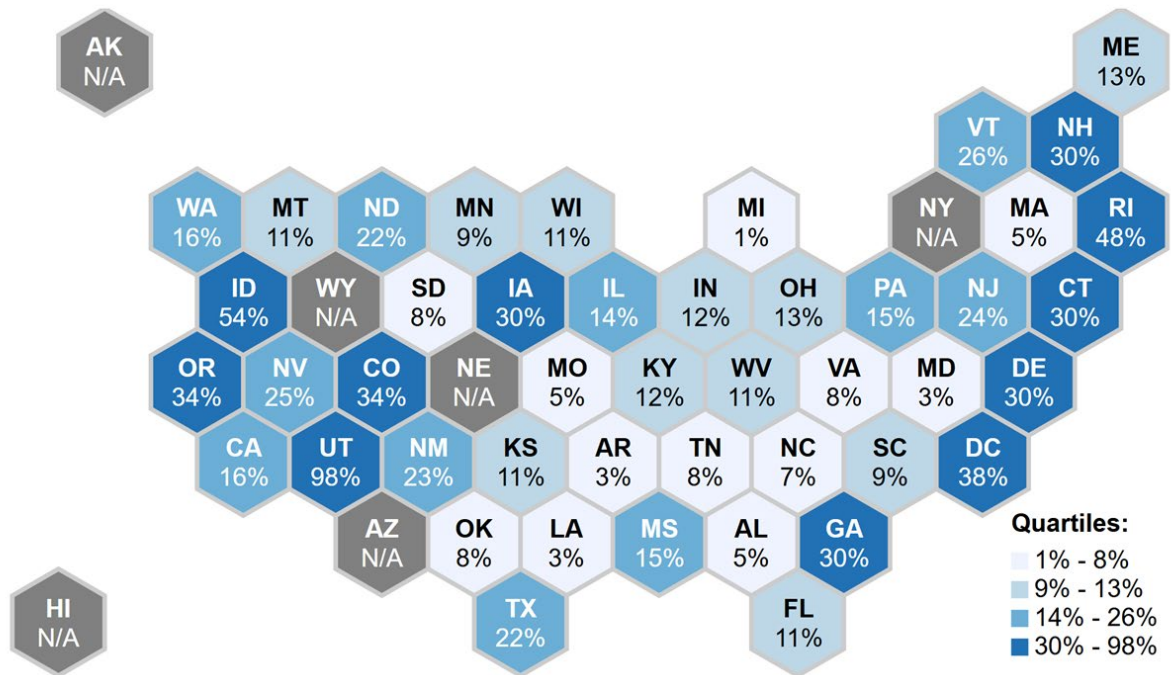
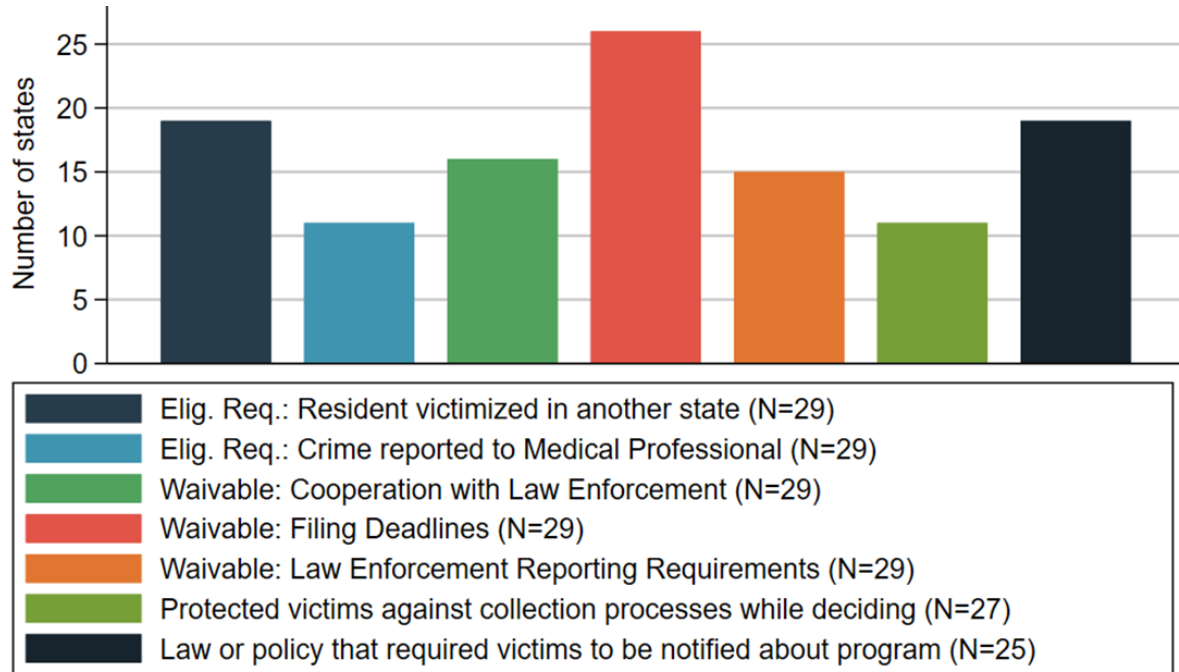
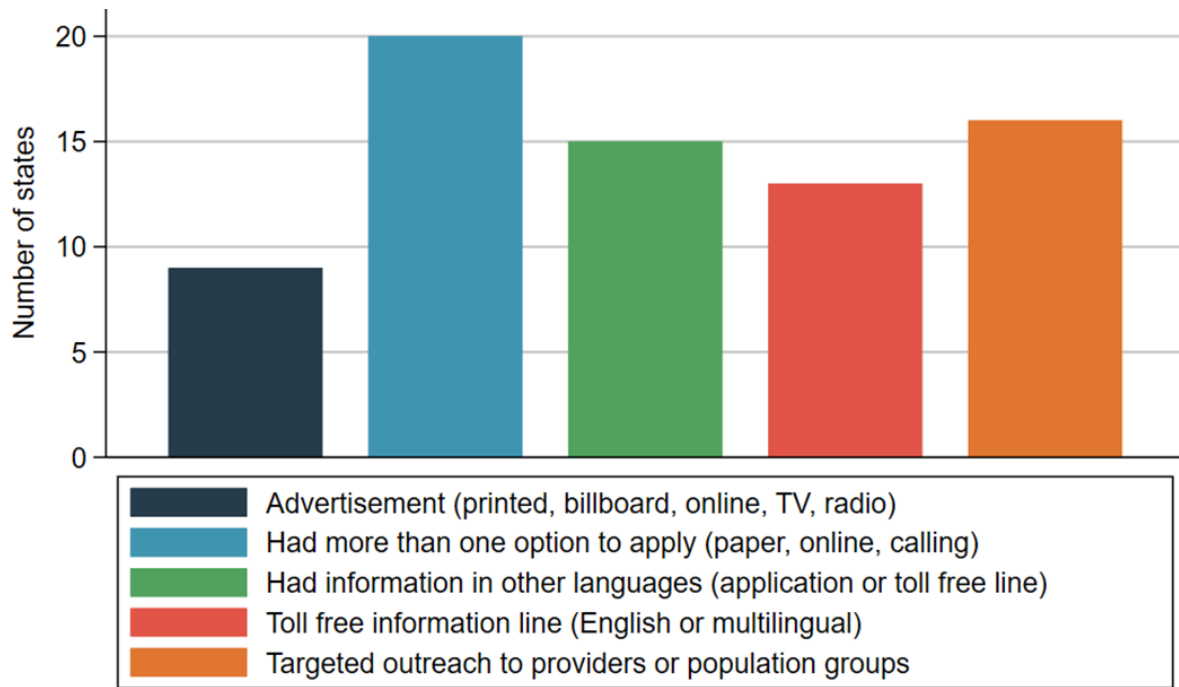


Figure 2: Frequency of key eligibility requirements and other policies affecting access vary across states.



Note: Questions edited for brevity.

Figure 3. Strategies used to increase accessibility of victim compensation



N = 21. Columns show combinations of multi-select choices.