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# Victims of Community Violence in Chicago: The Impact on Professional Responders

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*FEATURE ARTICLE*

**VICTIMS OF COMMUNITY  
VIOLENCE IN CHICAGO: THE  
IMPACT ON PROFESSIONAL  
RESPONDERS**

*by* LEE SHEVELL

**O**n January 18, 2011 Cook County Juvenile Court Judge Colleen Sheehan sentenced a 15 year-old boy for the murder of 16-year-old Derriion Albert.<sup>1</sup> “This happened in broad daylight, on a public street, near a community center,” Sheehan reflected in open court. “That a young man could be beaten to death under those circumstances is really unthinkable. It undermines the very fabric of our society.”<sup>2</sup>

Albert, a high school junior honors student, was murdered outside of his high school on the South Side of Chicago when he was unintentionally caught in a street fight between two rival gangs.<sup>3</sup> Judge Sheehan described the sentencing hearing as “the saddest day that I have ever been a part of as a judge.”<sup>4</sup>

The cost of violence often extends beyond its victims. Its influence also reaches “solicitors” – those who respond to violence in communities as professionals. Police officers, doctors, social workers, lawyers, and judges experience unique harms at the hands of increasing brutality on Chicago’s streets. Solicitors working with clients exposed to violence risk a transfer of symptoms from the client to the helper.<sup>5</sup> This is a phenomenon known as compassion fatigue. This article explores the effects of clients’ exposure to trauma upon three groups of solicitors: mental health providers, attorneys, and judges.

#### VIOLENCE IN CHICAGO: A CONSIDERATION OF WHAT IS BEING SOLICITED

Solicitors affected by compassion fatigue generally experience a cumulative exposure to victims suffering from trauma.<sup>6</sup> For solicitors in Chicago working with clients exposed to violence, there is no shortage of work. During 2010, 510 people were murdered in the city, 80 percent by gunfire. Half were between the ages of 10 and 25 years old.<sup>7</sup> One study suggests that Chicago’s increase in homicides from 2007 to 2008 reduced the population by 5,000 people.<sup>8</sup> However, Judge Sheehan’s reflection demonstrates how the impact of violence extends beyond mere population reduction: the “[murder] victims aren’t the only victims.”<sup>9</sup>

For residents living in high crime areas, the impact of constant exposure to violence, known as “community violence”<sup>10</sup>, often results in chronic stress and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).<sup>11</sup> There is no respite from the heightened anxiety about one’s own safety and the safety of others in areas consumed by violence.<sup>12</sup> One mother lamented, “[I]t’s 365 days a year, 24 hours a day . . . it is bad in the summer . . . in the winter . . . all the time. The drugs don’t stop. The violence doesn’t stop. We’re tired.”<sup>13</sup>

As professional responders, solicitors must experience and process community violence on a daily basis. They take on clients’ burdens through fact-finding, story-telling, and occupational responsibilities that require victims to replay and relive the violent events to the solicitor.

For many solicitors, clients' suffering comes with a personal cost. Compassion fatigue often begins when the solicitor employs "empathetic engagement with trauma survivors who relate narratives of overwhelming horror and pain."<sup>14</sup> Symptoms of this phenomenon include isolation from others, anxiety, problems with coping skills, a decreased sense of accomplishment, loss of confidence when working with clients, nightmares, and stomach problems.<sup>15</sup> When solicitors consistently engage with traumatized clients, they are similarly impacted by the experience of the victim, as well as by the experience of attempting to help their client.<sup>16</sup>

#### MENTAL HEALTH PROVIDERS AS SOLICITORS

Mental health providers are the solicitors most recognized by the public for their work with victims of violence through therapeutic intervention to symptoms of trauma. In a study conducted to analyze the effects of traumatized clients on social workers, nearly all (97.8 percent) of the respondents indicated that their client population experienced trauma.<sup>17</sup> The study used these results to measure impact on the solicitor, finding that 55 percent met at least one core diagnostic criteria for PTSD.<sup>18</sup>

In Chicago, research shows that community violence and chronic stress is taking a significant toll on students in the Chicago Public School (CPS) system as well.<sup>19</sup> The main solicitor of trauma victims in schools is the school social worker. One school social worker for CPS with more than 15 years of experience explained her role as the lead responder to the social and emotional concerns of students.<sup>20</sup> In times of violence, she manages the crisis as it unfolds.<sup>21</sup> Later, she runs grief groups and addresses the needs of individual students and staff.<sup>22</sup> She speaks of overwhelming stories of community violence, including a student who was "shot at the beginning of the school year, within sight of the school, while on the way in the morning."<sup>23</sup>

When asked what compassion fatigue meant to a trauma solicitor, she replied, "[R]emaining empathic in order to address the needs of the students who are bombarded with violence, traumas and its after-effects can present unique challenges. This type of fatigue creeps up on you."<sup>24</sup>

It is a feeling she shares with other solicitors in her school. “The fatigue affects all of us in the school. . . Staff members spend a great deal of time debriefing with other staff members as a healthy way to deal with the experience.”<sup>25</sup>

#### LAWYERS AS SOLICITORS

Lawyers are also solicitors entrenched in community violence, acting as agents between a legal dispute and the justice system. In a study that surveyed 100 criminal and non-criminal attorneys, the level of vicarious trauma was higher for the criminal law solicitors.<sup>26</sup> In particular, criminal law solicitors reported significantly higher levels of subjective distress and self-reported vicarious trauma, depression, stress, and cognitive changes in relation to safety and intimacy.<sup>27</sup>

Criminal attorneys both defend and prosecute those accused of crimes, including crimes of violence. In criminal cases, lawyers act as officers between an act of violence and the criminal justice system – a public face that elicits stories of violence in court. Attorneys must absorb the traumatic details of cases and maintain long-term relationships with their clients and crime victims.<sup>28</sup>

“Sometimes the best thing for a client is to take a plea,” said one former Cook County, Ill. Public Defender.<sup>29</sup> “A defendant will plead guilty to a sentence with time served or the lowest turnaround to leave jail, whether or not guilt is a factor. The innocent get swept away in this tide, regardless of the Public Defender’s efforts.”<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, the attorney said, “State’s Attorneys in some ways have it the worse. They expect that their work will make victims feel whole again. But nothing will bring back a dead father. The victim at the end cannot feel whole.”<sup>31</sup>

The Public Defender believes the self-perception of the role of an attorney in criminal courts may impact the likelihood of compassion fatigue.<sup>32</sup> “I don’t believe in an excess of compassion, but an attorney should not get involved in a case in a way that you are looking for a thank you,” he said. “They should keep their eyes on that service to the individual’s needs and consider ‘What am I doing for this client?’ and not ‘How am I doing as an attorney?’”<sup>33</sup>

Results of a study that examined attorneys from agencies specializing in domestic violence, family law, and legal aid criminal services show that lawyers

have significantly higher rates of compassion fatigue than mental health providers do.<sup>34</sup> The difference between mental health workers and attorneys appear to be related to professional expectations, such that attorneys are discouraged from showing weakness and strive to avoid vulnerability.<sup>35</sup>

#### JUDGES AS SOLICITORS

For judges, there is less repetition of each particular traumatic story, but they still face a considerable incidence of compassion fatigue.<sup>36</sup>

In a study of 500 judges across the United States, 63 percent reported one or more symptoms identified with work-related compassion fatigue. Judges with seven or more years of experience reported higher levels of externalized symptoms, such as anger or hostility.<sup>37</sup> Further, female judges reported greater incidents of compassion fatigue, including internalized symptoms such as depression (73 percent of female judges versus 54 percent of males).<sup>38</sup>

The challenges judges face are unique and individualized. Judges are the ultimate decision-maker in perpetrators' and victims' lives, meting out consequences and granting retribution for violence. Yet they must remain fair, courteous, dignified and patient at all times in the course of their duties.<sup>39</sup>

Judges may have the hardest time of all finding preventative solutions for compassion fatigue. In order to combat the emotional hardship from hearing about trauma on a regular basis while staying unbiased and effective, experts recommend therapeutic debriefing and consultation.<sup>40</sup> Unfortunately, much of a judge's work must remain confidential.<sup>41</sup> According to one judge, "[T]he reality is that some judges work in isolation, they cannot consult about a case, they see horrific crimes, make weighty decisions and have to keep their mouths shut about everything."<sup>42</sup>

#### IMPLICATIONS

While attempting to aid the victims of violence by addressing trauma through therapeutic response and legal remedy, solicitors themselves can become victims of community violence through secondary trauma. Although mental health providers may have an understanding of how to manage this phenome-

non, the professionals in the legal system overall have yet to discuss or address such issues.

The importance of creating environments to support all types of solicitors, and specifically those who work with clients exposed to violence, is essential. Both the available research and responses from solicitors show how important it is to develop educational programs for both students and professionals on how to deal with this pressure.<sup>43</sup> If these support systems are not created to counter compassion fatigue, there is a great risk of perpetuating a vicious epidemic and losing the professionals who can aid their clients.

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#### NOTES

1 Jason Meisner. *Sentence for juvenile in Fenger beating: Jail until 21*, CHI. TRIB., Jan 18, 2011 available at [http://articles.chicagobreakingnews.com/2011-01-18/news/28532975\\_1\\_juvenile-court-juvenile-detention-center-alberts](http://articles.chicagobreakingnews.com/2011-01-18/news/28532975_1_juvenile-court-juvenile-detention-center-alberts).

2 *Id.*

3 *Beating Death of Derrion Albert, 16, Caught on Tape*, HUFFINGTON POST, Sept. 27, 2009, available at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/09/27/beatng-death-of-derrien\\_n\\_301319.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/09/27/beatng-death-of-derrien_n_301319.html)

4 Meisner, *supra* note 1.

5 Lila Petar Vrklevski and John Franklin, *Vicarious Trauma: The Impact of Solicitors of Exposure to Traumatic Material*, 14 TRAUMATOLOGY 2008 at 107. If left unaddressed, compassion fatigue can “lead to a loss of effective treatment for the client; an inability to discharge professional, social and personal responsibilities for the trauma worker; detachment and emotional withdrawal from family and friends; depersonalization; and disillusionment with the organization”.

6 *Id.*, at 106.

7 The University of Chicago, *Crime Lab: Gun Violence Among School Age Youth*, Mar. 2009 at 1.

8 *Id.* at 4.

9 *Id.*

10 *Id.* at 2. The University of Chicago interviewed almost 100 residents in Chicago, including men, women, youth, students, single mothers, faith leaders, educators, teachers, police officers, emergency medicine physicians, and other medical responders on the effects of community violence.

11 N.Y. UNIV. CHILD STUDY CENTER, COMMUNITY VIOLENCE: THE EFFECTS ON CHILDREN, available at [http://www.aboutourkids.org/articles/community\\_violence\\_effects\\_children](http://www.aboutourkids.org/articles/community_violence_effects_children). “Community violence (CV) refers to exposure, as a witness or through actual experience, to acts of interpersonal violence perpetrated by individuals who are not intimately related to the victim.”

12 *Id.*

13 *Id.* at 5.

14 Vrklevski, *supra* note 5 at 107.

- 15 *Compassion Fatigue Can Strike Human Service Workers*, Sep. 21, 2010, available at [www.pennlive.com](http://www.pennlive.com).
- 16 Fischman, Yael. Secondary Trauma in the Legal Professions: A Clinical Perspective. *TORTURE*: Vol. 18, Num. 2, 2008 at 108.
- 17 Brian E. Bride, *From Prevalence of Secondary Traumatic Stress Among Social Workers*, *SOCIAL WORK*, Vol. 52, Num. 1, Jan. 2007 at 67.
- 18 *Id.*
- 19 Violence in Chicago: A Multi-Level Approach, available at [http://www.childrensmrc.org/news/intouch\\_summer08/violence\\_chicago/](http://www.childrensmrc.org/news/intouch_summer08/violence_chicago/), pg. 3.
- 20 Email Interview with Chicago Public Schools School Social Worker (Mar. 3, 2011).
- 21 *Id.*
- 22 *Id.*
- 23 *Id.*
- 24 *Id.*
- 25 *Id.*
- 26 Vrlevski, *supra* note 5 at 114.
- 27 *Id.*
- 28 Albert, Linda. *Keeping Legal Minds Intact: Mitigating Compassion Fatigue among Government Lawyers*, *THE WISC. DEFENDER*, Winter/Spring 2009, Volume 17, Issue 1.
- 29 Interview with Former Cook County Public Defender, in Chi., Ill. (Mar. 28, 2011).
- 30 *Id.*
- 31 *Id.*
- 32 *Id.*
- 33 *Id.*
- 34 Andrew P. Levin & Scott Greisberg. *Vicarious Trauma in Attorneys*. 24 *PACE L. REV.* 2003-2004 at 245.
- 35 Albert, *supra* note 28 at 1.
- 36 Peter G. Jaffe, Claire V. Crooks, Billie Lee Dunford-Jackson, & Michael Town, *Vicarious Trauma in Judges: The Personal Challenge of Dispersing Justice*, *JUV. AND FAMILY CT. J.*, Fall 2003 at 14.
- 37 Michael A. Town, *Is Compassion fatigue an issue for judges?* *FL. BAR*, June 1, 2004, available at <http://www.floridabar.org>.
- 38 Jaffe, *supra* note 36 at 15. "Internalizing symptoms were intended to capture those related to anxiety, depression, and somatic problems. Externalizing/hostility included strong negative emotions (anger, frustration, cynicism) and interpersonal difficulties. The unique trauma factor. . . (re-experiencing trauma event, avoidance/numbing, and persistent arousal)."
- 39 *Id.* at 12.
- 40 *Id.* at 16.
- 41 *Id.*
- 42 *Id.*
- 43 Levin, *supra* note 34 at 245.