BREAKING THE ICE:
UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF COLD CASE HOMICIDE SURVIVORS

By
ASHLEY R. PEAKE

A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2011
To all survivors who so bravely shared their stories of tragedy, love and hope with me, to those educators and practitioners who aided in my knowledge and research, to my husband for his incredible support and to my family who loves me, believes in me and has always given me the opportunity to accomplish my dreams.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank my chairs, Marian Borg and Lonn Lanza-Kaduce for their guidance and significant contributions to my dissertation. I also thank the remaining members of my supervisory committee, Ronald Akers, Silvia Echevarria-Doan, and Constance Shehan, for their assistance and encouragement throughout this project. I appreciate all of my undergraduate research assistants, Brooke Barber, Shannon Barry, Catherine Dos Santos, Janki Gandhi, Charity Grady, Bryan King, Keith Morgan, Randall Morris, Ronnie Pirtle, Lindsey Rhodes, Shirtrina Roberts, for their assistance in the research and transcription process. I would like to recognize the survivors in my study for their willingness to share intimate experiences with me in the hopes to help others. Special thanks go out to my loving family for their constant support throughout my graduate career. Finally, thank you to my husband, Buddy Wellman, for his love and for teaching me that anything is possible.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1  INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions and Study Relevance</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview of Dissertation</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2  LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Social Context of Homicide in the United States</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homicide Survivors</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature on Grief and Bereavement</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature on Traumatic Grief</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Studies of Homicide Survivors</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3  RESEARCH DESIGN</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Design</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Format</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Questions</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active Interviewing</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcription</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analytical Strategy</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grounded Theory Overview</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grounded Theory Process</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4  INITIAL REACTIONS</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shock</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guilt/Self Blame</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blaming Other Family Members</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blaming the Victim</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blaming Professionals: Law Enforcement and Media</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure to respond</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure to collect or preserve evidence</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Failure to investigate ................................................................. 67
Inadequate coverage ................................................................. 69
Conclusion ................................................................................ 71

5 ATTEMPTING TO MOVE FORWARD ........................................... 73

Grief Judgment .......................................................................... 75
Physical and Emotional Effects .................................................. 81
Emotional Effects ....................................................................... 84
Coping Methods ......................................................................... 89
Religion ........................................................................................ 95
Remembering the Victim ............................................................ 102
  Creating a Memorial ................................................................ 102
  Maintaining Their Possessions ............................................... 104
  Difficulties of Holidays .......................................................... 105
Conclusion ................................................................................ 107

6 PRE-EXISTING RELATIONSHIPS ............................................... 109

Family ....................................................................................... 109
  Need to be Strong and to Protect ........................................... 109
  Impact on Familial Relationships ......................................... 115
Friends ...................................................................................... 118
Conclusion ................................................................................ 123

7 POST-HOMICIDE RELATIONSHIPS ....................................... 124

Murder is Different ..................................................................... 124
Other Survivors ......................................................................... 129
  Ability to Understand ........................................................... 129
  Helpfulness of Other Survivors ............................................. 131
Practitioners ............................................................................. 135
  Law Enforcement ................................................................... 135
    Lack of communication ..................................................... 136
    Lack of investigation ......................................................... 139
  Victim Advocates .................................................................. 144
    Media .................................................................................. 148
      Portrayal of victim .......................................................... 148
      Difficulty viewing media coverage .................................. 152
Conclusion ................................................................................ 158

8 ANTICIPATING A RESOLUTION ................................................. 161

Fear .......................................................................................... 161
Hope for a Resolution .............................................................. 165
Confronting the Offender .......................................................... 170
  Recommending a Sentence ................................................... 174
Revenge ..................................................................................... 175
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3-1</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants' demographic information</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

BREAKING THE ICE: UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF COLD CASE HOMICIDE SURVIVORS

By
Ashley R. Peake

August 2011

Chair: Lonn Lanza-Kaduce
Cochair: Marian Borg
Major: Criminology, Law and Society

Each year, an estimated 30,000 individuals in the United States become cold case homicide survivors: family members left behind after an unsolved murder. This group of crime victims is largely unrecognized in the scholarly literature, as well as by programs aimed at assisting the bereaved in general and crime victims in particular. This dissertation begins to tell their personal stories.

Based on 24 in-depth interviews, the research explores the lived experiences of cold case homicide survivors in the days, months and years following their traumatic loss and provides insight into their unique journey of bereavement. The interviews trace this journey, from the survivors’ initial reactions to the homicide, through the obstacles and facilitators they encountered in their attempts to move forward after their loves ones’ death, to the complex emotions involved in the anticipation of their cases being solved. While their stories at times convey typical elements of grieving, including feelings of anger, denial and blame, the survivors also describe experiences and emotions unique to their situation, particularly those associated with the long-term, open-ended nature of their grief.
Results suggest numerous unmet needs of cold case homicide survivors and consequently reveal numerous ways in which law enforcement and bereavement professionals might establish more effective relationships with and create specific programs for these crime victims. In addition, the qualitative research contributes to the literature on bereavement and victimization by giving voice to this understudied but increasingly significant group. Results suggest several fruitful areas for continued research involving larger samples of cold case homicide survivors, examining more systematically differences and similarities among them, and longitudinal work describing the continuation of their grief journey, especially with regard to pre-and post-offender identification issues.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

It could be well argued that the secondary victims of homicide survivors, rape victims, and others have in the past been just such ‘subordinate people’. A failure to heed them impairs a proper analysis of the social organization and meanings of criminality.

-Rock, 1998, Murderers, victims and “survivors’

The grieving process experienced by family members in the aftermath of a loved one’s death has been well examined in previous literature. Research has described how family members mourn, the stages of grief they pass through, and the difficulties they encounter with their relationships along the way. Much of this research has focused on “traditional” loss, as well as traumatic bereavement, for example, coping patterns among individuals whose family members die in accidents, suicides and even homicides. Despite these well-established models of bereavement and grief, little is known about the unique struggle faced by family members of “cold case” homicides: homicide in which no offender has been identified or arrested for the crime.

Daniel Webster once said “Every unpunished murder takes away something from the security of every man’s life” (Webster, 1830). Any attempt at understanding the effects of unsolved homicides must first begin by examining the surviving family. This dissertation explores the unique journey of grief that “cold case” homicide survivors face. More specifically, I describe their stories and the different hurdles they face compared with those suffering through other forms of bereavement.

Like many researchers, my previous experiences attracted me to this topic. I have always been a gregarious individual with a passion for helping others. As an undergraduate, I majored in public relations with the goal of building a career with a nonprofit agency. Upon graduation I secured a job at a major bookstore as a manager
of community relations. Through this position I was able to network with the community and took specific interest in a local police athletic league. In my interactions with this local program, I was able to share the joy of reading and emphasize the importance of literacy to underprivileged children in the community. Working with these families and law enforcement, I recognized that my childhood interest in criminology had not faded. After a few short years in the field of public relations, I returned to school to pursue a master’s and doctorate degree in criminology. I have always been intrigued by homicide. Pondering why someone would resort to killing another human being and thinking about how police assemble the pieces of the story in order to solve a case in fact led me towards studying criminology in graduate school. Throughout my graduate career, I taught undergraduate courses on subject areas related to my dissertation. Two courses in particular (homicide and victimology) directly aided in my research. To better understand the complex nature of homicide and death, I completed a professional certificate in Forensic Death Investigation at the University of Florida. I also volunteered as an intern with the local police department and sheriff’s office. Eventually, I was granted the unique opportunity to work alongside cold case homicide detectives reading cases, interviewing suspects, searching for evidence, assisting with reports and participating in meetings with surviving family members.

I am fortunate to have an interdisciplinary academic background. My degree in public relations enhanced my communication skills, allowing me to share my ideas and knowledge, articulate my goals, and create strong rapport with others. This skill set was one of the most critical keys to the success of my dissertation. As a graduate student I trained in a department that offered sociology and criminology, expanding my
methodological understandings and challenging me to examine issues through multiple lenses. My certificate in forensic death investigation provided me with the knowledge needed to develop strong connections with law enforcement personnel, and this awareness proved to be useful when communicating with my survivors who did not fully comprehend the jargon and science behind the evidence in their loved ones’ cases. In short, my educational background and professional experiences have greatly influenced the direction and strengthened the quality of my research.

I was raised in an extremely loving and giving family. Both of my parents instilled strong lessons of compassion and gratitude for those around me. From the time I was a little girl, I remember volunteering in soup kitchens, nursing homes and children’s homes with my family and church youth group. These experiences, coupled with my faith, reminded me how blessed I was and how I was responsible for giving myself to others so that they too could feel the blessings I had been given. I was always viewed as being a good listener, offering great advice and always able to bring a smile to someone else’s face.

Initially, I had decided to research the development and inner workings of cold case homicide units. I intended to study the growth of these units throughout the country, how cold cases differed from solved cases, which cases received the most attention and so forth. Trained as a quantitative researcher, I was comfortable with the idea of collecting data and using statistical analysis to analyze my findings. During my internship, however, I began to see a major dilemma that cold case homicide detectives faced. Family members desperately wanted answers to their case, but the detectives had to balance how much information they could release while still preserving the
integrity of the case. Family members perceived this balance game as a lack of honesty or transparency. To better understand the survivors’ experiences, I decided to search for a homicide bereavement group. I soon realized few resources existed for survivors of homicide, but eventually I found a group that held meetings a few hours from the University. I thought that sitting through a meeting would provide me with insight into survivors’ experiences. Ultimately my goal was to better understand how police procedure and behaviors might alleviate or inadvertently intensify survivors’ pain.

The bereavement meeting was open to all survivors of homicide, including those with cases where an offender had been identified and those whose cases were still unsolved. It began by allowing the survivors to introduce themselves and tell their story. Then the group tackled issues that were weighing heavily on one or more members. Sitting in the room as an observer, I listened intently to the tragic stories of each survivor, but one woman’s story stood out to me. Her teenage son had been murdered in 1997 in her home, and the murderer had never been caught. The police had classified her son’s murder as a cold case homicide. She spoke with grace and wisdom, providing comfort to the other survivors. However, when the time came for her to share her story with the group, I could tell there was a deep pain that she was struggling with, different from all the other survivors in the room. She held up a newspaper clipping that had a picture of her son and information about his case. She noted that her son’s memory had been reduced to a one inch booking photo and a short summary of his murder. The media and the police had given her little hope that she would ever learn who killed her son. The meeting progressed with information about navigating through the court system, coping with confronting the offender, and other
issues a family would face in a traditional homicide when a perpetrator is brought to justice. I remained focused on the mother who did not have an answer to who killed her son, and I saw how she became increasingly withdrawn from the group as the discussion focused on these more “practical” issues. Clearly, the topics there did not apply to her situation. Her issue was much more fundamental: Who had killed her son? After the meeting, she pulled me aside to talk about her case. She told me that several questions plagued her. Knowing that I studied cold case homicides, she asked me to clarify the meaning of the term “cold case homicide”. She wanted to know if I thought the police were still investigating her son’s murder. She asked if his involvement with drugs might make the police and media less interested in catching a perpetrator. She asked me how likely it was that her son’s case would ever be solved.

On my two hour drive home from the meeting, I felt I had a duty to examine this woman’s struggle with the loss of her son. I immediately shifted the focus of my dissertation from the investigative aspect of cold case homicides to those family members who are left to cope with the unsolved murder of their loved one. My own compassion and desire to help those in need trumped the original idea I had to systematically evaluate cold case homicide departments. The moment I witnessed the human despair that accompanied these cases, there was no option but for me to learn these cold case homicide survivors’ stories and seek ways in which the pain these families encounter might be lessened. I saw an opportunity to be an advocate for these families, and I believe that my passion broke the traditional stereotypes of a researcher and allowed me to penetrate the social and demographic barriers that often impede the collection of such rich and intimate data.
The first goal of my dissertation was to uncover survivors' stories and share their lived experiences. Initially, I was also driven to complete this project to share information with the practitioners who interact with those affected by cold case homicides. I had seen very different sides of cold case homicides: grieving, answer-starved families; professional, answer-seeking detectives; and clinical, treatment-oriented bereavement leaders. In many of these settings, I saw disconnect between the families and the practitioners. First, disconnect was apparent with the mother at the bereavement meeting. Much of the focus of the meeting and the upcoming planned events was centered on justice and the court process. But this mother might never see justice or step foot into a courtroom. It was clear that the practitioners and other members of the bereavement group could not fully relate to or assist a cold case homicide survivor. The next level of disconnect became clear when I was invited to meet with a family who had traveled from New Jersey to meet with police about their daughter's/sister's cold case homicide. Due to the large volume of information and other cold cases, the law enforcement team had not been able to sort through all of the information in the case, but they were confident they had a clear understanding of the details that might provide insight to the family. Other practitioners, including a prosecutor and a media team, were also present at the meeting. We sat at a large meeting room table, with boxes of evidence lined from one end to the other. I felt overwhelmed by the information they had on the case and wondered what the purpose was for having it out when the family arrived. Their visit would last only a couple hours. Would they be able to sort through even a fraction of the information in that time? Were the police thinking that showing the family the amount of data they had might provide a
sense of comfort or confidence towards a solution to the case? As the conversation began, the mother stated she did not know why forensics could not help in this case. From her questions it was clear that she knew very little about forensics or even what evidence remained in her daughter’s case. However, she was answered by a crime analyst who embarked on an excruciatingly detailed explanation of mitochondrial DNA and the complex scientific jargon of DNA analysis. The mother became frustrated due to her lack of understanding about the process and inability to understand the crime analyst. After the explanation she simply shifted her focus to a new aspect in her daughter’s murder. For her part, the forensic analyst seemed unaware of the futility of her very detailed and technical explanation. As I watched and listened to this mother, I began to notice areas where a survivor’s story and experience might be able to inform practitioners and help them communicate and work more effectively with cold case homicide survivors. Establishing the unique needs of the survivors and highlighting how professionals such as law enforcement officials, victim advocates and bereavement specialists might be able to play a critical role in the bereavement process became the second goal of my dissertation.

Early in my dissertation planning, I encountered resistance from those involved in my research. First, there was concern that I was embarking on a study that was too sensitive. I was told that it would be difficult to find survivors who would want to share their personal tragedies with me. From my brief encounters with the survivors at the bereavement meeting and my internship at the sheriff’s office, I knew this not to be the case. Many survivors would be enthusiastic to share their loved one’s story for many reasons. My interview was a way for the survivor to share information with someone
who was not there to judge or fix the situation, but was truly there to listen. One survivor told me “I said yes to being interviewed because I knew you weren’t sick of hearing my story like my friends and family are.” Participating also kept their family member relevant and in a sense the survivor felt like their loved one had not been forgotten even though the case remained unsolved. From my perspective, survivors needed and wanted to be heard. Hopefully, my dissertation provides them with that voice.

**Research Questions and Study Relevance**

The goal of this project is to voice the often forgotten stories of cold case homicide survivors. This project is about listening to families talk about their experiences with an unresolved murder, sometimes years after the event. All the survivors who participated in the study had a family member murdered, but had no identified offender in the case. I wanted to know more about their challenges, their future hopes and the services that might be provided to make their journey an easier one. The following research question guides this project: *How do survivors of cold case homicides describe their experience living in the aftermath of murder?* More specifically, this study aims to:

1. Develop an understanding of the lived experiences of cold case homicide survivors;
2. Describe the unique aspects of cold case homicide bereavement compared with previously researched forms of grief;
3. Create socially relevant knowledge that could be used to guide survivor bereavement programs and educate case-relevant professionals (i.e. law enforcement, bereavement specialists, and the media).

This issue of understanding the experiences of cold case homicide survivors is of great importance as the homicide clearance rates continue to decrease. In the U.S., a homicide case is generally considered “cleared” when the police arrest a suspect,
charge him/her with an offense and turn the case over for prosecution.\(^1\) Clearance rates are calculated annually as the proportion of all homicides in which a suspect has been arrested. These homicides are considered "solved" or "cleared" by the police. In 2007, for example, the homicide clearance rate was 61%, meaning that the police arrested a suspect in just under 2/3 of the homicides reported in that year.\(^2\) Taken from the opposite perspective, the police were unable to arrest a suspect in more than 1/3 of the homicide cases in 2007 alone. According to the FBI, homicide clearance rates have steadily declined from 91% in 1963 to their current level. The homicides in which no suspect is ever arrested are considered "uncleared" by the police. While some of these cases are eventually resolved, a proportion of them eventually "go cold." For each additional cold case homicide, surviving family members are left behind to grieve without answers. While a significant amount of literature has focused on various aspects of homicide and of the bereavement process, this dissertation adds to the existing research in several unique ways.

First, this project utilizes qualitative interviews with survivors of cold case homicides. Existing literature on bereavement mainly focuses on survivors of traditional, solved homicide, and few of those studies provide the rich qualitative material to fully understand the survivor’s perspective. By taking time to truly listen to the stories of the survivors, I was able to hear their views on major challenges they have

---

\(^1\) According to the US Department of Justice (2002) cases may also be considered clear via "exceptional means." In order to claim clearance via exceptional means, the agency is required to identify the offender, have enough evidence to proceed with prosecution, detail the offender’s location and encounter an extraneous circumstance that prevents them from proceeding forward with an arrest, charge and/or prosecution. Examples include failure of victim cooperation, refusal of jurisdictional transfer and death of the offender.

\(^2\) Homicides which occurred in previous years are reported and calculated in the clearance rate for the year in which they were solved.
encountered, their unique needs and their personal growth since the homicide. If we are to help the increasing number of families who experience cold case homicides, we must learn more from the survivors who are directly affected.

Next, I explore an expansive list of topics with the survivors. The majority of homicide literature on traditional survivors (i.e. cleared cases) is quantitative in nature, with only a few scholars focusing on the rich, qualitative stories. Typically the established research focuses on select major issues, such as victim-offender mediation or difficulties facing the trial. However, using a semi-structured interview format, I was able to ask broad questions and draw major themes from the stories the survivors were telling me. I started by asking them to describe their story, from the moment they heard the news of the homicide until the present day. Then we discussed their coping and healing. Finally, I spoke to the survivors about their interaction with specific practitioners, including law enforcement, media and bereavement specialists. It was important to see how these topics fit together and as a whole, shaped the survivors’ experiences.

My research also enhances the literature on bereavement. While there is a significant body of research on traditional grief and bereavement, research on traumatic grief and even more specifically homicide grief, is limited. This study enhances our understanding of how people heal in the aftermath of loss. The findings from my dissertation indicate that there are ways in which these families’ experiences mirror some facets of the traditional and traumatic grief models, while other facets of their bereavement are unique and add different dimension to the well established grief models.
Finally, the broader findings from my research are relevant to achieving better informed policy and programming. Much was learned from the recommendations and experiences of the participants in my study. By taking their stories and examining their unmet needs, bereavement programs can be developed to better accommodate families who face this unique type of loss. Also, practitioners can learn from the recommendations these survivors expressed. Program and policy changes of this nature should be developed as a result of sociological and criminological literature, or they are likely to be fruitless and ineffective. Research on cold case homicide survivors is severely needed, and I view my work as critical to helping close the gap in our sociological and criminological understanding of this topic.

**Overview of Dissertation**

Chapter 2 will continue with an overview of the relevant existing literature on homicide and grief. The chapter will detail the history of homicide, cold case homicide classifications, traditional grief models, traumatic grief models, and traditional homicide bereavement models. Chapter 3 will shift the focus to this specific study, explaining the methodological and analytical approach chosen for the project. Within the chapter I will explain the selection of participants, describe the sample and introduce the 24 survivors I interviewed.

During the analysis of my data, I found it useful to understand the survivors’ personal stories of bereavement as a journey. With each additional interview, it became clear that each survivor was sharing significant experiences and stages that they had encountered, were currently coping with and were still anticipating. As I sorted through the vast data, I began to think of these events as stages along the survivors’ journey.
from the homicide notification to present. This perception was substantiated by the survivors’ own words of progression and movement within the bereavement process.

Grace: They might have already gone down that path and be able to direct you. Can you give me some direction of where to go from here?

Abigail: We’ve both been down that road. […] Wondering what you are going to do next week and the next week. Something that nags at a person. I try to take it day by day.

Marianne: [You] need to know what stage they are in before you can help. Just like when I am teaching, you have to find out where the student is before you can move forward. You can’t say you are going to be on page 314 if they are on page 187. You can’t drag them along. And if they are on page 187, you have to be on page 187 and bring them from that point forward.

Kelly: All I can do is take one day at a time.

The survivors in my sample also emphasized the long-term nature of their grieving process. They described the process as being lengthy and without a definite end.

Sarah: I’ve been doing that for eight and a half years.

Harrison: You can look at the whole picture from the day that it happened till the day it is now. […] It goes on and on and on.

Throughout my dissertation, I use the word *journey* to describe the survivors’ attempts to navigate through their grief and move forward from the unsolved murder of their loved ones. It is important to recognize that this journey is not linear and the survivors often reported moments of digression. In Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 8, I will detail the findings from my study within the framework of this journey and the significant steps encountered along the way. Chapter 4 focuses on the initial reactions of survivors after the news of the murder. Major themes include shock, denial and blame. Chapter 5 examines how the families tried to move forward after the homicide. The themes in this section include grieving, coping, role of religion and remembering the victim. Chapter 6
explores the different effects the homicide had on the survivors’ pre-existing relationships with family and friends. Chapter 7 details the post-homicide relationships survivors develop with law enforcement, media, victim advocates and other homicide survivors. Chapter 8 examines the future anticipations for cold case homicide survivors. I believe this section is the most significant, as it encompasses experiences especially unique to cold case homicide survivors. This chapter will detail fear, hope for justice, confronting the offender and recommending a sentence. The final chapter, Chapter 9, is the conclusion. I discuss the overall survivor experience, implications, limitations, and future research. I also detail what my journey was like as a researcher who was able to share in the lives of such strong and incredible survivors.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

The Social Context of Homicide in the United States

Homicide is the willful (non-negligent) killing of one human being by another (UCR). According to the National Center for Health Statistics, 18,361 Americans were the victims of homicide in 2007. Homicide ranked as the 15th leading cause of death, comprising 0.8 percent of the deaths that year, at a rate of 6.1 per 100,000 people. Persons aged 15-24 were the most common age group affected by homicide, with a rate of 13.1 per 100,000 and were closely followed by victims aged 25-34, with a rate of 11.7 per 100,000. Homicide was the second leading cause of death for 15-24 year olds after accidents, and the third leading cause of death for 25-34 year olds, after accidents and suicide. Homicide rates differ significantly by race, currently as well as historically. Recent statistics indicate that compared with Whites, Blacks are almost six times more likely to be homicide victims; Hispanics are two and a half times more likely; and Asians are about twice as likely. In terms of gender, males are about four times more likely to be murdered than females (Xu, Kochanek, Murphy, & Tejada-Vera, 2010).

In Florida, 1,394 murders were reported to the police in 2007 (Xu, Kochanek, Murphy, & Tejada-Vera, 2010). The homicide rate for the state was slightly higher than the national average, with Florida reporting 7.6 murders per 100,000 people compared with the national rate of 6.1. Florida is frequently ranked in the top 10 most murderous states. To combat the growing problem in the state, then governor, Charlie Christ signed into law the 2007 Anti-Murder Act. This act sought to reduce homicide by

---

3 The 2007 death statistics gathered by the National Center for Health Statistics and published in an article by Xu, Kochanek, Murphy, and Tejada-Vera (2010) were the most comprehensive and detailed homicide rates available to date at the time this dissertation was written.
requiring violent felony offenders to remain in jail if they violate probation until the courts formally decide if the offender poses additional danger to the community. This act came in the aftermath of many highly publicized cases where children were murdered by known dangerous offenders released on parole. The governor stated: “Florida has already lost too many people, too early in their lives, […] The horrendous murders of children like Adam Walsh, Carlie Brucia, Jessica Lunsford, Sarah Lunde, and the six young people in Deltona remind us that we cannot continue to permit violent felony offenders who have violated the terms of their probation to have the opportunity to prey upon our people and our children” (Florida Department of Corrections, 2007).

Despite the tremendous focus of political leaders and law enforcement personnel, many homicide cases are never “solved” and hence punishment of the offender is never even an issue. Each year 39% of homicides nationally (FBI) and 40% of murders in Florida (Hargrove, 2010) are never “cleared” or solved by the police. The current study focuses on the family survivors of these homicides and more specifically those which the police have categorized as “cold.” Little research has focused on the nature and frequency of those cases, and equally importantly, little is known about the experiences of the family members of cold case homicides. A universal definition for a cold case homicide does not exist. Most scholars and law enforcement personnel agree that three elements contribute to the decision to officially declare an “uncleared” homicide as cold: the original detective has been reassigned or is no longer working the case; there are no promising leads or new sources of information; and the case is at least one year old and has had no activity for a year (Walton, 2006), and this is the definition I have elected to apply to this study. Although no official statistics exist to indicate the actual
number of cold cases, the decline in clearance rates over the past four and a half
decades has no doubt resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of cold case
homicides.

**Homicide Survivors**

The family members of homicide victims in general account for a largely
overlooked group of victims in our country. Estimates indicate that 5 million adults in
the United States have experienced the homicide of an immediate family member, 6.6
million adults have lost a close relative to murder and another 4.8 million adults have
had a close friend killed (Amick-McMullan, Kilpatrick, & Resnick, 1991). Given the
ambiguity in estimating exactly how many cold case homicides exist in the United
States, the precise number of cold case homicide survivors is also unknown. In the
absence of systematically collected data, estimates regarding the frequency of cold
case homicides are based on established homicide clearance rates. Murphy (1997)
suggests that for every homicide victim, there are at least four survivors. Using this
estimate, for the 18,361 homicides occurring in 2007, there would be an estimated
73,444 survivors. With current clearance rates of 61%, there is a risk that 28,643
survivors’ cases annually will eventually be classified as cold case homicides. An
estimation of nearly 30,000 survivors a year lends support for the need to better
understand the journey and needs of cold case homicide survivors. For the purpose of
my study, I have elected to define homicide survivors as the victim’s immediate family
members. According to Amick-McMullen et al. (1991 pg 551), immediate family
members include parents, children, spouses, siblings, grandparents and grandchildren
of homicide victims.
The act of homicide has historically been viewed as one of the most significant crimes. However, the rise of victim advocacy has only recently begun to acknowledge homicide survivors as victims of violent crime. Bard and Sangrey (1979) were the first scholars to recognize that the living survivors of a homicide victim may also suffer from victimization. While the literature on the subject is limited, several scholars have attempted to understand the experiences of homicide survivors. Two of the more commonly used frameworks within the sociology and criminology literature rely on grief studies and traumatic grief studies more specifically. Both of these were useful in my research for suggesting initial substantive areas to explore with my survivors and as a general framework for beginning to analyze my interview data.

**Literature on Grief and Bereavement**

After a personal tragic event or loss of a loved one, individuals go through many stages of grief. The grieving process varies for each individual, but there exist some similarities. For example, the grieving process is not linear in nature and does not have a predetermined, acceptable duration. Several established frameworks have emerged to explore the bereavement process, including general grief and traumatic grief theories. It is important to explore the major studies that have contributed to these two frameworks, as they lay the foundation for the current study.

Bowlby and Parkes (1961) were pioneers when examining the adjustment to bereavement. They developed a theory of grief that included four stages: shock-numbness, yearning-searching, disorganization-despair, and reorganization. The first stage of shock and numbness allow the surviving individuals to temporarily protect themselves from the overwhelming emotional response that is to come. Searching and yearning is a period in which the individuals struggle to let go of the deceased. Often
this period is characterized by anger, sadness and confusion. Disorganization-despair occurs in the stage where the surviving individuals withdraw and internalizes their emotional pain. The final stage in Bowlby and Parkes theory is reorganization. It is at this point the individual learns to resume a normal life without the deceased.

When studying terminally ill patients, Kübler-Ross (1969) utilized Bowlby and Parkes’ theory to describe the participants’ understanding of their impending death. The theory details five stages including denial-dissociation-isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Denial-dissociation-isolation occurs when individuals deny the event has occurred and isolates themselves to protect this belief. Anger is often marked by blame for the illness or death. The blame can be general, i.e. society, or specific, i.e. self or doctors. The bargaining stage occurs when individual seek ways to undo the event. Depression includes numbness that may mask lingering sadness and anger. The final stage of general grief is acceptance. The individuals are likely to experience a decrease in anger, depression and sadness. The acceptance phase will be complete when the individuals are able to acknowledge and accept the death. This theory has remained extremely popular when understanding grief after death and has previously been used by scholars studying homicide survivors (Clements & Burgess, 2002; Feldman Hertz, Prothrow, Stith & Chery, 2005)

Lamb (1998) introduced another grieving theory that describes four ways in which grief can manifest itself. These four manifestations include feelings, physical sensations, cognitions and behavioral disturbances. Lamb notes that patients will progress through an initial, intermediate and final level of grief. In the initial stage of grief, people postpone the bereavement process and the realization of their loss, a
phase that normally remains until after the formalities of a death (i.e. obtaining a death certificate and having a funeral). The intermediate stage occurs when survivors begin to emotionally face the death. They question their responsibility in the death, search for meaning in their loss and start to develop coping strategies, whether positive or negative. The final stage is marked by the realization that dwelling on the loss is futile and grief-stricken persons begin to move forward with their lives despite their loss. According to Lamb, identifying the stage of grief a patient is experiencing is vital to the bereavement process.

Homicide survivors are likely to display several components of traditional general grief patterns. However, the nature of the death must be acknowledged when examining the grieving patterns of survivors. Homicide is an unnatural, sudden and violent death. Therefore general grief stages do not provide a complete framework for examining complex homicide bereavement. The literature on traumatic grief offers additional insights.

**Literature on Traumatic Grief**

Several scholars argue that homicide survivors are more likely to suffer from elements of traumatic grief than traditional bereavement (Armour, 2002; Feldman Hertz, et al., 2005; Malone, 2007; Masters, Friedman, & Getzel, 1988; Rando, 1993; Rinear, 1988; Rynearson, 1984, 1988; Rynearson & McCreery, 1993). Spungen (1998) describes how traumatic grief can be characterized by both emotional and physical responses that affect the central nervous system and can shatter the basic assumptions survivors have established about the world in which they live. Recently, scholars have begun to study traumatic grief by comparing the bereavement process of survivors of sudden, traumatic deaths, including accidents, suicides, vehicular homicide and murder.
(Feldman Hertz, et al., 2005; Masters, et al., 1998; Murphy, Johnson, Wu, Fan & Lohan, 2003; Vessier-Batchen & Douglas, 2006). The studies all conclude that homicide survivors experience more intense and complicated grieving than other survivors of sudden death.

There are two sets of factors that predispose someone to traumatic grieving (Rando, 1993). A survivor is more likely to experience traumatic grief when the nature of death is sudden, involves a child victim, or the act can be viewed as preventable (Rando, 1993). Rando (1993) also reports that it is more likely one experiences traumatic grief if the survivor had a turbulent relationship with the victim prior to death or if they feel a lack of social support. These factors, in addition to the suddenness of the death, complicate the bereavement process and cause many survivors to deviate from the general grieving framework.

While the experiences may not be the same as the general grief framework, practitioners often utilize this framework to help survivors heal. Bereavement specialists have traditionally practiced under the grief assumptions that it is necessary to teach the survivors to release the bonds they once shared with the deceased, to discover a healthy lifestyle without the deceased and to develop new relationships (Rando, 1993). Miller (1999) warns that practitioners should not insist that survivors completely let go of their murdered loved one, as this in unrealistic and unachievable for most. Many survivors cannot fathom the idea of “letting go” of their loved one, as it would make them feel as though they have forgotten about the person who has been killed, causing them to feel increasingly lonely (Armour, 2002). Also, the grief framework assumes that there is a finite endpoint to grieving, while homicide research indicates that hurt is likely
to be ongoing and may never end for those left behind (Armour, 2002; Rando, 1993). Because of the ongoing nature of their grief, homicide survivors must learn to mask their emotions in order to continue a “normal” life. This fact is in direct contrast to the general grief framework that states a person must fully express their emotions and accept their loss in order to heal (Armour, 2002). In one study, parents who lost a child to homicide were least likely to express acceptance over a period of 5 years, when compared with parents who lost a child to accident and suicide (Wu, Fan & Lohan, 2003).

In reality, homicide bereavement can be categorized by alterations in belief systems, social stigma, insufficient experience with law enforcement and lack of social support (Armour, 2002). The death of a family member can cause someone to defy existing schemas about the world (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). Janoff-Bulman identifies three world views that are often challenged after a negative life event. “Benevolence of the world” explores the degree that people believe that good and bad events do occur. “Meaningfulness of the world” focuses on the extent to which people believe they have control over what occurs in their life. “Assumptions about self-worth” examines how people view themselves as good and cautious human beings. People must learn to change or maintain their beliefs about the world and themselves to begin to heal from a traumatic loss (Klass, 1993).

Basic assumptions people hold about the world around them are shattered when a homicide strikes a family. Most people believe that violence is something that happens to other people (Janoff-Bulman, 1985), so when a homicide occurs, the family members experience feelings of inability to remain safe, to protect their loved ones, and to trust others. This feeling is intensified for parents who may feel that they failed at protecting
their slain child and now question whether they can care for their surviving children and spouse (Rinear, 1985). People also believe that they have the ability to control events in their lives. Those who practice cautious and pure actions cannot make sense of homicide, as it violates the basic assumption that they actively avoided danger (Rinear, 1988). Survivors in this scenario often ask why did this crime happen to me? (Janoff-Bulman, 1985). Victimization of “good” people violates the assumption that we live in a “just-world” and that people get what they deserve (Janoff-Bulman, 1985). When a good person is murdered, it not only shocks the family but also causes the public to panic as they begin to believe that violence is a realistic possibility for all in the community.

Most homicide bereavement research is limited to the parents of murdered children, due to the fact that homicide is one of the leading causes of death for persons ages 5-34 (U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, 2009). Studying the parents of murdered children allows researchers to examine how the idea of self-worth is shattered when a homicide of a child occurs. In a similar study conducted by Matthews and Marwit (2004), the authors compare parents of accident victims with parents of homicide victims. The accident survivors were more negative about their ability to control the world around them while homicide survivors were more negative about themselves. The parents who survive their child’s murder tend to blame themselves and no longer feel valued as parents (Matthews & Marwit, 2004). The study also found that parents who experience the loss of a child by homicide are more likely than accident survivors to view the world as a malicious place (Matthews & Marwit, 2004; Wickie & Marwit, 2001). Others have stated that the parents of murdered children often focus on self-blaming techniques to prevent feelings of a hurtful world and lack of control over one’s
wellbeing (Rando, 1993). After experiencing a homicide, the parents will often ask “why me” and begin to seek meaning in their loss (Neimeyer, 1998), sometimes leading to roles of advocacy and support for other homicide survivors. Klass (1988) states that in the midst of finding meaning for our loss, survivors seek meaning in all their life events—both good and bad—now putting into perspective life without their loved one.

Intrusive emotions such as guilt, anger, and lack of trust are likely to plague survivors (Armour, 2002). In addition to emotions, behaviors such as frightening imagery, nightmares and hyper vigilance are also likely to manifest (Armour, 2002; Rynearson, 1995). Survivors, specifically parents, often seek to maintain a relationship or interact with inner-representations of the deceased, and therefore will experience hallucinations or link images/items to the deceased (Klass, 1993). In addition to the hallucinations, many survivors report painful reenactments of the death itself, trying to understand what their slain family member endured in his/her final moments. Even though some elements of psychological stress fade over time, certain events can trigger the pain to resurface and cause the survivor to feel as though the murder just happened. Some physical changes may include disturbance of sleep patterns, loss or gain of weight, headaches and increased shock reactions (Armour, 2002).

Regardless of who a traumatic death directly affects, the whole family suffers the traumatic aftermath. For many clearly defined roles are altered, causing parents to lose their confidence in their ability to parent (Miller, 1999), children assuming the parenting role, or fathers stepping in to serve as both mother and father and vice versa. A homicide can also cause a break in the bonds of the surviving family members (Miller,
Due to the stresses caused by the sudden death of a loved one, there is an increased risk of child and spousal abuse (Miller, 1999).

Children are left in a fragile position when they are the survivors of a homicide. In the case where the murder victim is a sibling, the surviving child might feel the pressure to retaliate against the perpetrator (Temple, 1997). Similar to parents, an older sibling will often feel responsible for not watching out for their younger sibling who was murdered (Temple, 1997). For other siblings, they may feel neglected by their parents who are fixated on the murdered sibling or feel that they should have been the child murdered, not their sibling. These feelings can cause further strain on the family dynamics and relationships.

Marital satisfaction is often disturbed when a family experiences a homicide. Compared with those who had lost a child to accident or suicide, homicide survivors rated their marital satisfaction to be the lowest over a five year period (Wu, et al., 2003). A break in a marriage can occur when one spouse holds the other spouse responsible for the homicide, even when the spouse is not involved in the murder. Stress on the marriage can also be contributed to the different grieving styles of men and women and the feeling that one’s spouse cannot fully relate to one’s own grief.

For traditional survivors (i.e. cleared cases), there is a constant fear that the murderer could be paroled or escape from prison (Armour, 2002). Through my interviews I found that fear for cold case homicide survivors is much different. For example, the survivors of a cold case do not know the identity of the perpetrator, and they often struggle with the idea that someone they know could be responsible for the murder. Also, some survivors are likely to fear that the perpetrator could return and kill
again. Clearly there are significant issues unique to the grieving process of cold case homicide survivors, based on the fact that they do not have an identified perpetrator. These unique experiences are detailed throughout the various chapters of my dissertation.

**Qualitative Studies of Homicide Survivors**

These previous studies informed many of the research questions included in my interviews and throughout my dissertation. In addition, a small collection of qualitative pieces on traditional homicide survivors offered particularly significant insights (Armour, 2002, 2003; Armour & Umbriet, 2006; King, 2004; Malone, 2007). Armour’s (2002; 2003) research with 14 families of homicide victims in cleared cases details the “meaning making” that these survivors experience in both an interpersonal and intrapersonal manner. Armour’s in-depth interviews focus on the idea of closure for homicide survivors and the results depict how survivors move forward with their lives after the murder and identification of the offender. In the process of trying to understand the meaningless nature of their loss, Armour found that survivors are often able to reprioritize important issues in their lives. In fact, her research shows that many survivors cope with their loss by serving as activists and helping others who are experiencing a similar tragedy. The cold case homicide survivors that I interviewed also expressed their desire to help others who are affected by homicide, specifically those whose cases remain unsolved. This concept is further discussed in Chapter 8: Post-homicide relationships.

King (2004) takes a unique approach to understanding homicide survivors by examining the experiences of 17 families of homicide victims in comparison to the families of death row inmates. King describes the similarities between these groups
including common grief emotions, such as anger and denial, and poor experiences with criminal justice personnel, such as a lack of compassion and honesty. Several recommendations are made by King, including specialized training for practitioners, to combat the dissatisfaction of surviving family members.

Malone (2007) reports on the results of in-depth interviews with 41 survivors and focus groups with practitioners involved in victim support, probation and policing. She identifies the emotional and practical aspects of the grieving process and the relationships with practitioners. Malone places a specific emphasis on the role of criminal justice officials in the bereavement process and explores their ability to meet survivors’ needs. Malone takes the stories of the survivors and practitioners to create guidelines for improving services for those affected by homicide, with the hopes of avoiding their re-victimization. Each of these studies provided guidance for my dissertation, providing a starting point for understanding areas in which cold case survivor experiences might be similar to or distinct from traditional homicide survivors.

In sum, various scholars have identified and described the grieving process that individuals undergo after the death of a loved one. While several studies have examined the ways in which homicide survivors experience this process and have noted the differences in their healing journey, almost nothing is known about the lived experiences of cold case homicide survivors in particular. Given the unique nature of their situation, research focusing on how these survivors experience their loss and navigate their lives after the murder is critical, especially in light of increasing uncleared homicides. The focus of my dissertation is to describe how cold case homicide survivors grieve and how their loss impacts their own lives and their relationships with
friends and family. In addition, previous literature has examined the relationship between survivors and practitioners, most notably the police. Again, this literature focuses on the relationship between survivors of cleared cases and the police. My research extends these findings by exploring the unique aspects of the interactions of cold case survivors with not only the police, but also bereavement and media personnel. Given the open-ended, ongoing nature of cold case investigations, describing the nature of relationships between these practitioners, and survivors and how the survivor feels about that interaction, are important topics to investigate.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH DESIGN

According to Creswell (2003), the grounded theory approach adopted in many qualitative studies allows the researcher to inductively develop a “theory” from their data. I elected to utilize this approach, gathering information by asking open ended questions of participants and then searching for broad patterns, generalizations, and themes in the data. These generalizations were compared across participants and previous literature in order to form general conclusions about the survivors’ stories. Rather than the deductive approach found in quantitative research, I chose qualitative methodology where I was able to develop “patterns” or “generalizations” from the survivors’ stories. Combined, these themes represent interconnected thoughts that relate to a complete picture and will eventually allow me to develop a theory that fits this collection of parts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I adopted grounded theory methodology to guide the collection and analysis of my data and will present my themes and findings within my dissertation.

Study Design

Sample

Considering the complex nature of bereavement and the sensitive nature of the topic, in-depth interviews were an ideal method for identifying and examining the experiences of cold case homicide survivors. Neimeyer (1998) explains how many individuals possess a desire to share their stories of loss and bereavement. When sharing their story, survivors are able to reshape their relationship with their lost love one and reorganize their life sequence, making it easier for them to put their journey into perspective and make meaning of their loss (Neimeyer, 1998). My research strategy
allowed the survivors to tell their stories in a nonthreatening and private manner. I identified survivors with the help of three sources: law enforcement personnel, bereavement groups and media outlets. Law enforcement officials from the local police department and sheriff’s office provided names of survivors in their cold case files. Advocates from two area bereavement groups also referred cold case survivors to participate in my study. Finally, I utilized the local television news station to acquire the names of homicide survivors featured in a cold case special and contacted the survivors myself. These organizations were open to my requests for particular participant characteristics that were of specific interest in my research. Gathering participants from different sources also assisted in developing a more diverse sample and helped to avoid biased results. For example, it is possible that the survivors provided by the police may have had different views of law enforcement from those gathered from bereavement groups. I tracked the source of referral to help assess the extent to which this may be true (See Table 3-1). I found that the referral source of the participants was not related to the relationship the survivors had with that organization. Instead, each referral source provided participants who had both positive and negative experiences with them.

Since creating generalizable results is not a goal of grounded theory, the representativeness of my sample is not critical. Nonetheless, my goal was to generate a sufficiently large and diverse group of participants. Informed by previous research, I incorporated four criteria to guide my selection of participants. First, the respondents’ relationship with the victim was an important characteristic to study. I limited the study to survivors who were immediate family members of the victim, defined as spouses,
parents, siblings, children, grandparents and grandchildren. I particularly wanted to
include grandparents as immediate family since grandparents have often been direct
guardians of the victim. By varying the relationship with the victim, I also generated a
sample that is comprised of both men and women. Gender is an important criterion
since previous research suggests that women are likely to grieve differently than men
(Schwab, 1996). Third, I sought to have a mixed race sample, including both whites
and blacks in the sample. Evidence suggests that grieving processes vary along
cultural lines (Rosenblatt, 2001) particularly in terms of family relationships and
experiences with law enforcement. Therefore, I interviewed survivors from diverse
racial/ethnic backgrounds, even though the numbers are not representative of the
population. Finally, the sample consists of participants involved in cases with varying
lengths of time since the murder. Previous literature states that the pain associated with
homicide bereavement is not elevated and does not fade with the passage of time
(Rando, 1993, 1996; Spungen, 1998). However, including survivors who differ along
this dimension enabled me to explore how passage of time impacts the grieving
process. In the event that a survivor asked for multiple family members to participate in
the interview process, I welcomed all interested family members to join the study.

My final sample consists of 24 cold case homicide survivors (n=24) from 15
different families. Six men and 18 females participated in the study. Men were much
more reluctant to discuss the homicide than women were, thus explaining the surplus of
women in the sample. 16 of the participants were white and eight were black. The
average age of the participant was approximately 50 years with a range of 18-74 years
and the average time since the murder was approximately 12 years with a range of 2-44
years. Included in my sample were ten parents (three fathers, seven mothers); nine siblings (three brothers, six sisters); two granddaughters; one grandmother; one daughter; and one wife. The participants varied greatly by household income, with nine reporting less than $25,000, three between $25,000 and 50,000, two between $50,001 and $75,000, two between $75,001 and $100,000, and three reporting more than $100,000. Five participants did not report a household income. Five of my respondents were single, nine married, six divorced and four widowed. Specific details of the participants, by interview number and details of the survivors’ demographics are detailed in Table 3-1. This table summarizes this demographic information as well as providing the families to which each respondent belongs and their pseudonyms that I will use throughout the presentation of my results.

**Interview Format**

In order to disassociate myself from any agency or organization, I personally contacted the survivors after being provided the relevant contact information. At the onset of each interview, a consent form (Appendix A) was provided to the survivor and included the option of having the interview audio taped or hand noted. After the consent form was signed, but prior to beginning the interview, the survivor was asked to complete a demographic questionnaire (Appendix B). Next the interview process began. A detailed skeleton of questions and topics can be viewed in Appendix C. At the end of the interview, I asked the participant for any concluding thoughts, memories and/or suggestions. Prior to leaving the interview, I provided the participant with a copy of the consent form and a referral form (Appendix D) which provides advocate contact numbers, useful websites, and appropriate books on grief for both adults and children. Due to the sensitive nature of the interviews, I gave survivors the opportunity to stop the
Interview at any time with the option to resume the interview at a future date. No survivors chose this option.

**Interview Questions**

The findings that emerged from my dissertation help scholars and practitioners better understand the lived experiences of cold case homicide survivors. Guided by traditional bereavement research and the few existing studies on traditional homicide survivors, my interview questions measured multiple dimensions of the survivor experience. Appendix C contains a complete list of questions. I began the interview by asking the survivors to tell me their story, specifically their experiences from notification of their loved one’s disappearance or death to the current time. These questions helped me gain a better understanding of how the responding survivors view their lives and the crime itself. The next major section of the interview asked survivors to reflect on their experiences with others, including their friends and family, law enforcement officials, bereavement specialists, and media personnel involved in the aftermath of their loved one’s death. For example, to understand the survivor’s relationship with police, I asked each participant to describe his/her feelings about and experiences with law enforcement prior to the murder; to describe the investigation of the case; to detail the current level of interaction; to explain how the police have impacted the grieving process; and to provide advice to both the practitioner and to other survivors. The third section of the interview involved the coping/grieving process. The questions were designed to understand how the violent death of a loved one affects the survivor’s sense of self; if and when the survivor sought counseling or formal therapy; and what types of physical and practical issues the death has created. The final section of the interview included miscellaneous questions. These questions allowed me to explore
issues such as self-blaming and letting go. I asked the survivors to express their level of confidence that the case will be solved, and to address the reactions they might have to meeting the offender, being in court, and recommending a sentence. At the conclusion of the interview, I offered each survivor the opportunity to share additional hardships, experiences or memories with me.

**Active Interviewing**

It is important to note that I approached each interview as a "social encounter", which allows the interview to be viewed as a place where reportable knowledge is constructed by one’s interactions with others and not merely gathered through neutral questioning (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004). My interviews went beyond just asking questions, and instead created a two-way dialogue, known as active interviewing. I recognized that I played a critical role in the interview process and my own behaviors would shape the data I was able to gather from the cold case homicide survivors. I began this study with the understanding that my population of interest was extremely vulnerable. Therefore, I focused on several goals to create an environment of trust, openness and care for each survivor.

Starting at the recruitment phase of my study, I approached the survivors with a sincere desire to hear their stories. Little is known about cold case homicide survivors and therefore, I informed my participants that they would be the experts on the subject. I specifically asked them if they would teach me about their experiences. I also emphasized that by allowing me to share their experiences with them, they would be aiding in research that could ultimately help others who find themselves in a similar situation. For many survivors this approach served as a rare moment when they had the ability to contribute to a significant project, were able to maintain control over their
stories and felt needed and recognized as important component of a cold case homicide. These feelings were in direct contrast with the fact that homicide survivors are often forgotten victims of crime. My thorough explanation of the study, and my emphasis on the important role they would play in the research, paved the way for a substantial qualitative sample of 24 individuals.

When scheduling the interviews, I focused on maintaining a system of flexibility. I was aware that revealing intimate details of grief and tragedy may be difficult for some survivors. Therefore, I wanted to assure the maximum comfort for each participant. To allow for such comfort, scheduling times, dates and locations were contingent on the survivors’ requests. I asked the survivors where they would like to meet, indicating I would travel to wherever they were most comfortable. For the majority of survivors this meant coming to their home, where they could openly share their emotions without scrutiny from others. However, for some the location was much more unique. For example, one mother had come to the area to meet with law enforcement and asked if I would be willing to complete the interview in her van. Another survivor asked me to meet her at her office after work, so that we could have a private area to meet. Others weren’t as concerned with privacy, as one participant asked me to meet for coffee and another survivor requested our meeting occur at a restaurant so that we could eat dinner together. I agreed to each of these locations without hesitation. Other families I met asked if they could participate in the study even if they lived out of town. For many families I traveled to their homes around the state. I even completed a few interviews over the phone for those individuals who lived out of state but were eager to share their stories. The meetings occurred at various times including weekdays and weekends,
early morning meetings and late night interviews. I believe the survivors recognized my willingness to be flexible and thus reciprocated by contributing large portions of time and energy to the study.

During the interviews, I was fully engaged in the survivors’ stories and was open to actively participating in the dialogue, both verbally and emotionally. I quickly became comfortable with the format of the interview, and after speaking with my first few survivors, the structured interview questions had given way to more natural conversations. The survivors often encouraged me to share my own personal experiences, feelings and beliefs with them, providing an opportunity to deepen the trust and the rapport we had already established. For example, Harrison was very hesitant to participate in the interview, beginning as a very closed off participant. In the middle of one of his responses, he asked me if I was religious. This was a topic I asked the survivors about, but I had not anticipated that they may also want to know the same intimate details about me. Recognizing his sincere interest in my personal stance, I shared with him my belief in a Christian God. In an instant, my relationship with Harrison changed. He began to open himself completely to the interview, noting that he was sharing things with me he had never shared with even his own family. His interview was one of the longest and richest within my sample, despite the initial hesitation on his part. In the end, he asked if he could pray for me and for the project. It was such a significant moment in my research. I realized how my own story allowed the survivors to identify with me, regardless of demographic differences such as gender and race.
I also recognized that I needed to be emotionally vulnerable throughout the interviews, careful not to dismiss my own reactions to their stories of pain and joy. The interviews had many moments of pain. In these instances, I allowed myself to cry with them, to hold their hand as they tried to compose their thoughts, or to hug them as we both wept. Ethan asked if he could read an excerpt from his journey about the night he found out his son was murdered. A few sentences into his reading, Ethan began to cry. He quickly apologized and tried to catch his breath. I told him not to apologize, and before I could finish my sentence, I too began to cry. Ethan, Sarah and I sat quite for a few moments until the emotional magnitude of the moment passed. Early in the interview, I had already found a deep, genuine bond with this family, and in return they went beyond the expectations of the interview. In addition to Ethan’s journal, the family showed me a poem that Robert (their son and the victim’s brother) had written and read at the funeral. Photo albums of the family were brought out and allowed me to witness the happiness they were still able to enjoy. In these moments, I was able to share their laughter and excitement drawn from the memories they had shared with their son before his homicide. I established these emotional bonds with many of the survivors, and in turn I believe was granted access to a more holistic experience of the survivors’ grieving process. Supplemental to the depth and personal nature of the stories, I was also invited to share the physical reminders of the victim, including the victim’s bedrooms, photo albums, poems, journals, letters and memorials that might have otherwise been missed in a structured interview.

I was very careful to maintain a nonjudgmental position when speaking with these families. The survivors’ stories were laced with a myriad of accounts where they felt as
if their opinions or beliefs weren’t being valued, they were frequently misunderstood or they were constantly being scrutinized for their actions. Not wanting to add to these feelings, I was very cautious to avoid any type of rebuttal or plausible explanations for their feelings. Instead, I made the goal of each interview to listen and to learn from the survivors. My ultimate goal was to truly understand how they perceived their experience as a cold case homicide survivor. This served as one of the key reasons survivors indicated they were eager to participate in the study. They recognized my desire to hear their story and appreciated that I did not try to evaluate their experience or correct their perceptions.

The process of active interviewing produced a fruitful study, with rich information and strong relational ties. I found that being a part of the interview was critical to gathering data from such a sensitive and vulnerable group of participants. Committing to an active interview equipped me with the necessary tools to gain the survivors’ trust and in turn gather information rich with details beyond what I had originally anticipated. The interview format allowed the survivors a platform to share their voice and be heard, thus making the interview extremely therapeutic to most. Finally, serving as an active interviewer provided personal growth, scholarly knowledge and a therapeutic environment for me as well: a result that was not expected at the onset of the study.

**Transcription**

I transcribed the interviews using a word processor. The interviews were transcribed word for word, including stutters, slang and verbally detected emotions (i.e. crying, laughing, etc). Trained undergraduate students assisted in the original transcription of the majority of the interviews. Once they had completed transcription, I reviewed each case by listening to the audio recording and following the transcript.
After correcting any errors, I again listened to the tapes to verify accuracy. Finally, I reviewed each interview immediately upon transcription, enabling me to note any emotions or body language that occurred during the interview process.

**Analytical Strategy**

**Grounded Theory Overview**

I elected to use grounded theory to analyze the data I gathered from the survivor interviews. Grounded theory does not contain formulaic procedures, and instead is extremely flexible and well suited for exploratory research (Charmaz, 2000). I selected this analytic strategy because it encourages researchers to use this analytic approach when attempting to gain knowledge about social justice inquiry (Charmaz 2005). My ultimate goal for using grounded theory was to develop, refine and relate the various concepts that emerge from the data (Charmaz, 2000).

Various approaches for grounded theory analysis exist. For the current project, I utilized Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory. Constructivist theory attempts to portray the multiple social realities experienced by study participants and aims to understand the information from the participants’ point of view (Charmaz, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Constructivist theorists assume a reflexive role and consider how the concepts and theories they have developed reflect their own experiences (Charmaz, 2006). The goal for a constructivist theorist is to explore and explain the complexities of a particular setting or group (Charmaz, 2006) while recognizing my own perspective and interpretation.

**Grounded Theory Process**

According to grounded theory, I performed data collection and analysis simultaneously (Charmaz, 2000). First, I coded the data as they were collected.
Coding allowed me to view the data from a new perspective and led the data collection and theory in an unpredictable direction (Charmaz, 2000). Some scholars criticize qualitative analysis due to the subjective nature of the interpretations. However, grounded theory called for me to embrace the way in which I influenced the interpretations of the data and how my personal interpretations shaped the forthcoming codes and major themes (Charmaz, 2000). The process involved with constructivist grounded theory allowed me to reflect on how my interpretations and the interpretations of the participants have influenced my conclusions.

Coding occurred in two phases: initial coding and selective coding. During initial coding I carefully examined the data line-by-line (Glaser, 1978) and assigned action codes to the data (Charmaz, 2000). Action codes allowed me to keep studying the data and to focus on what people were doing and feeling. At the initial coding phase, I worked to keep the codes tied closely to the data. These codes were preliminary and remained open to change ultimately allowing me to develop codes that best fit the data (Charmaz, 2006). Focused coding was the second phase of the coding process. At this phase the codes became more conceptual and direct than the initial codes (Glaser, 1978). By developing more narrow codes, I was able to condense the initial codes and create larger categories and segments of information (Charmaz, 2006). Similar to Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) axial coding, I utilized Charmaz’ (2006) recommendation by developing subcategories within major categories and examining the relationships between these concepts. Finally, I was able to go through the survivors’ stories and make comparisons and draw conclusions (Charmaz, 1983, 1995, 2000; Glaser, 1978, 1992) about the grief process the cold case homicide survivors experienced.
Throughout the process, I created memos and used them throughout my dissertation for multiple purposes. First, the memos allowed me to decompress and reflect on the interview process after each meeting. The memos also allowed me to make notes about question revisions and participant feedback about the process. Specifically, my first interview with Michelle allowed me to gauge my initial set of questions. Minor adjustments were made to the interview format based on my experience with Michelle. For example, she informed me that words such as loss and closure should be avoided when speaking with survivors. She also provided information that I had not specifically asked about in my questioning but appeared to be extremely important to her grieving process. Based on this interview, I altered my verbiage, eliminated select questions that did not generate conversation, and added additional questions that Michelle had inspired. Finally, the memos assisted in the analysis portion of the study. Relationships among the data, developed codes, participant meanings, and other information I deemed relevant were recorded in memos. It is important to note that memos are free-flowing and there are little procedural restrictions on their development or content (Charmaz, 2006). As memos are an intimate part of the research process, they will not be included in my appendix, subsequent writings or publications.

The remaining portion of my dissertation focuses on the personal stories of cold case homicide survivors. As mentioned previously in this paper, the intimate details, tragedies and triumphs that I heard throughout these interviews were analyzed in terms of each survivor's journey through grief. Every chapter will introduce a step along this journey, while recognizing that the path is not always linear. Chapter 4 details the
survivors’ initial reaction to the news of death. Chapter 5 is an examination of the survivors’ attempts to move forward. Chapter 6 presents the effects an unsolved homicide has on the survivors’ existing relationships with friends and family. Chapter 7 explores the post-homicide relationships that the survivors are exposed to, including other homicide survivors and homicide related professionals. Chapter 8 highlights the most significant and unique stage in a cold case survivor’s journey: the survivors’ hopes and expectations for the future, despite the years of unanswered questions and lack of a resolution in their homicide cases.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Number</th>
<th>Interview Number</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Participant/Victim Relationship</th>
<th>Years since murder*</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Mother/Son</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Sister/Sister</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Clara</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Sister/Brother</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Mother/Daughter</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Brother/Sister</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Father/Daughter</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Marianne</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>Granddaughter/Grandmother</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>Mother/Daughter</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Mother/Son</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Harrison</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Father/Son</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Ethan</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Father/Son</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Mother/Son</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>Sister/Brother</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Abigail</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Mother/Son</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>Grandmother/Granddaughter</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Katie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Daughter/Mother</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Gabrielle</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Wife/Husband</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Madelyn</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Mother/Son</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Sister/Brother</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Elliot</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Brother/Brother</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Sister/Sister</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Sophie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Granddaughter/Grandmother</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Sister/Brother</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Brother/Brother</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Law</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: F = Female; M = Male; W = White; B = Black; Group = Bereavement Group, Law = Law Enforcement, Media = News Media

*Years since murder is in reference from the murder date as of the date of interview
CHAPTER 4
INITIAL REACTIONS

With intense initial reactions, cold case homicide survivor’s journey of bereavement begins. When first notified of the murder, the survivors immediately experienced shock, describing how their world stopped in an instant. The shock seemed to provide a natural period of emotional numbness, a way of preparing the survivor for the emotional turmoil that would shortly follow. This initial shock and numbness shifted into a stage of denial, which in turn often served as a means for the survivor to postpone the finality of the death. As denial faded, many of the survivors expressed anger and blame. These emotions were directed at themselves, for not being able to prevent the homicide, or at others, including family members, related professionals and most significantly the unknown offender, for the circumstances surrounding their loved one’s death. While the general components of shock, denial and even anger mirror the grief process described in general bereavement literature, the unique situation of cold case homicide survivors made the meaning of these emotions and the way in which they were expressed quite different. This chapter describes the stages of shock, denial and anger as experienced by the cold case homicide survivors I interviewed.

Shock

Shock and numbness are typical responses to sudden traumatic loss (Asaro & Clements, 2005; Clements, DeRanieri, Vigil, & Benasutti, 2004; Rock 1998). In the event of a homicide, the loss seems to defy natural order (Raphale, 1984) and leaves the family of the victim with little time to emotionally prepare, collect themselves or come to peace with the idea of death (Rock 1998). The notification of a sudden traumatic
death causes a severe wave of emotions that can be overwhelming for surviving family members both emotionally and physically (Armour, 2002; Asaro, 1992; Asaro & Clements, 2005; Clements & Henry, 2001). Shock and numbness allow the survivors a chance to postpone the overwhelming emotions, slowly allowing themselves to experience the intense grief when they are ready. Lifton (1979) describes shock as a protective shield for survivors.

Participants in my study followed the pattern of shock described in the literature. The cold case homicide survivors told stories of shock and disbelief when they first received notification of the homicide. There was a clear pause in the reality of each survivor as they tried to comprehend the magnitude of this type of traumatic death.

Harrison: All of a sudden the world just came to an end and just stopped.

Sophie: Just shock. I think you are kind of just in shock in any kind of emergency like that.

Sarah: God put his arms around me once I’d heard... I started crying; I just couldn’t believe it. I felt the Lord’s arms go around me even before Glen did put his arms around me, but it was just... Isn’t it strange how you... I guess your mind just rebels.

Harrison received notification of his son’s murder when police officers knocked on his door. He was unable to fully understand the news of his son’s homicide. Instead, he said his life stopped as he tried to rationalize what the officer had told him.

Harrison: I had a knock on the door and it was two detectives, and they said, “We be sorry to inform you that he has been killed.” And I began asking them what happened, and he said he was shot in the head. At that moment my whole world just depleted. I just could not grasp a hold to believe this. I wanted to see him. They told me no, you don’t want to go. You don’t want to go around there. And then I was just in total shock.
Ethan and Sarah were also awoken early one morning by a knock on their door. A police officer told the family their son had been killed in the doorway of his apartment. Ethan was in disbelief.

Ethan: When I told the officer I was Ethan he said Devon (pseudonym) had been killed in Gainesville. I said that can’t be. I can’t say how I felt in that moment; I think in shock. I asked the officer how he was killed and he said he was shot. I couldn’t believe it.

Sarah remembered that morning very vividly. Her husband had not been the only one to experience shock. Sarah said that her younger son was most traumatized by the news of his brother’s murder.

Sarah: You know, anyway they told us, you know, asked us if we were the parents of Devon, and we said yes and my husband said yes and then they told us he had been shot and killed and of course you know we were in shock. Ethan asked them are you sure? My son’s in Gainesville, you know, trying to make the connect. At about that time our younger son came out of the bedroom and started to... Probably still 19. Anyway he just lost it; he kind of went crazy. He wouldn’t let the police officers in and he just kinda jumped on one of them just in disbelief.

Regardless of the way in which they heard the news, the survivors seemed to share their initial reactions of shock, numbness and disbelief. From these, denial seemed to be an emotion that helped them to delay the finality of their loss. This finding is consistent with literature on general grief as well as sudden traumatic death literature (Clements, et al., 2004), including studies on homicide survivors in general.

**Denial**

In the immediate aftermath of a homicide, families are faced with an emotional challenge of trying to make sense of a senseless death. In addition to shock and numbness, survivors feel denial. Rando (1993; 1996) found that failure to recognize a loss may complicate the general grief process. However, temporary denial may be healthy for survivors of sudden traumatic death. This natural avoidance of the reality of
death allows the individual to gradually accept the event when they are able, experiencing the feelings of loss in a style that is more manageable (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005). Similarly, in these cold case homicides, many of the survivors did not want to accept the idea that their loved one had been taken from them so suddenly and due to such tragic circumstances. Their feelings of denial mirror general grief survivors but were expressed in unique ways. For some families in my sample, there was a period of time when the victim was missing or failed to return home. In these cases, the survivors often tried to rationalize where the person might be and why they had failed to communicate with the family.

Nancy: [On the way to victim's home] I was looking at all the cars and I everything that was going in my direction and the other direction and I kept saying, where is she, where is she? Is she in the trunk of that car? {…} And you're thinking that maybe by the time I drive from Tampa to Gainesville, she'll be there. And everything will be fine.

Mark: I was assuming, I mean I was scared, but I assumed that she had gone off and partied at some friend’s house and fell asleep or some logical explanation.

Emily: {…} Heather (pseudonym) was a very punctual type of person and a very reliable person. She wasn't one to not call and say either something happened or she'll be delayed. I just thought that she did something or just forgot to call or something like that […]

Madelyn: My kids keep saying “it wasn’t him mommy. It was somebody else.” My son said “you know how dad said he has to work so we can have money… that is what he is doing.

When the death was confirmed, some survivors said that initially they believed the homicide could not have happened because they had just seen or spoken to their loved one. One brother described the initial anger at the police who were notifying the family of the murder. His recent communication with his brother made it difficult to understand and accept the news from the detectives.
Robert: The night that he was killed he gave me a call and we talked, because Devon was coming home and we were making plans to hang out and do some stuff while he was down. That was about it. I talked to him, got some stuff together, told him I loved him and let him go. Two police officers showed up at my house and they just knocked on the door, it was 12:30 or 1 o’clock and regretted to inform us… we were used to knocks like that because my brother and I were always getting into trouble. Knocks on the door were always bad. But we were all just thinking, what did he do, what did he get himself into this time? We knew it couldn’t be too bad because I had just talked to him. They told us that he was killed. My initial reaction was to call the cops liars and they are idiots. I just talked to him. You don’t know what you are talking about. To be local [police] and not in *** [Town where murder occurred] it was just too weird and I didn’t believe them, of course. But then, once it set in, why else would they come to my house?

Other family members tried to rationalize the homicide by convincing themselves that the news of death was incorrect. These survivors described how they initially tried to convince themselves that there had to be some sort of misunderstanding.

Madelyn: So I called her [daughter-in-law] phone and she said “He’s dead” and I said “no Robyn” They said he had gotten shot but I didn’t think it was anything drastic.

Kayla: He [police officer] was like “you can’t go over there” and I was like “what’s going on?” Then I could kind of see this white sheet on the ground. I just fell to the ground. It was not my brother on the ground.

Julia: So I’m like “Oh no, no, no, no, no.” So I jumped in the car and I remember travelling down 295 going “No, no no, they had mistaken him for someone else” you know and “This isn’t real, this isn’t happening…you know no, no, no, no.”

If the survivor did immediately acknowledge that something had happened to their loved one, they often thought it was more probable that their loved one was severely injured and not dead. One mother was immediately advised to stay at home, despite her desire to want to go see her son. In our interview, she described the deep regret she lives with for not immediately going to the crime scene and holding her son. She wonders if her touch might have given him the strength to survive.
Julia: And I wanted to go to the hospital because they said one person was in the hospital fighting for their lives. Well in another incident. And I just switched that in my mind to him. And I said "well let me just go to the hospital let me just go" and I’m hollering and screaming and no one would let me go to the hospital so we sat there for seemed like eons. And um people started coming over. And I just couldn’t believe it still. And I wanted to see him. You know for myself, and they said no you can’t go you can’t go. Because he was shot, in the head and in the abdomen, so you know they were thinking you know it would have been too gruesome for me to see him. But you know I didn’t care. I didn’t care I wanted to see him. I really wanted to see him. I wanted to see him before he became very stiff. To see that he truly was dead. Because my faith was so great was if I can just get to him and call his spirit back. I couldn’t go I couldn’t go. They wouldn’t let me go. They wouldn’t let me go. So you know we sat there and you know everybody is coming over, and wanted to know if it was really real. And we told them yes. And we just sat there just staring. Because I was like. No no no no.

The news of death is overwhelming and for most homicide survivors a noted feeling of despair ensues. Acknowledging the loss means acknowledging a life without the victim. The finality of accepting the murder was particularly difficult and was articulated as a painful experience by multiple families.

Harrison: Then comes the realization that he is gone and that you got to go on, but part of me died right along with him.

Madelyn: I didn’t want to go to the funeral home. It was just dealing with the realization of what was happening.

Gabrielle: It is like I am in denial. I am not in denial, I know he is dead and he isn’t coming back. But dealing with it, is hard.

Once the initial shock and denial of the homicide fade, reality begins to emerge. The survivors’ emotions often develop into anger.

**Anger**

While anger is part of the normal grieving process, the guilt and blame that emerge after a homicide are both extreme and severe (Kashka & Beard, 1999). As the reality of the death sets in, homicide survivors struggle to find order, an explanation and
a sense of control. Previous literature on homicide survivors whose cases are solved describe how feelings of anger are directed at the offender. The unique difference for my survivors is that they do not have an identified perpetrator or whom to focus their anger, nor do they have all of the details of the death. They struggle to uncover an understanding of the murder, despite the missing pieces. Sometimes this desperation and anger manifests as guilt and blame. For the cold case homicide survivors I interviewed, anger was directed at four common sources: themselves, other family members, the victim, and professionals.

**Guilt/Self Blame**

Survivors of a traumatic sudden death are likely to develop an “only if” or “what if” reaction (Burgess, 1975; Kashka & Beard, 1999; Rock, 1998). This question is often answered with personal responsibility on the part of the survivor. Parents of homicide victims are particularly vulnerable to self blame and feelings of guilt. According to Rando (1996), the murder of a child is one of the least expected events in life. Parents are supposed to outlive their children, and when this does not happen, parents often assume the responsibility for their child’s death. For some parents, the guilt is a manifestation of their perceived inability to protect their child (Gyulay, 1989; Knapp, 1986; Masters, et al., 1988; Rinear, 1988). Rinear (1988) states that parents often believe that there is some action they did retrospectively which allowed the murder to occur in the first place. Several parents I interviewed expressed such initial feelings of guilt for their child’s death.

Clara: If only we had moved to Gainesville because when they were getting divorced and things were getting difficult, she had never worked, and then they had three kids, and then she was gone. […] If I had moved, none of this would have happened.
Anna: [I blame myself] everyday. Like if I had kept her from running away from home. She was only ten months younger then I was. I would have been able to keep her closer to me. I blame my dad, but now that he is dead I kind of pick up the slack and blame myself.

Emily: Sending her down to Florida, that’s for sure. Made a big mistake. She was insistent on coming down there. I’m not that familiar with the demographics there in that area. I probably should have got very familiar. I think every parent should really study a town. You know, where their child has decided to go to school. I was just very, I guess, naive myself.

Rebecca: [I feel guilty for] Buying that place over there, because that’s where she was killed. Yeah that’s just one thing you have to remember God forgives you so you have to forgive yourself.

Children and siblings of the murder victim also assumed some sense of guilt and responsibility for their loved one’s homicide. One mom described how her son had a desire to change places with his deceased sister, stating it would have been a different scenario if he had been the older child.

Emily: My son was sort of saying to me, if only I had been born before Heather had been born. If I had been the oldest and she the youngest, that would have made a big difference.” But that is not the way God wanted it.

Another brother felt as though his inability to be with his brother was the cause of his death. He contemplated how spending more time with him or trying to convince him to do something else that day could have saved his life.

Elliot: I wish I had been there. I just wish he hadn’t gone around there. What if we had talked a little longer? I haven’t really forgiven myself.

A granddaughter fixated on the idea that she should have had her grandmother move closer to the rest of the family. Due to her age, the granddaughter insisted her grandmother was defenseless, and if she had not been left alone, she might still be alive.

Marianne: I should have got her to come to Alabama and live because she was 72.
Researchers who have examined homicide survivors note the consequences of this type of blame. In some regards, the self-blame component of homicide grief can be helpful. Self-blame might allow survivors to feel an increased sense of control, order and predictability while decreasing their own feelings of personal vulnerability (Masters, Friedman, & Getzel, 1987; Rinear, 1988). However, these feelings of self-blame can also be detrimental. In severe cases the survivor's feelings shift from being a contributing factor in the victim's death, to being the primary cause of the murder (Masters, et al. 1987). This self-blame can intensify when the survivors perceive the actions and comments of others to confirm or substantiate their guilt. This perception often causes the survivors to distance themselves from others. If not treated, self guilt can be one of the largest contributors to lack of advancement in the healing process (Parkes, 1993).

In an effort to make sense of a senseless death, survivors of traditional homicide often seek to blame someone else for the tragedy. Weinberg (1994) found that the majority of survivors blame both themselves and others. Consciously blaming others can help to alleviate or displace the self-blame and guilt the survivor felt immediately following the murder. Blaming someone else for the homicide also establishes an explanation for the death, allows the survivor to reestablish control, and can aid in the restoration of personal trust and security (Burgess, 1975). The cold case homicides survivors I spoke to were similar in that they often directed their anger by assigning blame to other family members, the victim and professionals in the case.
Blaming Other Family Members

Anger against others can manifest into blaming close family members for the victim’s murder (Masters, et al., 1988). Often in a strained family situation, parents will turn against each other in an effort to make sense of the crime. Given the nature of cold case homicides, anger is sometimes expressed not only for the death but also for the inability to find an offender. One divorced set of parents clearly placed a large responsibility for the death and lack of progress in the case on each other. One mother believed the father had exposed their daughter to a dangerous lifestyle, which ultimately would place her in the situation that ended her life.

Nancy: I truly believe that Mark had something to do with Christina’s (pseudonym) disappearance. He exposed her to drugs. I had some prescription drugs from a bad car accident, but she never took my stuff. He exposed her to drugs. His ex had cocaine in her when she died. The only thing she never confided in me was drugs. I truly believe that what he exposed her to, killed her.

The father felt little blame for the death of their daughter, but did blame his ex-wife for the failure of progress in the case.

Mark: She was giving out stuff she wasn’t supposed to do. She cleaned out Christina’s apartment which was a huge mistake. It could be… And even DNA wasn’t a big a deal then, but it could have been anything. Fingerprints, anything.

Existing literature on homicide in general suggests that the spouse or former spouse of a homicide survivor is most likely to be the familial target for anger and blame. The likelihood that a spouse will be blamed for the death increases if the accused spouse has publicly displayed feelings of guilt and responsibility. The accusatory nature of this spousal blame can cause alienation, increased distance between the family members and disruption to the parenting skills of both parents (Rinear, 1988).
Blaming the Victim

It is not uncommon for homicide survivors to blame the victim for their death. Anger towards the victim grows as the survivor discovers ways in which the victim’s behavior may have contributed to the murder. Several scholars argue that homicide victims can contribute to their own death through their behavior, personality and lack of adjustment (Avison, 1973; Gelles, 1987; Morris & Bloom-Cooper, 1967; Rock, 1998; Wolfgang, 1967). Survivors sometimes use victim blaming in their quest for peace. When a survivor blames the victim, it provides a sense of moral justification and helps answer the overwhelming question of ‘why’ the homicide occurred (NOVA, 1985; Rock, 1998). The cold case homicide survivors in my interviews expressed blame towards the victim by questioning how the victim’s behavior or the choices they had made prior to the homicide placed them in a vulnerable situation that resulted in murder.

Michelle: One of the things I used to say is “What could he have done to make somebody that mad at him to do that?” and then I had to realize that, that just probably wasn’t it. You know? But, that, that was one of the things that I could think of to help me to deal with um, on one end knowing that there was a person that was evil and then, you know, wanting to make Seth (pseudonym) be responsible for his murder and being angry with him. Um, why did you open the door?

Mark: A lot of people that are victims put themselves, Christina did it, put themselves in a position that in those days didn’t seem to be such a big deal. If that had been broad daylight that probably wouldn’t have happened. So it just, sometimes you put yourself in even moderate harms way and bad things happen.

Michelle: How do I know what my son did that they ended up taking his life, that he didn’t do it to protect us, cause he knew that we didn’t have anything to defend ourselves with. If he had come back to where I was, I wouldn’t have cared if they had threatened to blow up the, burn up the house or do whatever. We would have all made it out of there.

Abigail: But the friends he chose was going to be the death of him.
Victim blaming is natural and is often short lived. For the cold case homicide survivors it serves as a temporary relief from self-blame. My interviews suggest that the anger displayed towards the victim most often eventually shifts to professionals involved in the case.

**Blaming Professionals: Law Enforcement and Media**

The safest target for a survivors’ anger and guilt can be society, specifically focusing on professionals who play a role in a homicide investigation and trial (Masters, et al., 1988; Rinear, 1988). In traditional homicide cases the blame may also shift quickly from one’s self, others and the victim to an identified suspect. The family shifts their focus to the perpetrator in the case and prepares for a resolution in the form of formal justice. However, the experiences of the families I interviewed are significantly different from traditional homicide survivors in this regard. At the time of the interview, no perpetrator had been charged in the case. Therefore, the blame associated with the event lingers and begins to shift.

Robert: I don’t think anything was handled well. Really it was all awful. I think that is why these cases end up this way.

The cold case homicide survivors here most commonly directed their criticisms towards the police and forensic technicians for the failure to identify a perpetrator and make an arrest in their case. Three distinct contexts of blame were applied to law enforcement officials including failure to respond to the scene of the crime, failure to collect/preserve evidence, and failure to investigate leads in the years following the murder. In addition to the police, some survivors expressed anger towards the media, charging that the lack of media coverage and the negative portrayal of the victim were detrimental to solving their loved one’s murder.
**Failure to respond**

Cold case homicide survivors noted that police were often slow to respond to the initial report of a crime. It was a common perception that the officers could have provided a more rapid response to the crime scene, thus leading to a more effective investigation. Some families reported that this delay in response might have allowed the suspect to 'get away with murder.'

Elizabeth: After he was killed I became very upset. He was killed at... He was stabbed at 2:30. I got on the scene at 4 o'clock, a few minutes before. There was no helicopter in the air. There was no dog on the scene. And, well now it makes sense because he left in a car and they wouldn't have done any of that I guess.

Emily: Officer Roberts came to the apartment and then he said to us at the time that he could not put out a missing report, I believe for, I don't know how many hours. I forget what he said. I thought it was 48. And we tried to insist on his starting something with a search because it was just out of character for Heather to do something like this and here it's already Monday afternoon. And I'm sure by that time, she would have called unless something happened. And then that was Monday and I don't believe they really started a large search until Tuesday. That something like this, there's something wrong. Anyway, I don't think it was Tuesday until he started a full investigation.

Abigail: I don't think the reaction was done fast enough. And I think, that could be true because this side of town gave them so much problems you know, because it is an area where you have a lot of drugs and stuff over the southwest side of town. I think they just took their time to get there, because they have so many problems. At that area.

Kayla: We were there for about 15 minutes before the police came. Now when we are just hanging out, we have about 10 police coming around, just harassing us for no reason. But here Miles (pseudonym) go get gunned down and you didn't hear nothing, you can't find nothing, no car. What's going on? Sometimes I feel like the police are scared to get involved. It shouldn't have taken them more than 3 minutes to get over here. They was right there.

The overwhelming feeling expressed by survivors was a lack of concern for their loved one. It was a common perception among cold case homicide survivors that certain
areas of town, certain types of victims and certain crimes were not of importance to law
enforcement officials. This slow response was identified by the survivors as one of the
major reasons their case was now cold.

**Failure to collect or preserve evidence**

Another source of frustration and blame arose out of the survivors’ belief that law
enforcement officials had failed to collect and preserve critical evidence in their case.

Without proper evidence, a homicide is difficult to solve and prosecute. The lack of
evidence in the cold case homicides was sighted by my survivors as one of the reasons
the case remained unsolved.

Emily: Her body was brought to the Medical Examiner’s Office and hosed down. I
have no idea whether little pieces of, articles or whatever was taken off of
her body. I have no idea whether or not that was ever done or whether
somebody who worked in the Medical Examiner’s Office just hosed her
body down because it was covered in dirt. And grass and so on. I have no
idea if that was mistake of the Sheriff’s Office or the Medical Examiner’s
Office to have hosed her body down. And then whatever they did take
from her body, swabbings, was sent to a laboratory and what happened is,
in the lab, I think it was Jacksonville, the slides were contaminated. This
really bothered me because, actually one obstruction after another was
occurring.

Emily: Again, this is how I'm looking at it, as the victim's mother. You know, this is
how I'm perceiving what happened. There was a great deal of obstruction.
And things are not being done the way they should have been done. And
then I'm told that there was very little semen or sperm or whatever, left
because of the contamination.

Rebecca: I don't think the police gave the case enough attention, or they didn’t really
gather enough evidence. They didn’t. Chris (*pseudonym*) was their only
suspect. They were hoping when they put him in person he would tell
another person. But he didn’t.

Abigail: Like looking for the bullet. It looked like they [the police] were looking
down on the ground, you know. But what happens if the bullet was up in a
tree. I don’t see anyone looking up they all running down. All bullets don’t
land on the ground.
Elizabeth: But, and then 45 minutes after I arrived on the scene, it poured down and rained. So anything that they were going to get, and I mean, it rained so hard that day. It was unbelievable. So anything that they might have or could have found got washed away.

According to many of the survivors critical evidence at the scene was not collected early in the investigation. Subsequently, evidence that had been gathered was not preserved or treated properly. Therefore, survivors blamed law enforcement for their inability to gather the necessary evidence to apprehend a suspect.

**Failure to investigate**

The survivors also commonly blame the police for a failure to investigate potential leads. When tips were reported to police, families reported that the police failed to follow up on the information. Frustration grew as the families recognized the opportunity to solve the case might have been compromised.

Mark: We were looking at a lead where they claim she was buried in this barbeque pit, and there’s an apartment building on top of it. And that apartment building was built 3 years ago, that pissed me off. That lead has been there for years. And if somebody had just followed it up then you could have dug up that pit and seen if it was a real lead or not. Now we’ll never know. So, yeah, there’s, you know, I guess on the flip side of it, my police story, I’m frustrated that that didn’t happen sooner.

Survivors were aware that many cases are solved when witnesses are willing to share information with law enforcement. However, they felt that the police had failed to reach out to potential witnesses.

Gabrielle: I don’t trust them [the police]. You have to be persistent. Somebody’s going to jail. I feel like they had enough information and I feel like they could have done went and talked to those boys. They talked to one, and I know that one said he needed a lawyer, and you don’t need a lawyer when you’re innocent.

Gabrielle: One thing about detectives, you have good detectives that get out there and talk to people. The one on Mile’s case would ask and then say okay. The one on Bryan’s case got his ass out there. He went out there and
got an arrest. With Mile’s they are like, “Yeah, I did this and this.” You aren’t putting the fire under his ass.

Kayla: That is the reason why a lot of the cases don’t get solved. They aren’t out their asking the people they need to ask.

Elliot: My thing is they know everything that is going on and they’re not doing nothing. Nobody stepping in, nobody trying to lock anybody up. They just like “let them kill each other. We’re not going to do anything, and just let them kill each other.” Why isn’t anyone out there, trying to pull in these two sides and try to get to the bottom of this?

Some of my cold case homicide survivors reported performing their own investigations into the case, feeling as if they had developed possible leads. Upon reporting this to law enforcement, they felt their information had been dismissed or viewed as a waste of the officer’s time.

Ethan: Well… we told them some things, they didn’t follow up on it and that just kind of bothered me. Why wouldn’t they… if we thought we knew something why would they not investigate it?

Grace: I am giving them names… I told them who I thought it was and they didn’t even go interview them. He is still sitting in jail right now. Doesn’t make me feel very good or make me trust the judicial system.

Many family members interpret lack of communication and progress updates from law enforcement as a failure to investigate the case or listen to the family. Some survivors’ perceived law enforcement as being secretive and believed they often withheld important information.

Nancy: All their actions show that something is not right.

As communication decreases, the hope for a solution in their cases also declines, which in turn causes frustration and ultimately anger towards the police. To these survivors, their loved one’s case is often their primary focus. When the police fail to openly communicate the same level of commitment and concern, the survivors
described entering into this cycle of frustration. However difficult their relationship with the police is, however, the survivors in my sample often set aside their personal frustration to focus on finding a solution to their case. I will explore issues related to communication with police further in Chapter 7: Post-Homicide Relationships.

**Inadequate coverage**

In addition to the feelings of anger towards law enforcement, my respondents also expressed anger towards the media. Here, their feelings were conveyed as frustration with the minimal or negative coverage of the homicide. Families blamed this lack of attention or negative coverage as another factor in the failure to reach a resolution in their case.

Robert: They didn’t dive into anything. They didn’t even interview us.

Abigail: I just felt like I needed more, more coverage done. And more talked about, something else done. Yea a lot of people don’t know that he is dead. So yea there should have been a lot of media coverage there should have been a lot more done. There should have been, you know. They didn’t investigate a whole lot. If you ask me.

Rebecca: [The media never ran a follow-up story] I don’t think they were trying to solve it. I really don’t.

Marianne: Nobody from the press interviewed anybody. Never. And just kind of gave it short shrift, I guess would be the phrase, that she was just some old reprobate that ran a tavern out in the woods and that was it.

Grace: I don’t think they emphasized enough on the suspect. They just said tall black man wearing a blue jersey. That is half the people over there. They had no description of his bicycle. There was a witness that had seen him, so why didn’t they ask this witness to come forward and give more information.

Grace: I don’t think they gave it as much attention as they should have. Still, they could give it more attention even now. They tend to want to do a rush job.

Michelle’s words highlighted many of the survivors’ feelings regarding negative coverage. She noted that the media should be conscious “not to defame the victim or
say things that bother them that could lead to things never solving their case.” Other family members expressed similar sentiments that when the murder victim is portrayed as a deviant or criminal themselves, the negative image in the media lessens the public's desire to assist in the investigation.

Anna: I think because she had a criminal record and that she was a prostitute and a drug user that they put her on the back burner. You know? That’s one less crime happening today. That’s how they made me feel and that was pretty much the very first article I read in the newspaper. Or that’s how the writer of the newspaper felt it.

Anna: People see local prostitutes murdered they are really not going to turn in their brother or cousin for doing it. Who is going to turn in criminal for turning in another one?

Marianne: She was just some old reprobate that ran a tavern out in the woods and that was it.

Rebecca: She was a dancer…so what? ...sometimes they say, “No humans here” after a girl’s killed, because she was a prostitute or…”Somebody did the world a favor.”

The survivors often felt that the media had a lack of concern for their case. Many believed their case had been neglected due to the minimal coverage it received. Even more bothersome to the survivors were the cases in which the media published defamatory information about the victim. Despite the personal emotional turmoil caused by negative media coverage, the survivors pointed out that they continued to maintain a relationship with media professionals because they considered them potentially influential in helping to resolve their case. Similar to the relationship they experienced with law enforcement, the survivors carefully balanced their personal pain with this dependence on media assistance. This complex relationship will be further explored in Chapter 7: Post-Homicide Relationships.
Conclusion

The cold case homicide survivors display immediate emotional responses that are typical of general grief, including feelings of shock, denial and anger. However, unique to their experiences is the intensity, manifestation and duration of these emotions. Murder is an unnatural and sudden traumatic death. The subsequent shock and denial that occur for homicide survivors serve as fundamental components of the healing process, guarding the survivor from the overwhelming and devastating reality of the violent death of their loved one.

As the shock and denial fade, survivors are left to cope with the reality of the homicide. To help manage the grief, survivors often turn to anger. Again, cold case homicide survivors in my study seem to develop a unique blame schema. In addition to blaming themselves, the victim and other family members, they often find a target for long-term blame. Existing literature on cleared-case homicide survivors describes how these family members typically direct their anger and blame toward a perpetrator. An identified offender provides a specific name and face toward which anger can be focused and responsibility assigned for their loved one’s murder. In the absence of this person, the survivors in my study seemed to direct their anger towards those responsible for solving their case. The lack of justice they feel demands answers, and for these survivors, related professionals are often to blame for the open-ended status of their homicide case. Whatever it be due to, inadequate or ineffective investigation or insufficient or misleading media coverage, the survivors I spoke to often targeted the police and reporters as significantly to blame for the failure to apprehend a suspect. The general feeling among many survivors was that law enforcement and the media showed a lack of concern for their case. This ambivalence among those responsible for
finding their loved one’s murderer elicits anger, a feeling which has remained consistent since the time of the homicide for the majority of survivors in my sample. While anger towards the victim often fades, the feelings of self-blame and anger towards professionals appear to be a long-term issues throughout the grieving journey. Without the arrest of an offender, these emotions seem unlikely to dissipate.

Despite these continued feelings of anger, cold case survivors expressed dedicated efforts to move forward with their lives. While many described moments of optimism, facilitating events, and helpful relationships in their journey, most also conveyed significant obstacles to their ongoing grief. Chapter 5 describes the survivors’ attempts to move forward.
CHAPTER 5
ATTEMPTING TO MOVE FORWARD

When the initial shock and denial end for survivors of homicide, the long and difficult journey of moving forward begins. During this time, survivors find ways to accept the murder, continue to grieve, and try to deal with the loss. Practitioners have several formulaic ways to assist victims of crime, and often approach “co-victims” with similar step-by-step methods of dealing with tragedy. However, through my interviews, I learned that there is little consistency in how the survivors of homicide grieve their loved one’s absence and cope with the death. Each individual acknowledged their readiness to heal and their personal needs in unique ways. Paul captured this theme when he stated, “There’s no right way to handle it.” Nonetheless, as they reflected on this part of their journey, many of my survivors expressed some common emotions and experiences in their efforts to “move forward” after their loved one’s death.

As their words suggest, the journey is not an easy or simple one, with many unforeseen obstacles as well as frustrating events experienced along the way. Again, one of the most significant aspects of my survivors’ stories is the complex nature involved in the “moving forward” part of the journey. Some of the very same events experienced as obstacles to some of my survivors were healing events to others. This chapter focuses on the various methods of coping and the many experiences encountered on the survivors’ path to healing. The major themes within this stage of grieving include feeling judged; coping through different methods; and the physical and emotional side effects that appear on the survivors’ journey. The chapter concludes with the survivors’ stories of memorializing their loved ones in the aftermath of the homicide. Importantly, the survivors’ stories reiterate the idea that their journey is not
linear: their testimonies describe their movement forward in the healing process, but also impediments and setbacks encountered along the way.

After any type of loss, many grief theories argue that the first step in moving forward is accepting the death. Acceptance does not mean that the individual should fully understand or be at peace with the act of murder, but they should recognize that the death is final and that their loved one is gone. Harrison discussed his struggle with accepting his son’s death.

Harrison: As long as I was in that [denial] it was like I ain’t letting go of him, and then when I came out of it it’s like wow, I’ve let go of my child. I want to go back; I want to go back into my place of comfort. I can enjoy him in the realness of it. But being out from that, I can talk to him, be with him, feel him, and know that he’s alright, and... the devil lied to me in there telling me if you get out of here he’s dead. He’s really dead. Then you let go of your child; you never did love him, you don’t care. But here the process took place and now all those lies... I enjoy him, I talk to him... But before that I was afraid to be happy; afraid to talk about it... Afraid of that... it means to me that he’s no longer with me because I’m talking about his death. I’m talking about he’s gone. He’s not here no more, but if I could stay in that time zone where I was I kept him alive in my head. And he feels... the first thing he’s going to get is guilt. Because the man’s healing now. He wants to live again.

Harrison’s struggle with acceptance was due to his belief that accepting the death would be letting go of his son forever. There is a common fear of forgetting a person and neglecting his/her memory if progress is made to resume a life not centered on pain. However, Harrison found strength and power with accepting his son’s death. He stated that he is able to talk to him now and focus on positive memories he had about his son. The initial guilt he felt had faded, and he expressed that he finally felt that he was able to begin the healing process.

Harrison’s ex-wife and close friend, Julia also found it difficult to grieve. In the months immediately following her son’s death, she attempted to focus on the possible
explanations for the homicide. Overtime, she recognized that her efforts to rationalize the murder were fruitless and her energy needed to shift to her own healing.

Julia: Where I am now with losing my son, I’m actually tired of hurting. I’m actually tired of mourning his lose. I’m actually tired of saying why did he live that way? Why, why, why? So God sat me down one day. He had me to read the book of Job. Chapters 1-5 concentrate on the fourth chapter 12th verse through the 5th chapter. Once I read that and meditated on that, I had to accept my healing.

Grief Judgment

Murder is an unnatural, complex and tragic type of death. Such is the grieving process the survivors experience when trying to charter through the acceptance of the death of their loved one. From my survivors’ stories, it is clear that there is not a right or wrong way to grieve. For some survivors, especially women, grief took on an outward and prolonged form. For others, including many men I spoke with, the grief was better handled internally and without the support of others. Despite the reality that both forms of grieving are present following a homicide, many of my survivors mentioned that they often felt judged by those around them for the manner in which they grieved.

Clara: Either they think you’ve gone off the deep end or wonder why you haven’t gone off the deep end.

Scholars who have studied loss have reported that in the aftermath of homicide, many people feel ill-equipped to know how to properly help a person who has lost a family member in such a tragic way (Armour, 2002; Doka, 1996). Therefore, a natural reaction to someone who is publicly grieving with a loss is to try to ease the pain and help them to move forward with their lives. Some of my survivors perceived this reaction as grief judgment and a way that others, however inadvertently, attempted to stifle their grief. Sophie described how she felt after her sister had been murdered. She
recognized that it was difficult for others to hear about her story and to process the
details of murder.

Sophie: I wanted everybody to know. You want people to know that you are
hurting inside, but you can’t go around crying about it all the time. I think
people are scared to bring them up. Now with my grandmother and my
aunt its okay; because now I am to the point where I can tell the story and
if I break down crying in front of them I am okay. Like I don’t care. I think
most people when they realize your family member was stabbed to death,
that’s all they hear and you are still talking. They don’t know how to
process that.

Often, other family members scrutinized the grieving process of those around
them. They had experienced the same tragedy, and therefore when their grieving
ended, they felt the other people in the family should stop too. This scrutiny caused the
survivors to feel judged by those around them. For example, Michelle was told that her
grieving was traumatic for her other son. She was told to stop grieving her murdered
son and to focus on the son who had survived the murder.

Michelle: All I can think about sometimes is, is, is what they tell me about… and
they don’t mean any harm when they say it, but… oh, you’ve got another
son. He ain’t replacing him, he can’t replace him.

Elizabeth was confronted by her son, and told that her efforts to help solve the
case were fruitless. She felt hurt that her hard work to find justice for her murdered son
was viewed as a waste of her time and she vowed to continue the hunt for answers
despite her son’s advice.

Elizabeth: My youngest son thinks that I shouldn’t be going to the newspaper and the
media that I should just let this go. And I said, ‘If I don’t fight for him,
nobody else is going to.’ I have to. Somebody has to do it. I think that
this is my job to do it and I’m going to do it. And he says that I should just
get over it and get on with it.

Nancy described that her significant other became agitated with the amount of
time she fixated on her daughter’s death.
Nancy: I was with [omitted name] for 8 years after and he said you have to put it out of your mind. It was totally unfair.

Rebecca noted that she had experienced the pressure to move on and stop grieving from her sister. In the aftermath of her son’s murder, this was not an option for her. In fact, she shared her struggle with a close friend who was also being scrutinized for her public display of grief.

Rebecca: My sister told me that [to get over it]. That’s something you just don’t get over. Mary [the survivor’s friend], when her daughter died by killing herself. She called me around 10 or 11 o’clock at night and we talked to 4 or 5. Somebody told her, “Mary you got to get over this and move on. She said, “What do I do Rebecca?” I said you tell them they haven’t lost a child. It’s that simple, you don’t ever get over it.

Family members are not the only ones who tend to pressure survivors to limit their time of grief. Julia described how shocked she was when she returned to work the week after her son’s murder.

Julia: This young lady who I thought she and I had a good relationship, she came in my office and said to me you need to find another to deal with losing your son. She said you making everybody sad. I said this hurts so bad I don’t know how else to act. She’s only two or three years younger than I am. Full grown woman, got children. But she had never lost a close relative. [I didn’t say that...] I was just too stunned and I’m just trying to explain to her the pain that I’m in. and she got up, and I think once I said it and she saw it, she just got up and went and left. I went in the bathroom and just stayed in the bathroom for awhile.

Julia’s experience was common among other women in my sample who also felt judged for their emotional displays after the homicide. Many of the women expressed the feeling of grieving “too much” and for feeling as though they were burdening those around them in moments of pain. The reason behind this feeling is likely two-fold. Women are much more likely to display their emotions and seek help from others. Research has found that the pain intensifies for a mother whose child was murdered,
because they often feel they have failed as a parent and have unnaturally outlived their child (Asaro & Clements, 2005; Rando, 1993; Rinear, 1988).

On the other side of the argument, when people do not see a change in someone’s behavior after homicide, they find this ironic. They begin to assume that the survivor is not grieving enough, and seek an explanation for this behavior. The survivors in my sample who internalized their grief felt that the people they interacted with often judged their behavior. According to these survivors, some people thought a failure to grieve outwardly showed a lack of concern and avoidance of the situation. Even among survivors, there were differences attributed to the meaning of displays of emotional grief. To Clara, each moment of grief was met with people’s advice and theories of what had happened to her sister. It seemed she would rather avoid these comments and hence preferred not to talk about her sister’s homicide. I asked Clara to describe how she grieved.

Clara: I’m pretty good at moving on. That’s just part of my personality. And it’s kind of the opposite because people might be judging me because I am moving on. And not that I was moving on but I was still functioning. The worst thing was coming back into town. And going back into the swing of things and having people look at you. And you know what they’re thinking. My thing? Don’t mention it. I know you’re sorry. But it’s just going to make it uncomfortable. If I haven’t seen you in 6 months. I didn’t want to have to rehash it. With people wondering how she’s going to react and how is she doing. So I think that made it even more uncomfortable and because it was such a sensitive subject. She wasn’t in a car accident, I mean, that’s tragic also. But she was killed in her home and we don’t know by who. I don’t want to hear your theories. There wasn’t much we knew about it. I told my friends to tell everyone just not to mention it.

When people did bring up her sister’s murder, she felt uncomfortable. Clara said that she would rather avoid the topic to keep her interactions with others as normal as
possible. “Don’t keep bringing it up. Or don’t act different around me or treat me differently.”

Similarly, some survivors noted that others judged their “limited grieving” as a sign that they did not care about their loved one. “They’ll say you don’t care. You don’t show no pain,” Harrison said. However, these survivors openly expressed that a failure to outwardly show grief does not show a lack of concern or care. Instead, it is just their way of handling the event.

Harrison: Just because we don’t talk about it all the time doesn’t mean we don’t think about it all the time. I don’t feel the need to bring it up. I don’t feel like I need to call them. You do feel torn because people might think you don’t love her if you’re not calling or hiring private investigators. [...] 

One couple I interviewed, Ethan and Sarah, noticed that their friends and family were consistently waiting for them to reach out for help and to emotionally break down. They strongly believed that their faith in God had allowed them to accept their son’s murder and avoid the normal feelings of pain and sorrow. Still, they noticed how those around them did not understand their reaction to the murder. They describe how those around them were judgmental of their lack of grieving.

Ethan: I really did because people are like, “Why aren’t you upset? Why aren’t you mad?” And I said I don’t know why I’m not; I just know that God’s taken that away from me and that I can’t be mad.

Sarah: People expect… even my closest friend that I work with I’m sure that she was waiting for me to fall apart. And I worked there for I don’t know how many years. Several years before I went to doing full time ministry that I do now. So I know probably for the longest time she expected me to fall apart because I think a lot of people did. I think they were thinking ok, they can’t keep going like this. I heard enough whispers I guess to get the feeling that they probably were waiting for us to go nuts or be angry or whatever.
Grief judgment by family members is well documented in the literature. Asaro and Clements (2005) note that grief for surviving family members may be similar but can occur at very different times and stages. They explain that when these phases of grief are not simultaneous, anger and friction can occur even within the same family. In some cases, a mother may spend extra time processing the murder while the father may push her to “move on.”

Indeed, our culture shapes the “acceptable” methods of grief for each gender in other ways. According to Asaro and Clements, for example, it is common for men to grieve without a need to cry. However, if others notice that a man has not outwardly grieved through tears they may assume he is acting inappropriately. Miller (2009) notes that it is not uncommon for those affected by homicide to outwardly appear as if they are coping well with the tragedy. Miller argues that this façade may actually be an intentional reaction to the murder, allowing the survivor to experience a sense of control and normalcy amidst the turmoil. In fact, Fish (1986) finds that men may actually have a more difficult time coping with sudden death than women. Despite their intense grief, men often try to cope with their pain by problem solving or elevating the emotional toll a tragedy takes on others over their own (Martin & Doka, 1998). Because many people, even in the same family, fail to realize there is no established method or given timetable for coping with a homicide (Asaro & Clements), pain and frustration can often result.

My survivors’ comments strongly reflect these arguments. Indeed their stories convey that contrary to traditional grief and common public perception, time does not heal the pain caused by homicide, and there are many different methods for grieving. For some, a display of outward grief is therapeutic while others survivors cope in a more
personal manner. My survivors described additional pain and frustration brought on by their inability to conform to others’ expectations of the “proper” way to grieve. In the end, the majority of survivors in my sample felt judged and alone at a time when they needed support. Even among the people closest to them, different ways of grieving were often judged as inadequate or inappropriate. These judgments often presented an additional obstacle in their journey forward after the homicide. Because others’ opinions can negatively affect the survivor’s attempt to move forward, it is important for the survivors to remain focused on what they believe will help them to heal, even if their choices do not conform to the expectations of others. Unfortunately, grief judgment is not the only obstacle the survivors will face on their healing journey. During the bereavement process, the survivors may also encounter physical and emotional challenges.

**Physical and Emotional Effects**

Many survivors were reluctant to disclose the physical side effects that they experienced after the homicide of their loved one. They were more inclined to share the emotional side effects. Perhaps this was the case because many of the survivors were unaware of the “common” physical side effects of trauma, but were comfortable that other homicide survivors struggled with emotional side effects similar to their own.

A small group of survivors was willing to share the physical repercussions that the homicide had on them. Michelle explained that the extreme stress of the murder caused her hair to fall out; a side effect she still experiences. “I can comb my hair and see it literally fall out into the sink,” she said. Abigail discussed that her blood pressure spiked after the homicide, but has improved over time.
Sleep was a common issue for participants in my sample. Harrison, Mark, Abigail, Michelle, Sarah and Julia each mentioned difficulties sleeping at some point in the interview. Harrison struggled to sleep after his son’s murder. Nighttime was a reminder of the death notification he had received the evening of the homicide.

Harrison: They woke me up that night and told me that Will had been killed and that sofa I slept on, I threw it out. I was right there by the door and when they came in I was right there on that sofa by the door laying down, and I threw that sofa out. I don’t sleep by the door no more.

A nurse recommended that Julia take an over the counter medicine to fall asleep easier. “She said you might need these to sleep. Well I’d never taken anything to sleep in my life and I was a little afraid; didn’t want to start then, and I didn’t take them.” Abigail said, “You can’t sleep for a while.” She articulated that her lack of sleep was based on anxiety that she now manages with her doctor. Michelle described to me her solution to difficulties sleeping.

Michelle: It’s almost like a job. It, ok, if I couldn’t sleep until 3… 4, 5, 6 that’s my three hours. But if I got to bed early um, 9… 9, 10, 11, 12, 1, 2, 3. I’m up. Okay? That’s how I would sleep. And I had to try and figure out what’s wrong with me. That was my, my safe way of sleeping because I had to be the one on watch, you know.

Michelle’s fear that the perpetrator could return or that one of her other children could also be murdered stopped her from feeling comfortable enough to sleep. She said that she is slowly regaining her feelings of safety and her sleep is now interrupted with thoughts of potential suspects and ideas that could aid in the investigation.

The most common physical side effect was related to eating and weight change. Abigail detailed that immediately following the homicide she did not eat. Ethan also told me that “you don’t eat a lot; you just… you’re not hungry.” He described how the required tasks (i.e. the funeral) that immediately follow the murder and the emotional
pain that ensues made it difficult to eat. Sarah followed her husband’s comment by
describing how eating became a matter of routine and immolation, not hunger. “There
was food everywhere. We ate, you know… it wasn’t like you were eating, enjoying it,
or… you just ate because that’s what everybody was doing.”

Weight change was also associated with the stress and eating habits of the
survivors. Mark told me that his friends were consistently telling him that he needed to
rest and find a way to eat and sleep. “I’d lost 20 pounds even listening to that” he
reported. Other survivors reported overeating, utilizing food as a comfort and weight
gain after the homicide. Julia said that she would frequent an oriental buffet frequently
to sit and eat until the pain went away. “I was surrounded by people. And maybe being
around people I couldn’t sit and cry. I was out in the public. I had to compose myself.”
She said being in public with other people made her feel as though she was not alone.
The feeling of eating and being full temporarily allowed her to escape the emotional hurt
she experienced. Kayla and Madelyn also reported overeating. Similar to Julia, Kayla
replaced her husband’s presence with the presence of food. She openly stated “I had
put on some pounds at first.” Madelyn said that she would eat to suppress her
emotions. “Eat, eat, eat. I have to let it out, but I am trying to keep it down.”

These descriptions of physical complications are consistent with existing literature.
Burgess (1975) found that homicide survivors often did not vividly remember the first
weeks following the homicide. Instead they reported feeling numb and confused.
However, Burgess noted that the families in her study were able to recall the physical
consequences they encountered in the aftermath of murder. According to several
studies, it is common for survivors of homicide to experience sleep disturbances,
insomnia, chest pain, heart palpitations, appetite disturbances, decreased immune systems, cardiovascular disorders and stomach complications (Armour, 2002; Burgess, 1975; Feldman Hertz, et al., 2005; Kenny, 2003; Miller, 2009). Kenney (2003) found that men were more likely than women to experience heart problems and premature death. It is possible that this finding is based in the sociological roles which require men to suppress their emotions (Kenney, 2003; Miller, 2009). Similar to the survivors in my study, Burgess notes that survivors were often encouraged to take pain pills or tranquilizers to reduce the physical effects of the trauma.

**Emotional Effects**

The survivors were extremely candid about the emotional toll that the homicide had taken on their lives. Depression, anxiety, anger and overwhelming sadness were the most common responses for the survivors in my sample.

Nancy was extremely forthcoming about the emotional difficulties she faced as a survivor of cold case homicide. Without a perpetrator and a sense of justice in their cases, it is easy for these specific survivors to feel overwhelmed and frustrated. Nancy explained that the emotional side effects she experienced were crippling. She recommends that other survivors attempt to carefully manage their negative emotions in an effort to avoid additional pain.

Nancy: You’ve got to stay focused because it’s very easy to get side tracked and discouraged and be angry. Hate and anger don’t help you at all. And that affects other things in your life.

Julia also explained the risks of developing feelings of hatred and anger.

Julia: The anger, just let go of the anger. The longer you stay angry it’s not always going to be [easy]. So it’s, you know, time does heal, but you know, you still don’t [get over it].
While both of these women detailed the importance of avoiding extreme emotional effects, several survivors in my study reported that they initially experienced rage or continue to harbor anger when thinking about the murder. Sophie said that she had “a lot of anger… I don’t know why.” When I asked Harrison if the homicide had changed his demeanor he quickly responded, “I was on the angry side... depression.” While I anticipated anger as an initial reaction, it was common for the survivors in my sample to detail how the anger still occurs in their life. Katie recalls her mother’s murder and explained how painful it was to think about her death. “I try not to think about it. I’ll get angry and yell or cry or stuff like that,” Katie said. Grace admitted she has never fully grieved the death of her sister. When I asked her why that was, she said she was too angry to grieve. Robert said that his brother’s murder caused a shift in his personality. “I get angry really quick, and I am very short tempered. Like in traffic, I get really aggravated which I never used to do before.”

Anger is a natural response to trauma and a specific level of grief (Kashka & Beard, 1999; Klass, 1988; Knapp, 1986; Ochberg, 1988). However, when the loss and trauma is a homicide, the rage is extreme (Kashka & Beard, 1999). Even if time diminishes the level of anger homicide survivors experience, it will not disappear (Ochberg, 1988). Miller (2009) specifies that “even where the perpetrator is identified, caught, and convicted, the anger may persist for years (pg. 69).” Miller’s descriptions aptly fit what I observed during my interviews: while traditional homicide survivors experience intensified anger compared with others who have experienced a death via different means, cold case survivors experience the anger at an even greater level. The
inability to fully release anger may be exaggerated for cold case survivors as they find themselves without a target or perpetrator to serve as a source of the anger.

Depression was also a common response to the homicide. In addition to Harrison, Mark described how the void caused by his daughter’s absence led him into a period of darkness.

Mark: I didn’t even have a job then. I went into a major clinical depression. […] I was pulling that shit like laying in bed till 10 or 11, not taking a shower all day. Full blown. I mean looking back on it. I ended up taking some Prozac and stuff. And it helped, and I got through it. I got through it but that was actually harder because she was so much support for me and then she was gone. The answer is, I never thought I’d be here 20 years later.

Gabrielle was already taking depression medicine prior to her husband’s murder. After witnessing the homicide and holding her husband before he died, Gabrielle said that her depression worsened. “…Now I take two depression medicines.” Julia has also previously experienced depression, but after the homicide she said “that [the murder] escalated everything so I did end up on anti-depressants.”

While only a few survivors were diagnosed with clinical depression, many survivors described bouts of extreme sadness and difficulty managing their emotional pain. Abigail said that the hardest thing is moving from one day to the next. She struggled with each new day until she developed coping mechanisms that allowed her to resume a sense of normalcy. She said it took a while before she could get up “without feeling like your insides are torn up. You know you cry a lot, you moan a lot, you think a lot. You worry a lot. You just go through a phase.” Julia also fought to resume her daily routine. She details how this was not an easy task. “I’d wake up crying a whole lot. Remembering… gosh, that was hard. Working at first I was going to
work and coming home and getting into the bed. I would just curl up in the fetal position. I stayed to myself.” Grace said that the frustration and sadness has not faded. “The whole time afterwards I had my periods of crying and questioning. I still do it, even after all these years.” Ethan and Sarah had a unique strength, but admitted it was not without fits of sorrow. “I cried plenty of times,” said Ethan. Sarah went on to tell me how the shower was her time for personal reflection and emotional release. In her private moments, she felt comfortable grieving without burdening Ethan and Robert.

Sarah: In the beginning I would get up in the morning and take a shower and just let the tears fall while I was in the shower and then I’d say, ok, Lord, I need some strength because I don’t want to be falling apart for Ethan and for Robert, you know? I needed to be strong for them and they were probably thinking the same thing. I’d get out of the shower and dry off and go, you know, put one foot in front of the next and go on. We’ve shed plenty of tears.

The final responses I observed were sensory triggers. I found that survivors’ emotions were activated by various stimuli. Both Clara and Sarah said that every time the phone rings, they are anxious and on edge. Sarah said, “That still scares me. But it’s just because it’s unexpected. It’s always scary.” Clara emphasized that even years after her sister’s murder that each phone call could be news in her sister’s case. For her, a phone call causes a sense of fear as she knows the murderer could be someone very close to her family. “I didn’t know what the next phone call was going to bring. I was nervous…” she stated. Time has eased the magnitude of this fear, but she said it still exists. Harrison was notified of his son’s murder by police officers who knocked on his door in the early hours of the morning. He said that the sound of a knock on the door causes him to temporarily relapse into the emotional turmoil he felt the night of the
homicide. Sounds and smells also affect Sophie. She recalls the scene of the crime and how her senses will sometimes stimulate the emotional response she felt that night.

Sophie: They [sirens] bothered me for a long time. I mean because when we got there, there were the sirens, and then the fire restarted while we were there, and they had to call them back for that. So we had to hear the sirens come back. They had to come back and re-put out the fire. You know it was a couple hours after we had got there. They had left and had to come back. I mean the investigators and everything were still there and everything and then the smell of smoke to this day...We went to see Pirates of the Caribbean at Disney and the canons went off and it bothered me. So it's like even 16 years later there's stimuli or whatever that triggers those feelings. I mean I'm used to it now I knew that was going to happen.

Emotional distress after a homicide has been documented in several previous studies. Miller (2009) describes anxiety and depression as two common emotional reactions that a homicide can induce. This response is greater for women than men, as women are traditionally known to possess and experience deeper emotions (Kenney, 2003; Miller, 2009). According to Zinzow, Rheingold, Hawkins, Saunders & Kilpatrick (2009), homicide survivors are twice as likely as non-homicide survivors to experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression and drug/alcohol dependence. Amick-McMullan, et al. (1991) found that depression and anxiety worsen with the decrease in satisfaction with the criminal justice system. The fact that the survivors in my case often feel that the police and criminal justice system have failed them might point to a higher rate of depression and anxiety in cold case homicide survivors than traditional homicide survivors. Horacek (1995) confirms that homicide survivors are able to work through the stages of grief but that the emotions associated with the loss are likely to remain throughout the survivors' lives. Even if they are able to resume normal functioning, it is unlikely the survivor will find themselves functioning at the same level they did prior to
the homicide. Kashka and Beard (1999) illustrate why the emotional pain is everlasting. In their 1999 piece they compare having a family member murdered with losing a limb. Their conclusion was that even though an amputee returns to life, part of them is forever missing and to a great degree this loss limits and shapes how they function each day.

**Coping Methods**

Trying to sort through the emotions of death is difficult. Each survivor must decide how the method in which they will cope with the homicide, if they want to seek outside help and what types of professional assistance they want or need. Some survivors sought formal methods of coping in order to help guide them through the healing process. The most common forms of formal coping were counseling, bereavement groups and medical doctors. Individual counseling is a very helpful way of focusing on the survivor and assisting him/her in navigating the path to recovery. Unlike group therapy, it allows the individual to focus on his/her own story. Individual counseling can be provided by a professional counselor, victim advocate or religious leader. Several families reported it being helpful for themselves and for their children who survived the event.

Sarah: Actually we did go. We found a Christian counselor and we… because we were concerned about Robert… and so we went, the three of us went and we talked to her and then Robert talked to her and then he went to her a few times, but we just talked to her once. Remember Shannon? So she was good; she was real sweet and real helpful, I think, to Robert.

Abigail: I went to talk to my social worker. And I talked to my pastor.

Rebecca: They [hospice] offered counseling to me and the kids, we took private counseling. Because Kim she thought if she cut her throat she could go live with her mother. So when I heard that I immediately took her to a doctor. So… me and the girls… the girls that were in the house. We all had counseling. I would [recommend that to other families].
Other survivors relied on a homicide bereavement group to help them through the aftermath. These survivors found comfort in knowing that there were other families facing similar situations. While the circumstances of the murder were different for each case, the families came together to share their own pain and help others through theirs.

Michelle: I have joined the, the Bereaved Survivors of Homicide group. A friend ah, she is a good friend, she um, she um didn’t know me. She called me after one of the, um, newspaper interviews. She said “I just wanted to” (giggles) she got my name from the detective. She is still a good detective now herself. She’s just like I call to let you know you are not alone and you know I want to invite you to the meetings. I had been invited by my victim advocate before then, but I was in my mind I guess thinking, um, you know. I knew these kinds of things happened every day, you know? And um, then at that point then I knew how people felt, you know?

Julia: Boohoo crying I told her they killed my baby, they killed my baby. That’s all I was saying. They killed my baby, they killed my baby. […] And they were there for us. They were there for us.

Julia: [Bereavement group] Without them, we would not have survived. They knew… they have the tools to help survivors. They have the tools. They know what to say and what not to say and when to say it. In going to compassionate families helped us to talk about losing Wham. Just being able to say my son was murdered. Just to be able to say…well I still don’t like to much to say he is dead. But I’ve gotten to where I can say he was murdered. I can say that. And without them I would not have survived. Because I had no real outlet no real people around me who actually understood.

Some families had a positive experience with bereavement groups, but several other survivors expressed their hesitations with participating in such groups. The main concerns were bringing up painful memories and feeling like their story was being compared with those of others.

Nancy: Support groups they are very difficult. But there are days when I want to get to the point, but when I get to that point, I can’t.

Marianne: And they have meetings and stuff, but I just never have really wanted to do that. I don’t think I could quote, un-quote, bear my soul in a group. Other people may need that but I’d be more of one for a one-on-one thing.
Abigail: I never had time for that [bereavement groups]. But I don’t think that would be much help because going in and just talking about it, it just brings up old feelings.

Kayla expressed that a phone call from a local bereavement group made her feel even worse than she had before the call. Being a survivor herself, the bereavement leader had shared her personal account and then asked Kayla to describe her brother’s murder. For her, the idea of a group made her coping process worse.

Kayla: One time the compassionate families girl called me, and when I got off the phone I was worse off then before she had called me. She called me and when that lady got off the phone it was like the day he had died. I stopped talking to her about it. They were letting me know they were there for me, I was in tears. I was so torn up… I couldn’t talk to them anymore.

Her brother, Elliot also felt as though the group counseling would not be useful for him. However, he stated that there was a local group that allowed homicide survivors to celebrate their loved one’s life and to come together for social events. In this way, the group setting was a positive way to feel surrounded by people that understood his experience.

Elliot: The counseling I would want would be one on one. I don’t want to sit in a room and go around. If that is what they want, good, but that is not what I am ready for. They try to make you do a group! I don’t want to sit down and air my laundry in front of everyone. I like the big group with Mrs. Beverly. When you come together, we are all suffering.

Several factors influence whether or not survivors seek traditional/formal therapy after a homicide. According to Rynearson (1995), the people who are likely to seek treatment are those who are younger, less religious, less stable in their marriage, have experienced previous counseling, taken psychiatric medication prior to the murder and have previously experienced abuse. From his study, Rynearson concluded that those in a highly stable family and those possessing a firm religious practice are likely to have
well defined and structured healing environments, therefore electing not to seek professional treatment. Also, those who are religious may be able to rationalize the homicide by focusing on the eternal life of the victim. When the treatment seekers were compared with the non-treatment seekers, the treatment seekers had higher scores on the Impact Events Scale (a tool used to measure post-traumatic stress levels in individuals who have experienced trauma) and reported higher rates of significant reenactments of the homicide. Few other studies have focused on who seeks treatment. The lack of participation may be caused by the survivors’ belief that they will gather strength and be supported by those around them. Another explanation for lack of participation may be that survivors view the need for therapy or peer support groups as a sign of their own inability to navigate grief or weakness (Rinear, 1988). Finally, survivors might presume that others will judge them and reinforce their ideas of self-blame and responsibility for the murder (Rinear, 1985; 1988).

Aside from the meaning assigned to seeking therapy, some survivors might not simply because they do not know the groups exist. Indeed, Rock finds that participation and knowledge of the groups is often happenstance (Rock, 1998). Usually information about the groups is provided through conversations, referrals and the media. When I initially began my study, I was surprised by the lack of resources for homicide survivors. I researched area support groups and found that there were few active groups in the state. Many had been closed due to lack of funding and participation, a finding consistent with Rock (1998). When survivors do chose to participate in group therapy, it is often described as unproductive or unhelpful. Rock notes that the groups are frequently unstable and unorganized, lacking a particular plan for healing. Perhaps
more groups that focus on remembrance, moving forward and hope would be more useful to the survivors who are hesitant to join traditional bereavement groups.

Michelle discussed the conversation she had with her doctor and how she was told that she needs to seek other ways to handle her pain.

Michelle: The doctor said that even though I think I’m in control of it, You know I’m really not and um I remember the doctor telling me one time, he said that we can work with you on a lot of stuff you are going through but, we cannot make you well from stuff that you know to be true, ok. Say for an instance, if I imagine I hear voices or if I imagine that this or that happened, see they can’t… see the things I have been through they are real. It is harder for them to help me to get past that in a traditional way. They can’t just say to me this is just my imagination and they have medicine that can help with that. I’ve got to find a way to deal with that. My fears are real.

Returning to work can be a difficult task for survivors immediately following a homicide. As previously mentioned, one mother had her coworkers tell her that she was making everyone in the office sad, and needed to develop a “healthier” ways of coping with her son’s murder. However, some survivors expressed that returning to work actually allowed them to heal. The ability to return to work provided them with an outlet. It gave some survivors a segment of time when they were forced to focus on something other than their loss. The occupation of time and returning to a routine of normalcy proved to be extremely helpful for these individuals.

Kayla: I can say that since I have been working, I don’t really worry and have that on my mind.

Abigail: Then I got to go to Shands and get scrubbed and go into surgery, and I can’t be having all that [emotional turmoil]. That was good therapy for me too, my job. I needed my job anyways to take care of them anyways. And then to still have that is a good thing. I didn’t really get back into surgery but I got back into nurse tech and I did a lot of taking care of patients and I like that.
Informal coping mechanisms were also used by survivors. Some of these strategies included journaling, writing songs, pottery, joining a gym, returning to work and investigating the case on their own. For most informal coping strategies included journaling their experience and writing updates on the progress of the case, but a few survivors turned to more artistic expressions of emotion. These moments, when survivors turned to art and creativity, provided a chance for reflection and solitude. Through this intimate private time, survivors expressed an ability to free their thoughts. By releasing some of these emotions, they were able to sort through and manage the pain of homicide.

Rebecca: I do some ceramics; I have 5,000 molds out there….and I write a lot of stuff. I cry up there by myself.

Robert: I just went into my room and stayed away from everyone. I just kind of wrote poems and lyrics and what-not to myself. I think it was really a God thing telling me to go in there and play out my thoughts and my feeling and kind of what I was thinking.

All of the survivors that I interviewed were missing answers in their case. They had no identified perpetrator and few updates from the police on progress in the investigation. A majority of survivors stated that a failure to solve the case was due to a possible lack of effort by the police. Whether it was an internet search, canvassing a neighborhood or looking for articles of evidence, many survivors took the quest for answers into their own hands. This personal journey of investigation seemed to serve a therapeutic purpose as well. These survivors are unique in their lack of justice, and therefore, they find peace in refusing to let the case die. To the individuals I spoke with, each day researching the case is a day closer to an answer. Many survivors expressed
a feeling that the day they give up on the case would cause them to feel as though they had given up on finding justice for their loved.

Michelle, for example, said that she was upset by the lack of openness between the police and herself. She had tried to gather information about her son’s murder, but was met with opposition from the police who told her they could not share what they knew at the time. To her, this was a sign that they were not trying to solve her son’s case. Therefore, she decided that she had to find the answers for herself.

Michelle:  I don’t know if, ‘cause you say you can’t tell me, and I understand, I don’t, cause I don’t, just like that little thing [newspaper article], and it just tripped them up when I guessed (the suspect). You [police] just don’t know how far behind you, you don’t know if I know, you just don’t know nothing. You not trying to find out. But um, I can’t give up. And I have to have the answers for myself because, I was here at one point, I moved to here, and I have to keep going (talking about emotionally progressing).

Grace stated that she actually searched for evidence around the crime scene and has asked people who are serving time in prison to talk to other inmates about her brother’s death. She feels that any leads she can acquire might help police catch a suspect.

Grace:  I spent my time going through the woods and looking for a weapon, talking to people, sometimes until 10 o’clock at night investigating it. I have people I know at the jail listen out. I told him I would find out who did it even if it took until the day I died. […] I work hard to dig up anything that might help one day.

Religion

When I listened to the survivors’ stories of coping, the most common theme was the role of religion in the grief process. The survivors I spoke with candidly told me about their faith and their understanding of the murder through a religious lens. For my sample, it seemed that the homicide magnified their existing beliefs. While a minority of survivors did not respect a belief in a “Christian God,” the remaining 20 described how
the homicide further cultivated their existing Christian faith. Mark was extremely upfront about his disgust for the concept of a “god.”

Mark: If there’s a god, he’s an asshole. And I know that’s a horrible thing to say. I know it’s not healthy, but that’s my position. I was never really a big church person or believer. And I never really believed the whole concept that there’s some guy up there that’s bigger than us, but if there is, I don’t like him very much.

Mark’s frustration with faith grew as people around him tried to use Christ as a means to pacify his pain.

Mark: And one of the things that really bugs me is when people say, oh you know she’s in a better place or there was a reason. There was no reason. Some shit ball was walking down the street when my daughter was running and killed her.

After a few minutes of conversation, Mark clarified that other people had been able to use their faith to help him. “I would love for people to pray for me, it’s the greatest thing but it just doesn’t for me, personally.” He just wanted to emphasize that a belief in God could not explain why his daughter was murdered. For Mark’s son Paul, the murder caused him to lose trust in faith. When I asked if things for him had changed he said the following:

Paul: It did for me because I didn’t have a lot of faith when I was growing up in my life and when I started at Saint Andrews, I actually took it upon myself to go and figure out if that was going to be a part of my life. And became baptized at 15 or 16 years old and so it I was really just starting to understand that part of my life and when this occurred it really just washed away everything that I had just learned.

I had expected to hear many of the survivors express similar stories of struggling with their faith, but instead for most of the survivors, their testimonies were about the power of religion and the role of God throughout their healing process. One family shared the following biblical passage from John 14:27: Peace I leave with you, my
peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be
troubled, neither let it be afraid. Belief in Christ was most commonly cited by survivors
as being the most helpful to their healing. The following quotations exemplify how the
survivors found faith to be their chief reliance after the murder:

Michelle: It is my faith that has gotten me this far.

Nancy: Without my faith, I would probably be in a straightjacket right now. I was
an Episcopalian and because of my relationship with my church I was able
to get through it. Otherwise you’re lost.

Marianne: I have a very, strong, just almost unshakable faith that my faith in God will
get me through everything and so that was, yeah. Especially initially and
going through the funeral and stuff. That probably was key.

Julia: Without my faith it wouldn’t be worth it. I wouldn’t be here.

Ethan: I can say now that God took control of this tragedy before I woke up. It is
now one month since the murder of my son and there has never been any
anger towards the person who did this. I can’t say I won’t change; I don’t
know, but God’s mercy and grace has been upon my family even before
we woke up that morning.

Sarah: I’ve been a Christian since I was eight years old and I never realized how
much God loved me, and that’s… Mary Davidson (pseudonym) when she
said that to us, God must really love you… I guess that started the
process of me thinking about what she was saying, but I realized how
much God loved me. He had let his son die for me and I could have never
given Devon willingly, you know. So that made me realize how much God
loved me that he would let Jesus die for me. I would die for him, you
know, but I never understood that till I lost Devon, even though I’d been a
Christian for all those years. I was in my forties I guess when Devon died
so all those years from eight to forty something I never realized that; never
understood that. That in itself was enough to change me. And to know He
loves me that much then I can love other people.

Abigail: Without reading my Bible I would be lost.

Abigail: You got to believe in God, you got to believe in trust in the Lord. You
know? Because that’s the only way that you’re going to be able to get
through it from day to day. Other than that you ain’t gonna make it. You
got to have faith in God, because when the law doesn’t work God works
and the power of prayer.
Gabrielle: I think God is what is keeping us together. If I didn’t have my faith in God and I had lost my husband, I would have probably gone crazy.

Kayla: God is what is keeping me going.

Sophie: It is the key role. The Bible speaks about what happens to people when they die. So that is... I know they are not in a place where they are hurting. I know they are not suffering, based on my beliefs in the scriptures that they are basically sleeping in a better place...they are in heaven enjoying life. Nothing like that I don’t wonder about an afterlife. So I am at peace with that.

Sophie: My faith in God is the number one thing and time and allowing myself to feel it, but I am that kind of person. Other people may not want to feel it.

Robert: [Once I realized it was real] It was just a God thing. He just instantly came in and filled me up and supported me and gave me strength.

I asked the survivors if they ever blamed God for the murder. Not a single survivor placed blame on God. However, some survivors did express anger with God or admitted questioning God immediately following the homicide. For Michelle, her anger with God came from the fact that the perpetrator was not apprehended immediately. “At first I was angry with God. A lot of that because, um, I just, in my mind, I knew that um, it is for a reason, you don’t know now, but eventually you may know.” She eventually found peace that God would allow her to learn the perpetrator’s identity in His time.

Nancy also contributes her strength to faith, but says it did not happen overnight. “And it took me awhile because I was angry with Jesus for allowing this to happen,” Nancy recalled. Grace shared that she too was angry with God, questioning why her brother was killed. He did not deserve to die that way, and for a while Grace struggled to comprehend what had happened. Now she says her outlook has changed. “I was searching for answers and I didn’t know anywhere else to go. I don’t blame God for anything.”
I quickly learned that the majority of my survivors had a firm understanding that their Christian God was not responsible for their loved one’s murder. Instead, they defined the motivation behind the killing as evil at the hands of another human being. Clara acknowledged that God does not control every move that humans make, stating, “so I don’t blame Him for the things that people do.” Instead God was a source of comfort for her, allowing her to focus on justice instead of anger. Emily made a clear distinction between good and evil. She noted that those people who can take the lives of another human being are the most evil among us. When discussing her daughter’s murder she said, “There’s evil and I believe that Satan is involved in this.” Grace agreed that Satan was just as influential as God. “God don’t make people do what they do. Satan does.” Harrison had faced much opposition from family and friends when he relied on his faith to heal him. People would mock his faith and assume that if God was good, He would not have allowed Harrison’s son, or any other person, to be murdered. However, Harrison took this attack on his God seriously. “God didn’t do that; they want to charge God with everything. Evil is in the world. If he wanted to make us robots then we… if he wanted to make all of us love Him that’s what we’d be doing, but He gave us a choice; He gave us a choice. So that guy chose to pick up that gun and pull that trigger.” Madelyn too had to clarify for others that God was not responsible for the manner in which her son died. She told me, “I knew that the Lord had a plan. He didn’t make this happen, but He doesn’t always prevent things from happening. The Lord doesn’t make anything bad happen, but when He is ready to take you, He took him.” She and Robert both embodied the ideas presented in Job 14:2: Seeing his days [are]
determined, the number of his months [are] with thee, thou hast appointed his bounds that he cannot pass.

Previous research has examined the effects of religion after tragedy. Kashka and Beard (1999) noted that homicide challenges the spiritual belief system. The authors explain that homicide causes a rift in the spiritual belief in a just and loving God. However, other authors describe that the type of God people believe in might actually influence whether or not religion is challenged or strengthened after tragedy. According to Hathaway and Pargament (1991), people who believe in a loving and caring God are likely to embrace religion after homicide, while those who view God as a punishing and revengeful God will often betray their previously established religious beliefs in the aftermath of tragedy. Most frequently religions present God as tender and caring. This portrayal of God can help a survivor find strength and peace after a death. For example, a belief in an afterlife and an opportunity to reunite with the victim in heaven can assist the family in finding peace in after a homicide (Sormanti and August, 1997). Many of my survivors found comfort in the idea of reuniting with their loved one after death. Future studies should examine the survivors’ perceptions of a caring versus revengeful god to how this perception might influence the role religion plays in the grieving process.

Religious personnel, including clergy, are often some of the first people that survivors of trauma will turn to for support (Bell, Morris, Holzer, and Warhweit, 1976). Several studies have shown that religious behaviors and beliefs are among the most successful coping strategies utilized after tragedy (Koenig, George and Seiger, 1988; Hathaway & Pargament, 1991; McCrae & Costa, 1986). It is becoming more common
for religious organizations to offer bereavement services and provide professional grief counseling (Kashka and Beard). Based on the survivors in my sample, religion and spirituality were the most significant healing elements in the survivors' lives. While I heard some stories (i.e. Harrison's friends and son) of people being questioned as to how a merciful God would allow a murder to occur in the first place, the overwhelming majority of survivors had found comfort in their religion and faith. Consistent with my findings, Rynearson (1996) recommends that professionals caring for homicide survivors should assist the patient in utilizing their spiritual beliefs, as these could help to ease the pain and crippling effects of homicide.

In examining the formal and informal mechanisms of coping, it is clear that there is no one way to cope with tragedy in the aftermath of murder. However, through the interviews with these 24 survivors, it is clear that for some formal therapy has assisted their journey, while others have come to terms with the fact that they are better off facing their emotions alone. A few survivors expressed the feelings that nothing would make their situation better. This seemed to indicate that these individuals were not at the point where they were ready to heal and to resume a life without pain. In fact, in these cases without justice, it seems that many survivors focused on the arrest of a suspect as their permission to start the healing process. This is a significant indication that the lack of a resolution serves as a unique roadblock on the journey traveled by cold case homicide survivors. Without an answer, it is possible that there is a permanent obstacle preventing the survivors from being able to reach a place of peace. Gabrielle told me, “Nothing has helped me… it doesn’t get easier. The day I can see them shackled up, I will be happy.” The hope for justice was common among the cold
Remembering the Victim

Many people struggle with the idea of moving forward in fear that they will in some way forget the deceased. It is this fear that also prevents so many people from moving forward in the healing process. The families I spoke with discuss ways in which they memorialize and honor the victim, in hopes of keeping their memory alive.

Creating a Memorial

One way my survivors honored their slain loved one was to memorialize them through an act of remembrance. The most common form of remembrance among my survivors was to attend a candlelight vigil for survivors of homicide. These events allow survivors of homicide to come together and light candles in the name of the victim. While many families participated in such events, the overall consensus was that the events were not as helpful as they originally assumed. Katie described the anxiety that came with attending the event. She said that she got nervous prior to arriving to the vigil because it was painful “when people want to start talking to you about it.” Julia had hopes that the vigil would serve as a therapeutic occasion, but for her it was anything but healing. She stated, “It was like having the funeral all over again. I don’t want to do that again.”

Another family described how they released a dove for each sibling in the family at their brother’s funeral. As the doves are released, they embark on a flight together back to their home. The release symbolized how the siblings would one day be together.
again and brought great peace to each of the survivors. Elliot described how the release helped him move forward. “It is supposed to be a sign that you are going to let them go. You know you love them, you know they are dead, but you need that okay, I am going to let you go.”

Robert’s brother Devon was murdered when they were both teenagers. It would be years before he memorialized his brother, but he did so in a grand way. “My littlest one is the one I named after her uncle… Ella Devon.” Clara chose to do the same with her daughter. “My sister’s name was Kristina Lynn (pseudonym) and my daughter’s name is Lynn Marie (pseudonym) after her and it is, it’s positive.”

While the idea of memorializing a loved one seemed positive, for some survivors, they nonetheless reported that they were not at a point in their journey where they were ready to physically or emotionally memorialize the death. Harrison did not want to participate in any type of vigil or dedication, as it made the finality of his son’s death too real. Instead he wanted his family to complete the memorial without him. “And when anybody wants to have something for Will (pseudonym), you all do that. I don’t want to participate in that. I know he’s gone, but the realness of the gone, I hated it; I just hate the idea of it, and when you talk about it with people you realize hey, man, that’s real, real.” Marianne thought that it would be healing to participate in memorializing her grandmother, but she admitted she was not quite ready for that step.

Marianne: And something that I still haven’t brought myself to do was, I think it’s Squirrel Park or something, they have a crime victims survivors, there’s like an association. And they have a memorial at this park and I don’t know if they have like, you know, that you buy a brick with the person’s name on it or if it’s stones or if it’s a wall or, you know, what they do. If it’s brass plates or something. I’m not sure how they do it. But I think they have something. I’ve just never--- It's like me walking in the door. It's like just really pushing to do it. It's just dealing with it and it bringing it all back.
There’s a park there and I think that’s where they do it. And they do a candle light vigil once a year and uh, to celebrate all the victims and they read their names out and all that. And I just have not been able to step over and do it. I’d say there’s a piece missing that I haven't been able to do that.

The experiences of Harrison and Marianne illustrate that recommended steps to healing, such as memorializing the victim, can actually be an obstacle to one’s grieving process. Again, each survivor’s experience with such strategies is unique; what proves helpful and therapeutic for some can be equally hurtful for others.

**Maintaining Their Possessions**

In the process of moving forward, families must decide what possessions of the victim they want to keep and which ones will be distributed to others or discarded. This is difficult decision for most families, as the victim’s personal items are all that physically remain of the victim. Letting go of some of these items feels like letting go of the victim. Due to this hardship, some families elect to maintain a victim’s room and possessions as if they were still living in the family home. For Nancy, keeping her daughter’s room in tact made her feel as though she was still there. “The bed is in the same position, the pictures are still on the walls, the desk is still the same one. I moved the bookcases around and got some plastic tubs stacked in her closet. It’s like I’m with her.”

The majority of families kept particular items that had significance and discarded the rest. The most common items that families treasured were photographs, clothes, automobiles, and jewelry. Ethan described how he kept several items of his son’s, allowing him to feel as though his son was with him.

Ethan: I kept some of his shirts. Now we’ve got to pick through and clean… I’ve got everything in my truck. I went through the Pathfinder that he was driving in. I kept it and drove it for a long time till she wouldn’t let me put another transmission in it. Anyway so he still rides with me and I still have
his picture stuck in my truck. People who ask us how many children do you have and I’ll always say two.

Rynearson (1996) found that pictures of the homicide victim can serve as a source of comfort, balancing out the painful images of the homicide with positive images of earlier memories.

**Difficulties of Holidays**

Special events and holidays are times when the death of a family member can be most difficult to handle. These occasions mark moments when families draw together to celebrate and the absence of a family member becomes increasingly noticeable. Katie recognized how her mother’s death was magnified when birthdays and Christmas arrive each year.

Katie: The hardest thing every year is watching her birthday go by and not doing anything. Christmas and my birthday and her birthday are the hardest for me. Usually on my birthday it’s hard. I feel like she there but she’s not when we are putting up a tree.

Even though these feelings become easier to manage, they never seem to go away, as Grace notes. “At times it gets easier, but around our birthdays, it is really hard. Holidays in general are rough.” Nancy described how families struggle at this time and have to make decisions about whether or not to change traditions. She warns families to weigh these decisions very carefully, stating that “once you change it, it’s never the same and you can’t put it back.”

Several families expressed that they created new traditions or made a symbolic gesture to include the deceased person in the event. Ethan and Sarah decided to change their traditional Christmas the year after their older son was murdered.

Sarah: The first Christmas was hard; we did something totally different. The four of us went to Washington and spent Christmas with her. It was challenging. We felt like that was the smart thing to do. We thought that
would be good because we knew how hard it would be to be here without him. Christmas has always been here and with all of us. We had already lost Ethan’s mother and grandmother and so our table was getting smaller, and so that felt like… somebody told us, I think, that would be a really smart thing to do so that’s what we did.

Grace finds her brother’s birthday to be a difficult milestone each year. However, she continues to celebrate her brother’s birthday even after his death. Each year, she returns to his gravestone to toast to his special day. “So on that day, I go to his grave, and I drink a beer. I take the rest of it and pour it on his headstone. It is just a memory that keeps a little part of him alive.”

In addition to major holidays, major life events are difficult for survivors who wish they had their loved one to witness the joy of the moment. Survivors I interviewed mentioned events such as births, marriages, and graduations to be particularly difficult. Julia notes that in the aftermath of her son’s murder, her grandson graduated from high school. The event was monumental for the survivors, who had few high school graduates in the family. “And we are very proud of him and then emotion came…oh I wish your dad was here…”

Several families noted the sadness when a new person joins the family. Moments such as marriage and birth remind survivors that the newest addition to the family will never know the slain family member’s legacy or memory. For Robert, this feeling was especially true. Growing up best friends with his older brother, he had envisioned sharing life’s greatest moments with his big brother by his side. However, after his brother was murdered, this changed. After his brother’s death, he went on to get married and start his own family. He expressed a feeling of sadness that his new family
will never know the brother that he lost. Robert shares how he copes with this difficulty through his faith.

Robert: One difficult thing is that my wife never got to meet him, because she wasn’t from here. It is hard for me with my kids. I want them to know him, because he was just such a good person and such a good role model. I can’t explain how perfect of a person he was and I wish they could see that instead of just hearing stories. But at the same time they benefit from the stories. They know what happened. My littlest doesn’t know. But my two older ones know what happened. When you share your Christianity and your faith it makes it easier. You know we pick a star in the sky and we speak to Devon like he is there and I let them know that he is up there with God. It makes it so much easier just to be open and honest.

Conclusion

Regardless of how the families struggle with the murder, the majority stated they have found a way to remember the positive moments and to keep the spirit of their loved one with them. Many have found peace in fully acknowledging the murder and preparing to move forward with their lives. As Harrison said “I just thank God for God letting me know that there’s more ways that you can love him, [even with] him not being here, and to remember him.” During the interviews, I began to understand a fine line between two major concepts when these survivors attempt to heal. Some survivors fear that if individual healing takes place, they will be letting go, forgetting or dishonoring the homicide victim. Others have come to accept the murder, and allowed themselves to heal while finding ways to remember and honor their loved one. Regardless of which concept the survivors chose, their descriptions of moving forward in the aftermath of the unsolved homicide remind us that their journey is extremely difficult and unique. They must struggle to move forward with their own lives without justice and without a full set of answers in their case. Masters, et al. (1988) recognize that healing is often stunted for homicide survivors if the perpetrator is alive and even further complicated if the
perpetrator goes unpunished. Despite their attempts to move forward, the cold case homicide survivors in my sample expressed that their grief was open-ended in nature, and that they often found themselves at an emotional standstill. My survivors believed that their bereavement journey could not be completed without the identity of the perpetrator.

Abigail: It’s just not over. It’s not over, because nobody has been arrested and they don’t know why. You know, it’s just not over for us. You know, it’s something that I think will drag out with us, because we don’t know why.

Chapters 6 and 7 detail the effects a homicide has on the survivors’ personal relationships. Chapter 6 specifically details the impact the murder has on their pre-existing relationships with friends and family. The survivors indicated that their friends and family had provided great strength throughout their journey, despite the strain that is placed on these relationships. Chapter 7 explores the post-homicide relationships that a survivor is thrust into during the aftermath of the murder. These relationships include other homicide survivors, law enforcement personnel, victim advocates and media professionals. While other survivors are extremely helpful to the survivor, the dependent nature of the professional relationships is often problematic for the cold case homicide survivors.
CHAPTER 6
PRE-EXISTING RELATIONSHIPS

For cold case homicide survivors, the open-ended nature of their loss, specifically the fact that no offender has been identified, adds an additional layer of uniqueness to their experience. In particular, the tragic and complex nature of their loved one’s murder significantly impacts their relationships with others. Chapter 6 details how the homicide affects the survivors’ existing relationships with family and friends. For some survivors, the murder brought them closer to those they loved, while others reported that the murder caused them to withdraw from friends and family. Within the family specifically, survivors often discussed their need to be strong for others, how they became over-protective, and how their familial relationships were impacted by the homicide. The survivors also expressed how their relationships with friends were affected. Again, friends served as a comfort to many of the survivors, helping the survivor through their grief and focus on the positive memories with the victim. Other survivors expressed that their friendships had been tainted by perceived awkwardness and betrayal. The ways in which cold case homicide survivors managed pre-existing relationships are explored within this chapter utilizing the survivors’ personal accounts.

Family

Need to be Strong and to Protect

The moment that a family is notified of the murder, a struggle begins: finding a balance between being strong for the rest of the family and mourning the death of the victim themselves. When I began this study, I expected to hear fathers vocalize this challenge. It seemed natural for the head of the household to garner a façade of
strength so that the other members of the family could turn to them for comfort. This
expectation was confirmed by Harrison.

Harrison: It took me a long time to find so that I could grieve for myself because I
was so worried about Kimberly. My other children, I was trying to be
strong for them, and I know it took time out to really grieve about Will. I
only did that about a year or two ago. I couldn’t let them know how much I
miss him because… I feel like if I would have fell apart they would have
fell apart, too. I knew through Christ I was the strong one so I had to play
that part.

He candidly discussed how his appearance of strength was actually hurtful, even
though his intentions were pure.

Harrison: You better be strong. I think society did that. That’s something we need to
get away from. And at the same time, by you being at the head you can
inflict a lot of pain by not being healed yourself. If you don’t deal with it,
this is the effect that it’s going to take on everybody because I’m snapping,
I’m hollering. And nobody knows why. They think it’s their fault, and at the
moment I don’t care about nothing no more.

His children and grandchildren would internalize the pain they felt by his
frustrations, and they would ask him questions such as “Would you have felt better if it
was me?” or “You would prefer it had been me than him, Daddy.” Miller (2009) asserts
that children feel that surviving parents often take out their pain and frustrations on the
remaining family members. Harrison explained he was only trying to be strong for his
family, and he was not alone in this goal. The other fathers in the sample also
expressed the desire to take care of others and be there for them as they grieved. This
was a finding that I anticipated, based on society’s view of a man’s role in the family
(Asaro and Clements, 2005; Martin & Doka, 1998). Literature supports the concept that
parents often struggle after the death of a child to serve as a parent to the surviving
children (Feldman Hertz, et al., 2005).
However, I was caught off-guard when I heard other family members also describe going into this same type of “protection mode.” Mothers, children and grandchildren also described the difficulty in grieving openly. They were very cautious to reveal the pain they held inside, in an effort to protect and serve as a source of support to the rest of the family. In one family I spoke with, I observed how each member of the family believed they had to be strong for the others. Ethan (father), Sarah (mother) and Robert (brother) all were consciously determined to portray strength to help the others in their family cope with the murder. Sarah would ask God to provide her with strength.

Sarah: Lord, I need some strength because I don’t want to be falling apart for Ethan and for Robert, you know? I needed to be strong for them and they were probably thinking the same thing.

She was right. In addition to her husband’s natural role of being strength for the family, her son also was very aware of his public grieving.

Robert: I have always been really good at getting my emotions out verbally. God really gave me that. I could always go to my mom and dad and blow up and they would listen to me and not get mad at me for blowing up and being honest. But at the same time I didn’t want to do that to them because they had just lost their son, so those were the last people I needed to blow up at. God gave me the strength to be strong for them.

Another pair of siblings discussed how they dealt with their grief in a way that would allow them to be strong for their family. Kayla told me “We all try to be strong for momma but we all have our weak days because every day is a different thing.” Her brother Elliot felt an even larger responsibility. Not only did he feel he needed to be strong for his mother, but he also wanted to be strong for his sister, his sister-in-law and the young children they all had. Elliot said, “I have to take care of my family. If I do grieve, do it by myself and not let them see it. It is really hard.” He described feeling very alone and unable to speak with any of the women in his family.
Emily struggled with her daughter’s murder and often turned to her husband for support. She also had a younger son, who she knew was having difficulty with his sister’s murder. He had told his mom on several occasions that he wished he had been the older sibling, so that his sister would have been safe. Knowing her son’s own difficulty with the death, Emily worked hard to keep her feelings from her son.

Emily: I don’t think it’s a good idea for me to... grieve to him. He has his own life to live and he has a new life. But I think he’s pretty good at this. He can sort of put things in perspective, I think much better than I could.

Even years after the murder, it appeared very clear that Emily was still grieving tremendously, while her son was able to refocus his attention on his job, wife and future plans.

The idea of hiding one’s pain from other family members is consistent with findings in Feldman Hertz, et al. (2005). According to interviews with surviving siblings of traditional homicide cases, Feldman Hertz, et al. found that siblings intentionally hide their pain to prevent further burdens for their parents. Miller (2009) also confirmed that in the aftermath of murder family members are reluctant to share their emotions with others. Similarly the stories of my survivors capture the idea that the majority of family members affected by homicide feel that they must protect the other family members from additional pain. Therefore, the survivors work diligently to keep emotions to themselves, to grieve privately and to serve as a source of strength to others. Nonetheless, embedded in the many stories of strength, I also heard stories of immense personal pain. The survivors articulated a major dilemma that other survivors in general must face: How do I protect my family from pain while still allowing myself to grieve?

More specifically parents seek ways to minimize the pain their children seek.
Several families expressed that the children in the family suffered greatly from the homicide, causing many of the parents and grandparents to feel helpless as they witnessed the children express their pain. Sarah described the difficulty in watching her youngest son grieve his brother’s death.

Sarah: Robert lay over him and… I think that was as hard for me watching Robert as it was to know that Devon was gone. It was just so hard and he was just so broken. Whoo, I’m glad I don’t have to go back there and do that again. His heart was broken because he loved his brother.

Rebecca shared the same pain when her granddaughter went to visit her mother’s grave.

Rebecca: She wanted to go to the cemetery so I took her over there. ’bout to broke my heart. She was down there on her knees, and she was looking up at the sky and saying, ‘Mommy please come back, I’ll be good I promise.’

After viewing the pain that tragedy brings to their family, many of the survivors expressed that they had become extremely aware of potential dangers their family members could face and sought ways to prevent future harm.

The suddenness of murder causes families to recognize how short life can be and how quickly life can be taken away. The aftermath of homicide resulted in many of the survivors becoming overprotective of the family members left behind. Clara profoundly stated, “I didn’t feel anyone was safe. Anyone could leave at anytime.” Most commonly, this fear was articulated by parents and grandparents who reported trying to protect the surviving children. Michelle’s overprotective nature generated from the fact that her son’s murder was unsolved.

Michelle: I think I did something, I wish I could take that back. I was already over protective, but I think I became a little bit over the deep end. I wanted to control everything aspect of my, um, my.. well it was mostly the girls I was concerned with. I wasn’t really concerned with the boys habits as much as I was concerned about the girls habits, because I just thinking in the
back of my mind… they are going to bring home the murderer. You know? And that, that, that was so unfair to them that I felt that way

Even though she regrets her actions, Michelle is not alone. Madelyn also expressed an desire to protect her children.

Madelyn: I was overly protective of my other kids. I pray to God it won’t happen again, but my mind set is that I am overprotective. I don’t want anyone to do anything to them.

The men in my study talked about this behavior in a slightly different manner.

They described being “cautious,” not overprotective, after the murder, trying to ensure the safety of those around them. Robert described how the murder has caused a hyperawareness in his life.

Robert: I am more protective now about the safety and health of my kids, than I ever would have been. I am not overly protective. If I hear a knock on the door, or a car honk, or something that is aggressive towards me and my family, it is hard. I am automatically like, don’t worry, I am the man of the family and I will protect you.

Paul does not have children, but he told me about how he tries to protect his wife from harm.

Paul: Well interestingly my wife is a big fanatic about going out and walking so there is a little bit of that fear sometimes. And in simple things like she wears head phones and I make her only put one ear in. And you know, never at night, and stuff like that so there’s definitely more awareness.

I found Paul’s statement extremely poignant, because his sister disappeared while on a jog, and years later he has the anxiety that a similar event could happen to his wife if she is not alert. In the aftermath of homicide, survivors often question how they could have prevented the murder (examples: Rynearson, 1988; Rynearson & McCreery, 1993; Sprang & McNeil, 1995). According to Rynearson (1996), it is necessary for the
family members to create a sense of safety to help cope with the loss. This need for safety may explain the overprotective nature several survivors expressed.

**Impact on Familial Relationships**

Surviving a tragedy is difficult for families, but the majority of those I interviewed expressed how the murder actually brought their families closer together.

**Abigail:** [In regards to her other son moving away] I told him that we’ll go together, because I’m not gonna let him leave me.

**Mark:** There was a positive in that. Paul [my son] and I. Paul is my best friend. We spend a lot of time together, we work together. That was a huge positive. Paul changed a lot more than I did. The biggest change in our lives was Paul and I becoming much closer. I’ve said it a thousand times, the only good thing that came out of this is Paul and I.

**Paul:** It brought dad and I closer together.

**Julia:** It made me gravitate more to them [the children] because their mother was gone. Now daddy is gone. I wanted to try and fill that void. It made me want to see them more and to talk with them more.

**Harrison:** We had a good relationship before it happened so when it did happen we [the family] pulled together. In a lot of cases that don’t happen because the family be already divided and disliking each other and when something comes like that, tragedy like that, it makes it worse. I think they blame each other and some of them don’t mind because that’s another weapon that they can use; it’s your fault. If you would have done it… all that comes to play. Thank God not the case.

Again, literature about the unique nature of homicide supports the reason I found such positive family relationships. Despite the stress that is placed on the families, the majority of them find solace in one another, as members of the same family are trying to overcome the same tragedy. This trauma likely develops a strong bond between them.

Little research has been done to measure the consequences of traumatic death on a marriage. However, a study by Murphy, et al. (2003) did include questions about the effects of sudden death of a child on marital satisfaction. When compared with other
survivors of sudden death, the authors found that parents of homicide victims reported the lowest rates of marital satisfaction and highest levels of marital distress.

I did not ask survivors to detail the specific effects of the murder on their marriage. However, several survivors took the opportunity to describe the positive and negative consequences the homicide had on their relationship with a spouse. Nancy told me that the effects on a marriage would depend on the strength of the marriage before the homicide. She said that it is easier on couples who are very close before the death than on those couples who already have cracks in the foundation of their relationship. She admits, “But even then, it’s very, very difficult.” For her and her husband, their relationship seemed to sustain the difficulties of her daughter’s disappearance. However, she said eight years after her daughter disappeared the relationship became problematic. “I think that because we didn’t have a normal life, things just fell apart. [My biggest mistake was] not making time for Rick (*pseudonym*) and me.” She believes that her fixation on her daughter caused her husband to feel distant and unappreciated. Their marriage resulted in a divorce.

Sophie had just started to date her husband when her grandmother was murdered. For her, it was difficult to balance her grief with a relationship during this period of time.

Sophie: There was a lot of anger. I had a lot of feelings I had to deal with. For the very first couple of years we were married it was very difficult. I had a lot of unresolved anger that I would take out on him. I didn’t know how to deal with it.

She was fortunate to have a husband who understood her pain and was able to recognize that her outbursts were not directed towards him. He allowed her to grieve openly and the initial hardships in their marriage translated into its current strengths.
Elizabeth described how the homicide changed her and consequently challenged her marriage.

Elizabeth: My husband [has] been my, just my rock… it changed him a lot and our marriage changed… only because I got crazy. We just now, probably in the last year and a half, it’s probably back to its… We’re a lot closer and a lot better, but there for awhile I wasn’t sure if we were going to make it when it first happened, because I didn’t care about anything.

Just as Nancy had focused so intently on the murder and Sophie had taken out her pain on her husband, Elizabeth had trouble caring for her marriage when the emotional effects of murder seemed to overwhelm her life.

When her sister was murdered, Clara turned to her husband for support.

Clara: I’d have gone crazy [without my husband]. He was there to help me calm back down. I talk about it all the time [to him] because I don’t feel bad talking to him about it. I’m a calm, rational, not very emotional person. I’m hurting, I’m scared, I’m confused, but I just don’t show it on the outside. He knew how close I was to my sister. So for me, it was just easier to keep that circle very small. [...] He [her husband] never gave me a hard time. But I think it changed a little at first, when I was more clingy. He’ll listen to me if I want to talk about it but won’t bring it up if I don’t. He just gauges it.

Because her husband was one of the few people she trusted, she admits that she became clingy. She said this caused strain on the relationship, but she attributes their ability to overcome this hurdle to her husband’s compassion and understanding. When I first began to talk to Clara, she was very reserved and cautious. She admitted she is not one to outwardly express her emotions. I believe survivors like Clara are reluctant to let many people see their vulnerabilities and therefore try to cope with the grief alone or with a sole supporter. For Clara, this person was her husband.

Emily also turned to her husband for support.

Elizabeth: I thought it brought us closer together. I don’t know whether every couple… I think some couples start blaming one another but my husband
and I did not blame one another. I feel that I, in fact, I had someone always to talk to. And I was very fortunate. To have someone to speak to about how I feel and to speak about Heather and what happened and so on. And he was a very good listener.

After her husband passed away, she seemed to have lost a sense of her strength. She reported earlier that she did not burden her son with her grief. Without her husband by her side, I felt her pain and her constant struggle to understand her daughter’s murder alone.

Ethan delivered the strongest testimony of the strength of marriage. His oldest son was murdered, and in the midst of tragedy he and his wife were able to draw strength from their love for one another.

Ethan: Let me tell you something. When Sarah and I were first married, before we had kids, we were nineteen, and I remember talking to her and saying you know, if we have kids we should never, ever, put them ahead of us because God said when we get married we are one. They are extra, so that means Me, God, and Sarah. Me, God and Sarah. And it’s always been. Had we have ever put our children ahead… I’ve seen families that would cater their kids, you know, like one mother or the dad would be with the kid and you’d break apart. We never did that; we never did that. Now don’t get me wrong, I loved my boys. But I loved the Sarah part of me. By having that type of relationship all of our lives up to that point, losing Devon that way I didn’t lose Sarah. She was still a part of me; we were one unit. We could cry together, and we were able to… God used that to draw us even closer together knowing that we’re going to be ok together. We’ll always be ok as long as we have each other like this.

They had begun their marriage with the philosophy that they were one and their children were extra gifts in their lives. Together they supported each other, openly discussing their pain, fears, memories and hopes. Therefore, the murder further solidified their commitment to one another.

Friends

When a family experiences the death of a family member, friends can often be the best form of therapy, allowing the survivors to grieve and heal in their presence.
According to scholars, contact with others is critical for successful healing after the sudden loss of a loved one (Amick-McMullen, Kilpatrick, Veronen & Smith, 1989; Bard & Connolly, 1982). Some of the survivors I spoke with recognized the power of friendship in the aftermath of homicide. Ethan expressed how his family would not have been able to heal as easily if it had not been for his church family. When they grieved for his family, he felt that his pain was being released with them.

Ethan: The friends and family that expressed their concerns was overwhelming. No words can express how they felt and no words were needed. The sorrow and tears that came from their heart said it all. I believe that every one, every tear shed from others is one less that my family had to and I did too. The sorrow others say they feel is sorrow taken away from us.

His wife stated how meaningful it was to have so many people come out and show their love for their son at his funeral.

Sarah: The night of visitation at the funeral home, normally visitation is a couple hours, five to seven or something like that; I don’t remember exactly what time it was, but it was hours. There were so many people there. Hours and hours and hours. It was just unbelievable the amount of people, and people from all walks of life and all ages.

Abigail was able to find peace at work. The people she worked with at the hospital took an active role in her grieving process. She said that this kindness and the grace of God saved her.

Abigail: And then wondering what you’re going to do next week and the next week… something that nags a person. [I try to take it day by day] That’s all you can do. Because I worked as a surgical nurse at Shands so my doctors were really thoughtful and they showed a lot of concerns for me and stuff like that. And there was a man that worked the night shift with me he was like my spiritual consoler, him and this other lady. Spiritually they would talk to me and that would get me through it they were always there for me I could talk to them and then going to church and worshipping God and understanding what our purpose is and all those things come together and help you get from day to the next day.
Abigail needed to be surrounded by people who cared about her. By resuming a sense of normalcy, she was able to navigate through her emotions each day. She admitted it is still a journey but that her faith has given her purpose and understanding after her son’s murder.

The majority of the survivors I spoke with did not have the same experience. Even in cases where people attempted to be helpful, many survivors reported that they felt their friends treated them differently than they had before the murder. The most common reason they provided was that the friends simply did not know what to say to them.

Robert expressed his experience with others’ discomfort.

Robert: I think a lot of people with death are scared to say stuff. With me I openly told my friends, I don’t want you to be quiet. I don’t want you to not share stories, because I wanted to know things I didn’t know. I wanted them to address Devon as if he were still here.

Even when he told people to talk about his brother, he said few listened. Kayla had the same experience.

Kayla: I think if people don’t understand, they know not to say anything to me. People want to ask questions, but they be scared. I feel good when I talk about him. You know, people they be wanting to know, but I be like, I don’t care, I don’t mind. You never know when they would be in my shoes. Everyone knows that we were so close.

She enjoyed sharing memories about her brother, not just for her healing, but to possibly help someone else who might find themselves in her situation.

Through the survivors’ experiences, they learned what behaviors were helpful to them and what behaviors were problematic. I found that survivors struggled with outside advice. I believe many people answer grief by trying to solve the pain. Natural reactions include saying things such as “it will be okay”, “this is God’s plan”, and “I
understand.” The survivors expressed that these typical responses are not helpful to the grieving process.

When people would approach Gabrielle and say, “I know how you feel,” Gabrielle reacted with frustration.

Gabrielle: You can’t possibly know how I feel. Until you walk to the walk, you don’t know how I feel. Don’t say that. These shoes... you do not want to walk in these shoes. I would respect you for saying I don’t know what to say but I am here.

Grace stated that she did not need people to try to find a solution for her. In fact, she did not need them to say anything in the moments they comforted her.

Grace: Listen. Just listen to me. You don’t have to say anything, just don’t get tired of listening to me. You don’t always have to say something because sometimes I just need to talk. Your..or sometimes if I’m talking you know say “yes I remember that..” Be supportive. And don’t give me advice. Please don’t tell me it’s going to be better, it’s going to be alright.

To Grace, things would never be okay again, and it became bothersome that others assumed her life should return to normalcy in the near future. Sophie clearly stated what many of the survivors had expressed throughout the study. She said, “Don’t try to find an answer; just listen.”

Survivors mostly reported a lack of support and strong feelings of loneliness after the funeral was over and the formal acknowledgements of the death ceased. Kayla told me that many people they had considered friends were not at the funeral. In addition to that pain, she said, “We used to have so many people here at the house, but no one comes around anymore.” Her brother, Elliot, echoed her frustration by saying, “The first week, everybody cares, but after then where is everybody at?” Gabrielle had the most vocal anger towards people that once were part of her life.
Gabrielle: Friends, I don’t know what friends are. When you funeral is over with, you are by yourself. The cakes and people are gone, and it is just you and your walls and your family. You might have the phone calls, but they stop and your life goes on.

Julia was able to detail the difficulty of being alone after the funeral. She said that when friends and family left she felt “terrible.” She described how the worst pain came in the silence.

Julia: And I mean the video started playing of his life. Video of his life…remembering this and remembering that. It was good but then, it made me cry because he was not there.”

The grief was overwhelming when the business-like events of the funeral had diminished and the formal support system disappeared. According to Freeman, Shaffer and Smith (1996) friends of homicide survivors can become avoidant, intrusive or suspicious of the survivors based on their own preconceived beliefs about the nature of homicide.

I believe that the feelings about friends to this point are common when tragedy occurs. Some survivors are open to support from friends, others cannot fully find comfort in the words of others. In accordance with Rinear’s findings (1985; 1988), the cold case homicide survivors felt that they were somewhat disconnected from “outsiders” and felt that in many situations, their friends and acquaintances were detached or stayed away. However, there is one element of a cold case homicide that I believe further complicates the relationships between survivors and their “friends.” Survivors of a cold case homicide do not know the identity of the perpetrator in their case. Many of them recognize that the killer is likely someone that they know (an idea further discussed in Chapter 8: Anticipating a Resolution). Therefore, they struggle with
an additional dilemma of who they can trust with information about the case and even more so who they can trust with their safety.

Clara: So I guess what sets apart a Cold Case family from one that gets solved, is just not knowing who you can trust. And you just don’t know if you’re saying something you shouldn’t say. You don’t know who to believe. You just change your dynamic with everyone who was involved in that person’s life.

In this regard, the trust and bonds that cold case survivors have established with many family members and friends become questionable, thus further shattering the once comforting ideas about the world in which they live.

Conclusion

Regardless of the unknown perpetrator, the impression I gained from my interviews was that the survivors’ family and friends are critical components in the bereavement journey. Positive bonds and encouragement from those closest to the victim can allow the survivor to advance forward in their bereavement journey. When the survivors experienced judgment or strain in these existing relationships, their journey appeared to be stunted or in extreme cases the survivor regressed further into pain.

Chapter 7 explores a unique element of homicide bereavement by examining the relationships a survivor forms post-homicide. The survivors encounter multiple professionals including law enforcement officials, media personnel and victim advocates. Additionally, Chapter 7 sheds light on the profound relationships homicide survivors share with each other. These survivors are bonded by their belief that murder is different from any other type of death.
CHAPTER 7
POST-HOMICIDE RELATIONSHIPS

Similar to other survivors of traditional loss, homicide survivors share their personal pain with family and friends. However, unlike traditional loss, survivors of homicide are thrust into a murder investigation. This process introduces survivors to additional individuals that they are forced to include in their bereavement journey. These post-homicide relationships include interactions with professionals, such as law enforcement officials, media personnel and victim advocates. Cold case homicide survivors are reliant on these professionals for a resolution in their case, and therefore their relationship with these individuals play a large role in the grieving process. Additionally, the survivors are likely to interact with other homicide survivors, who are described by my survivors as the only people who truly understand the pain associated with murder. The strong bond between homicide survivors is best described by the survivors’ own insights that homicide is unique and unlike any other type of death. The survivors must navigate through this difference, sharing their stories with other survivors and relying on the professionals they are introduced to post-homicide.

Murder is Different

Previous research suggests that those who experience homicide are at a higher risk of developing clinical problems and have a higher level of distress than people dealing with the loss of a loved one by other means (Thompson, Norris & Ruback, 1998). The bereavement journey that homicide survivors face is also documented to be very different from other types of bereavement (Armour, 2002; Malone, 2007; Masters, et al., 1988; Rando, 1993). Several survivors that I interviewed mentioned this differentiation, without being prompted to by interview questions. Some family members
noted that they had experienced death in the past, but were unable to relate to that experience because the grief process of murder was so different.

Michelle: [I] had a brother die when he was five years old in my bed, you know our bed, at the house we lived in. And so, that, that, that put me in a place where I know that you can go at anytime. And I knew people get into accidents. There is no guarantee of life. But, um, murder was a different thing.

Elizabeth: My mom dying and knowing that she’s dying, and then him being murdered. It was so different. I was crazy when my dad died because I was very close to him. But when my mom died, I had been there for two weeks and I was at peace. I lay down on the couch next to her while we were waiting for my niece to get there and slept the best I’ve slept in days. But with Bryan, I literally had a nervous breakdown.

Harrison: My son got killed. That’s the closest person to me. My mother had passed, but my son, my son, he’s supposed to outlive me. A natural death. Totally different. He was taken from me, violently taken, shot in the head. It took me a while to say he was shot in the head. I didn’t want to receive it.

Gabrielle: It is different when they have been in the hospital, and you know that now they are at peace.

Elliot: When someone is sick, you get ready for it… you have a warning.

Sophie: It’s different from having just losing someone. It’s not the same. [In regards to losing her mother to natural causes] Well she wasn’t hurt. She died in her sleep. But my grandmother was hurt. She was and both of them and there is a lot more psychologically that goes with that.

Other survivors highlighted how other people’s stories of tragedy were dissimilar to their own. Their interactions with others had reinforced the idea that murder created a different aftermath than any other type of death.

Emily: Losing a child under these circumstances is different than just losing a child. A number of them [her friends] have also lost their daughters. They’re my age and they have lost their daughters to breast cancer. But they have had--- Their daughters were married. See, how I feel is that Heather was 21. She never really had a life, you know? She was just starting. She was never married, if she had decided to be married. She never had children. She never had any life. Or their daughters--- They understand too, they differentiate.
The survivors' comments mirrored findings from several studies. Knapp (1986) observes, “Of all the ways a child might die, murder is surely the most devastating and painful for a family to endure. For one thing, murder represents a sudden loss, which in itself throws the family into violent turmoil. There is no time to prepare; it cuts deep and swift, like being run through with a cold blade” (pg 86). Even research comparing the aftermath of other types of sudden deaths, such as car accidents, suicide, and vehicular homicide, conclude that homicide is different as well.

Armour (2002) specifies three ways that homicide is unique to other types of traumatic death. First, the family members are confronted with the fact that their loved one was suddenly murdered by a willful human being. Second, the surviving family members must often publicly grieve, as homicide typically receives great attention from outsiders such as the media, law enforcement officials and community members. Finally, survivors of homicide are not seen as direct victims of a crime, since homicide is a crime against the state. Therefore, they find themselves often forgotten in the pursuit of justice.

Masters, et al. (1988) examined the similarities and difference between homicide survivors and survivors of suicide victims. Similarities included: economic stress, stigmatization of the deceased and their family/friends, and issues of guilt and responsibility. However, the authors note that there are several differences between the survivors as well. Homicide survivors have additional struggles including the publicity that surrounds a homicide, the realization that the perpetrator may be known to the family, pursuing fear of the perpetrator’s intentions and the effects on the remaining family members and a preoccupation with the concept of revenge. When the authors
compared the suicide and homicide survivors, they found that homicide survivors faced an even more complicated grief process. Masters et al. (1988) suggest that homicide survivors have the additional stresses of publicity, feelings of fear, anger, revenge and strained relationships if the suspected perpetrator is a friend or family member.

According to Kashka and Beard (1999) homicide is not only a personal event for survivors, but often also becomes a public and criminal justice event. Therefore, the survivors must face a personal journey of bereavement while handling the pressures of the media and the efforts of the criminal justice system to find and prosecute the murderer. Additional differences are noted in the article as well, including the fact that homicide is violent and intentional, incites rage and causes loss of trust in all social interactions. Murphy et al. (2003) specifically examined the differences between bereavement parents of accident, suicide and homicide victims. The results of the study showed that over time, parents of homicide victims reported the lowest rates of accepting the death and the highest rates of post-traumatic stress disorder and marital distress. These findings confirmed results of previous studies (Rinear, 1988; Thompson, et al., 1998), but also shed new light on the complications of homicide survivors, finding this group of parents to be the most dramatically affected when studied in a longitudinal manner. In sum previous literature strongly suggests that homicide survivors experience similar emotions associated with other grieving forms of sudden death, but with greater intensity. Using the cold case homicide survivors’ personal experiences, I detail how they differentiate between people who have experienced the murder of a family member and those who have not.
Many of the cold case homicide survivors I spoke with highlighted how their experience with death had separated them from all other people who had not experienced a homicide, a finding consistent with Amour (2002). Emily and Clara echoed what the literature supports: people who have not experienced a homicide cannot fully relate to a homicide survivor’s grief.

Emily: [In regards to another man who’s son died in an accident] And I believe he lost his son--- I believe he fell of the balcony or something? And he said to me, and I was very surprised that he said this, he said to me that he didn't know the pain is something that we were going through. He said he did lose his son and he explained, but he differentiated between the loss. Do you understand what I'm saying? He was a very compassionate gentleman. But there is a difference.

Clara: She wasn’t in a car accident, I mean, that’s tragic also. But she was killed in her home and we don’t know by who.

Because of these perceived and documented differences, many of my cold case homicide survivors expressed that it was very difficult to relate to other people. This inability to relate to others in some cases also seemed to exacerbate the survivors’ feelings of distance from others. The distance some experienced was in some ways due to their own unintended personal isolation. If a survivor feels no one can relate, they are more likely to withdraw from family, friends and outsiders, thus creating a barrier around themselves. This unintentional barrier may cause others to feel uncomfortable spending time with and/or offering assistance to the survivor. This pattern is substantiated by Miller’s (2009) research which found that some survivors are able to embrace help from friends and family while others tend to withdraw and isolate from others. In these cases, Miller argues the survivors’ actions lead to alienation from potential support sources. To explore the survivors’ feelings of aloneness, I asked them to describe their relationships with the people they encountered after the homicide. I
soon found that aside from close family and friends, the survivors truly held to the concept that only other homicide survivors would be able to relate them.

Other Survivors

During my interviews with the participants, I felt a very powerful connection to the survivors. They allowed me into their homes and offices and in some cases told me intimate feelings and experiences they had never shared before. One of the strongest themes I took away from the interviews was the survivors’ feelings of being different. In an instant, their lives had been affected by a tragic murder and they felt that the pain associated with this tragedy set them apart from others.

Ability to Understand

The overwhelming majority of survivors felt no one could relate to them unless they too had experienced a homicide in their family. This finding reflects existing literature that describes the aftermath of murder as a lonely trek, that could only be understood by others who have experienced a homicide themselves (Rock, 1998; Walter, 1994). Consequently, practitioners, friends and others in the community were of little assistance to the families as they struggled to come to terms with the death. Kayla distinguished her own interactions with outsiders and other survivors to illustrate this dilemma.

Kayla: When I talk to others who have lost someone [to murder] I say “you know we are family, we are all hurting and grieving.” Other people, when they say “I know how you feel”… No you don’t.

Several other survivors also openly discussed how easily they could relate to other families who had suffered a similar loss. Drawing on their shared experiences, the survivors very candidly answered the question “Do you feel others can relate to you.”

Michelle: You’ll never know unless it does happen to you.
Elizabeth: Only if they've been here.

Nancy: We're [homicide survivors] walking in the same shoes.

Harrison: With other people who lost someone through violence, the pain don't change; it's just the same. It goes on and on and on.

Abigail: We [homicide survivors] can relate to each other, you know. We both have been down that road.

Madelyn: If they are walking in these shoes, they know.

Sophie: I think that even though we [homicide survivors] all have different perspectives it's still… with homicide its one central thing. We are all wondering the same thing.

Mark found the ability to relate to other survivors to be slightly more complicated. While he acknowledged that other survivors are likely to understand his pain, his ability to relate to others was further limited to survivors who had lost a child to homicide.

Mark explained others can relate “depending on the circumstance. But if you've never lost a child, I don't give a damn who you are.” For him, the murder of a child even further defined his grief. He described the difference in detail.

Mark: A spouse, you don't have to love. A child, there's a connection there you can't break even if the kid was the biggest jerk in the world, it doesn't matter. I think it's different. I think in some cases, it may be worse to lose a spouse. Some people really are closer to their spouse than they are their kids. But I think not just in regards to losing a child, because you're talking about losing anybody, it's a little different. You never expect your child to die before you do. It's weird. You expect your mother and father to die. If your brother dies, it's a terrible thing, but you never expect to outlive your child.

Other survivors distinguished between their case and others, but in more surprising ways. That is, some were able to find differences that made them “better off” than other survivors. For example, Michelle pointed out that traditional homicide survivors and those who have a missing loved one might have a more difficult path than
survivors of cold case homicides, because they had to relive the pain of the homicide in court, while those with a missing family member had even fewer answers than she did.

Michelle: And when those cases are solved, I can say that those people are a little worser for it. But then, the one’s that are missing, they are even worse. You don’t even know where your loved ones are.”

Sarah provided another example of a survivor finding a positive comparison between her situation and that of others’. She told me about a meeting she had with a woman who was paralyzed from the neck down from a gunshot wound. The woman had suffered an injury almost identical to the one that had killed Sarah’s son.

Sarah: Well it was a .22 caliber pistol and it hit her in the back of the shoulder, the same place as Devon, and it [the bullet] just kind of ricochets once it gets inside. And so hers had landed in her spine and had paralyzed her. And it made me realize that I knew how adamant Devon was about not wanting... he would not have wanted to live like that. And so it was just the weirdest thing because the bullet entered her the same place as Devon’s and I know from the autopsy what the bullet did to Devon and how he died, but she didn’t; she lived. And she was just a sweetheart of a person and not bitter. I felt like the Lord was saying I could let Devon live and he could have had to live like this. He wouldn’t have wanted that. So that was just a real special gift. We cried. A lot of tears, but it was sweet. I’ve never seen her since that day. I guess I… I don’t even remember her name. I still couldn’t figure out how she got up into the building. But I think that was a special gift for me.

As she listened to the woman’s story, Sarah realized how the death of her son might have been a blessing, despite her pain.

**Helpfulness of Other Survivors**

Survivors expressed how talking with other homicide survivors was and is a helpful tool. Emily’s daughter was killed in a city that was earlier terrorized by serial killer Danny Rolling. She was able to meet with some of the mothers who had children murdered by Rolling.

Emily: I sort of wrote to her and she wrote to me. And she had lost her daughter a number of years ago, I think back in 1986 or something like that. And
she insisted when she knew we were coming down to Gainesville, [...] that we get together. To go out for dinner. And so she invited another woman that I told you had lost her daughter to Danny Rolling, she was there and what happened is this one woman, Pat, we met her and I thought it was an excellent meeting. We stayed there. We not only had dinner, but we stayed several hours after dinner.

Ethan and Sarah sought out other couples who had suffered a similar tragedy. They expressed how both families could serve as a source of support for one another.

Regardless of the words that were spoken when they were together, the idea that they truly understood their experience was therapeutic.

Sarah: When I have to go through that with somebody else I usually just hug them and cry with them. And they know I've been there so that means a lot. They know I know and that's a big difference, just like this couple that we were just talking to last weekend. It was like... we didn't know each other before their son was killed. We go to the same church but we had not really... we knew who each other was but we didn't really know each other. We have a pretty big church. It was a friend of mine that has us all over for dinner and let us talk; it was good. And really you don't have to say anything; just hug them and cry with them or whatever.

Other survivors had not yet experienced another survivor reaching out to them. However, there were very few who did not recognize the power that this relationship would have. Grace acknowledged how beneficial it would have been to hear from other survivors immediately following her brother's death.

Grace: They might have already gone down a path and be able to direct you in how to deal with stuff. Especially the older cases... how did you get to where you are today? What did you do that might help me? Can you give me some direction of how to go from here? You are meeting people who are in the same situation you are... you can bond with them and make friends with them.

Sophie noted that she enjoyed reading about other survivors because it allowed her to feel as though she was not alone. She had not considered going to a support group or seeking out other survivors until we discussed the topic in the interview.
However, she noted it was something she thought would be helpful. She recalled that when her grandmother was killed, she needed some guidance. She wanted to know what was going to happen in the days and years to come. Knowing that this was a need she had, she had developed a desire to help others when a similar tragedy occurs in their lives.

Sophie: You know if somebody in the middle of the night would call me up and say, “There is this family who just had”…and I could go and say, I know how you are feeling in this moment… I could do that and that would’ve been helpful to have had that done.

In addition to Sophie, several other survivors spoke out about their role to help other families who are affected by homicide. Some of them assumed the role of listening and guiding other survivors through homicide.

Michelle: I used to be given that job to call up a family or that they thought I might be a big help in talking to. I find myself more of a listener you know. And if they ask me something, you know, I can tell them what my experiences were. But more so than a few times, they kind of want to talk. You know? It would be nice to have somebody that you can talk to.

Marianne: You know what it’s like to lose a loved one and so I think you can relate to someone else that has lost a loved one. And perhaps if their loss is more recent than yours, you may be able to provide some insight.

Harrison: You can look at the whole picture from the day that it happened ‘til the day it is now and you can see all the goodness that God is doing and it’s meaningful now. The first time it’s meaningless, senseless… now all that’s gone and now you can see the beauty of it and then you can use the experience to help somebody else, because you know what they’re going through.

Other survivors had developed additional ways to help other families. Michelle not only called the families to offer her support, but she also took part in rallies and anniversary marches that were held in honor of cold case homicide victims. Michelle said “I feel that if I can make a difference in someone else’s case, because I have done
that quite a few times, helped pass out posters for someone else’s loved one.”

Rebecca, who had struggled to care for the family after the passing of her granddaughter, decided that financial support was another way to help families with unsolved homicides. She developed a cookbook that allowed for all proceeds to go the children of unsolved homicide victims.

I found that these families were not just reaching out to other survivors. They were taking the tragedy that occurred in their own lives and trying to make a difference in the lives of others. Sarah was the greatest example of this. She described two ways she was reaching out to other people in the aftermath of her son’s murder. First, she worked closely with the local health department to teach abstinence and the dangers of drugs and alcohol to area school children.

Sarah: I tell the story of Devon, a brief story of Devon’s life and show a picture of him and all that, and I don’t tell them he’s my son. If I tell a story and how important it is to choose the right kind of friends and people to be around because I don’t think Devon did a real good job of that. So anyway I tell that and then at the end I tell them he was my son. Their eyes are a big as saucers, but it makes them stop and think and it’s a true story.

Since Devon’s death, her professional goals have shifted. Once aspiring to own her own business, Sarah now runs a pregnancy care center for young, at-risk mothers.

Sarah: I’ve been doing that for eight and a half years. Somebody said, Sarah… I remember how hurtful I felt when I first realized I would never have grandchildren from Devon. Half of my family would not ever be here. And that was sad to me, and so several people have said Sarah, look how many children you have now. These girls and these babies you see coming into the world, you know. Just the Lord knew where to put me. And so I’ve grown, matured spiritually and of course so has Ethan and so has Robert. So yeah, I think we’re probably better people; no doubt.
Each of these survivors described how helping others had allowed them to feel more positive about the murder. They felt they had a purpose and were able to honor their loved ones through their good works.

**Practitioners**

While other survivors proved to be a resourceful post-homicide relationship for the cold case survivors I interviewed, their interactions with various professionals were not always as helpful. Unlike many other types of loss, homicide survivors are forced to deal with their grief in both an interpersonal and intrapersonal manner (Malone, 2007), as they balance their own personal grief with their public interactions with case-related professionals. Research suggests that it may help families to appoint a non-family member to serve as the family contact for the media, friends, and law enforcement agencies while the family seeks privacy (Malone, 2007). To better understand how the survivors perceived their interactions with and treatment by professionals, I asked them to detail their experiences with law enforcement, media and victim advocates. I present how their responses indicate that while these relationships were helpful for some survivors, they were also extremely detrimental for others.

**Law Enforcement**

Law enforcement agents were the professionals that appeared to be most important to the survivors. Burgess (1975) provides one of the only statements in the literature about cold case homicide survivors. She detailed how their grief might be further exacerbated by their extended relationship with the police. “If there is no suspect in a homicide case, the family must give considerable time and energy in working with the police to help determine leads, to describe the victim’s life prior to the homicide, and to help reconstruct events during and following a homicide” (p. 393).
believe that the failure to apprehend a perpetrator in this case makes the survivors shift their anger and frustrations from the traditional outlet, the perpetrator, to the law enforcement agents still working the case. When discussing their experiences with police, the majority of survivors’ dissatisfaction could be characterized by two themes: lack of communication and lack of investigation.

**Lack of communication**

First, the majority of survivors expressed frustration and anger at the failure for police to return their phone calls, the passage of years since any form of communication had occurred and the denial of information. Many survivors had tried to establish an open line of communication with law enforcement, assuming the responsibility of calling and checking on the status of their case. However, feelings of frustration, disappointment and defeat mounted when law enforcement failed to acknowledge their attempt to stay in contact. Michelle’s frustration grew out of fear. She felt that if she was not getting calls back, it was also possible that calls from other people with information in her son’s case were also not being returned.

Michelle: I am calling them and they are never calling me back, how do I know they’re not going to get a call from a tipster and never call the tipster back? Now that’s scary. Why have the detectives put themselves so far out of the, um, public’s reach? And how do you get one [a detective]? How do you call and get one?”

Nancy felt that in the 20 years since her daughter’s case began, law enforcement had neglected her.

Nancy: I’ve tried [to call] but after you beat your head against the wall calling 4 or 5 times a day, and your calls go unreturned, you stop. Emotionally you can’t handle that. The first time I got a telephone call was about 3 years ago and they called to tell me that they were sending out a press release on the cold cases. And I really appreciated them telling me because it’d been 17 years. And I told the sheriff that I hoped that this would be the beginning of a more open relationship because it had been 20 years and I
told them that I had not had any communication from their department and that I thought that that was a real shame.

Not everyone in the sample had taken on the personal responsibility of calling the police. Instead, many grew upset with the fact that the police had not contacted them. After the police had gathered original case information, many families found themselves without any communication for years.

Sarah: Well you know we actually haven’t heard from them in a while. Years. That’s frustrating, but I know that there’s been a lot of other murders since then and a lot of other cases to have to deal with so they just get put on the back burner. And we were not the kind of people that were knocking on their door. We were not calling all the time…

After thinking about this for a few moments, Sarah added, “I felt like calling and letting them know, hey, I’m still alive, are you doing anything?” From her comment I gathered that Sarah felt the police did not acknowledge the victim's family members who are relying on them for answers.

Harrison provided a bold statement that further emphasized this idea. When I asked if he communicated with the police he told me there was no point.

Harrison: I told myself it’s a done deal. Don’t call him because he ain’t got nothing. I don’t call. I think there’s a card in my wallet and I look and I say this is all I got left of my son is a card with a detective’s name on it, and this is what I get for my child; somebody killed my son and they don’t have a clue… and they don’t have a clue who did it.

In his mind, his son’s memory and the importance of his case accounted for nothing more than the faded business card he kept folded in his wallet.

When survivors were contacted, they often felt that the officers were not being up-front with them. In some instances, such as Anna’s case, survivors felt the police were dishonest. Anna said the most frustrating part of interacting with law enforcement were
the “lies.” The “lies” she described emerged from mixed messages from multiple
officers.

Anna: The first detective I asked him point blank or face to face was she raped?
And he told me point blank no. I wanted to know details. They just told me
she was strangled. I don’t know because the second detective had no
problem giving me that. He had no problem coming right out and saying
yes she was raped.

Nancy, Michelle and Rebecca thought that because they were women, the police
did not include them in the investigation from the beginning.

Nancy: They’re very secretive; they shoved me off in the background. I think that
the biggest problem is that law enforcement hasn’t considered me as part
of the investigation. And because they haven’t considered me part of the
investigation, they haven’t given me any information. I brought that child
into this earth and I’m being denied access to the child.

Michelle expressed similar frustration. She said that immediately following the
crime, she was extremely emotional, and she believes that police did not feel she was
able to contribute to the case.

Michelle: They never showed me pictures of anybody. But later I found out they
showed my daughter pictures, and uh it was like... there were things that I
thought about when I was sitting there.

The fact that police did not ask her questions immediately following the crime still
haunts Michelle, as she was in the home at the time of the attack and held her son as
he died. She felt it was possible she also held many of the pieces to solving this case.

Rebecca was the victim’s grandmother, but had raised the victim and the victim’s
children in her home since their births. She had tried to contact law enforcement on
several occasions.

Rebecca: They just don’t call me. One guy told me he didn’t have to talk to me
because I was only the grandmother. I said but I got the [grand] kids.
Emily said after a while, she became frustrated with the various explanations for failure to provide new information in her case.

Emily: I was calling up every single week at that time. And there was always no follow-up. Now, I don’t know what police procedure is, but I feel that there should be follow-up after two or three weeks. Unless I’m mistaken. But anyway, it seemed to be every time I called up, they would give me excuses that the lab or all sorts of crazy excuses that I didn’t understand what was going on.

Abigail had tried to establish communication from the onset of her son’s case.

Abigail: I stopped. After my son died, I used to call the sheriff’s office, umm every time I called them to try to get information, they would always tell me that the person I need to speak to wasn’t there or they were in a meeting and call back. There was always an excuse.

Gabrielle still calls the police, but she recognizes her calls are not likely to provide her with new information.

Gabrielle: I call once a week or every other week. The man I was talking to had to turn the case back to the state. They talk, but they don’t know much. They know stuff, but they ain’t gonna tell me.

**Lack of investigation**

The second major source of dissatisfaction with law enforcement was a perceived failure to actively investigate the case. To most, law enforcement holds a great responsibility to uncover answers and solve cases. As time goes on and survivors find themselves without a resolution in their case, a common reaction among them was to question the efforts of law enforcement. The survivors were asking a very basic question: If my case was a priority and the police are following up on all leads, why has a perpetrator not been apprehended? Survivors tried to assist police in many cases with information they deemed important. In their eyes, the police often had failed to acknowledge the importance of the information or to follow-up on perceived critical
leads. Robert felt their failure to act on information had caused the case to remain unsolved.

Robert: The original cops who worked the investigation, and those who have gotten the case and retired, I honestly do not have a lot of respect for them. I am very disappointed in the false information they have given. I just feel like they didn’t try or give a crap. That is why it is as cold as it is. They didn’t follow any of the leads my parents and me were giving them. They just kind of pooh-poohed everything off. They didn’t even report the fact that the cops that showed up on the scene and saw the car speeding off. I mean, so much stuff could have been done quickly and more effective, instead of their regular routine where they ask people that might have seen it. I am sure they could have done much better things and gotten to the bottom of this already.

His father, Ethan, shared the same frustrations.

Ethan: Well… we told them some things, they didn’t follow up on it and that just kind of bothered me. Why wouldn’t they… if we thought we knew something, why would they not investigate it?

Grace has tried to aid in the investigation by gathering information and forwarding it to the police. However, she doesn’t believe that law enforcement has followed up on any of the leads she developed.

Grace: I am giving them names… I told them who I thought it was and they didn’t even go interview them. He is still sitting in jail right now. Doesn’t make me feel very good or make me trust the judicial system.

In many cases the survivors felt like the officers were not putting in the effort needed to solve the homicide. Gabrielle was certain the police had information that could bring her husband’s killers to justice.

Gabrielle: I don’t trust them. You have to be persistent. Somebody’s going to jail. I feel like they had enough information and I feel like they could have done went and talked to those boys.
Gabrielle believed that if the police continued to question the suspects, they would eventually be able to arrest them. She had a firm explanation as to why no one had come forward in the murder of her husband. “You aren’t putting the fire under his ass.”

Kayla believed that the police knew more information than they were sharing or following up on. “That is the reason why a lot of the cases don’t get solved. They aren’t out their asking the people they need to ask.” Grace also recognized the slow pace of police action. The police had been notified of a possible perpetrator in her brother’s case, but she said, “When the police finally got there to talk to him, the gun had conveniently disappeared.”

In some cases, the families felt that the police were not concerned that their loved one had been murdered, because of the victim’s lifestyle or geographical location where the murder occurred. Elliot thought that police did not respond in a timely manner to his brother’s murder because of the area of town in which the homicide had occurred. This idea that the police were not interested in controlling crime in that area translated into his explanation as to why the investigation was also being treated without urgency.

Elliot: My thing is they know everything that is going on and they’re not doing nothing. Nobody stepping in, nobody trying to lock anybody up. They just like “let them kill each other. We’re not going to do anything, and just let them kill each other.” Why isn’t anyone out there, trying to pull in these two sides and try to get to the bottom of this?

Anna took an even more extreme stance towards law enforcement. She believes that the police did not care about her sister’s death because she was a known criminal in the community.

Anna: I think the whole thing [the investigation] was bogus. I think because she had a criminal record and that she was a prostitute and a drug user that they put her on the back burner. You know? That’s one less crime happening today.
Negative perceptions of the police contributed to the frightening concept of a cold case homicide. Emily expressed a disheartened opinion of her daughter’s case. “If there’s a cold [case homicide] department, her case was in the freezer.” I asked her to elaborate on her feelings.

Emily: Well, it’s not solved is it? I asked if this case was solvable or is it going to be something like a cold case? Because I was thinking my goodness, we didn’t know anything at that point. But he always insisted that this case was solvable. Well, you can see that 17 years later…

She had been told that her daughter’s case had several promising leads, but this information did nothing to ease her pain. In fact, her reaction made me feel that the promising statements by police almost seemed insincere and a means to pacify her fears, thus causing even more hurt. Abigail did not retain much faith in law enforcement’s ability to solve her son’s case. “I feel like this is at a standstill and this is where it is gonna stay.” Rebecca had a slightly more optimistic view. While she acknowledged her frustration with the current detectives, she believed a fresh start could be the key to solving her granddaughter’s murder. “It’s a cold case. I think it needs a new set of eyes. I do.”

The survivors who expressed positive experiences with the police also talked about the importance of communication in contributing to their sense of satisfaction. Each felt that they had been properly informed and had established an open line of communication and trust with detectives working their case. Clara was at peace with the status of her sister’s case.

Clara: I had a good experience with law enforcement, so it was just nice. They talked to me and answered my questions. I had confidence in them enough to feel like I could leave it with them.
Marianne spoke with investigators on a fairly regular basis, receiving updates and assisting with the case when possible.

Marianne: They were just very, very gracious. Very helpful. And they'd keep me informed. And they kept in really good touch with me and then if they got a lead or something, they'd ask me if I knew if such-and-such a name meant anything to me. And that sort of thing.

Sophie acknowledged the great work that the officers had done in the original investigation. She explained her understanding of their role, and was thankful for their work.

Sophie: The police did all that they could do. They were wonderful. They were not there after, but they are not a support service. They only go so far.

Two survivors who expressed great disappointment with law enforcement also shared positive experiences with the police. Robert acknowledged that with laws and procedures in place, the police are limited in what actions they can take when investigating and interviewing suspects. He appreciated the way that the current investigators listened to him and were able to share information that they currently had.

For Anna, the latest detective on her sister’s case had made a point to ask about her sister’s life. She made an effort to learn about her as a person, and not just as a case number. While the case was no closer to a resolution, at least she trusted that her sister was in caring hands.

Despite the positive experiences of some survivors, the majority did not have a positive reaction to law enforcement. Quite clearly, in the instances where police expressed personal concern, created open lines of communication and included the survivors in the investigation, survivors were more likely to express a sense of satisfaction and peace. Sophie noted that the police are not a support service for the
families left behind, yet she and others noted the importance of feeling acknowledged by the detectives and officers who they believe hold the key to one day solving their loved one’s murder.

In previous research Rock (1998) notes that some of the survivors’ frustration with law enforcement may emerge from their lack of control over the situation. In many cases, the survivors have limited access to the case, the victim and/or their possessions until the trial is completed, and therefore, for the survivors in this sample, the failure to apprehend a perpetrator may postpone the overwhelming lack of control that is described as detrimental to the healing process in traditional homicide grief literature. The police are the individuals who the survivors rely on to solve their loved ones’ homicides. The survivors in my sample explained their satisfaction and frustrations with police and how this specific relationship affected their grieving process. However, it is significant to note that they also made it clear that regardless of the pain that their relationship with police had caused them, they needed the police for a resolution in their case. Therefore, the survivors were willing to subject themselves to personal pain in an effort to keep their loved one’s case alive. This unique theme of reliance and dedication to a solution would be recognized in each of the professional post-homicide relationships the survivors described.

Victim Advocates

The survivors also described the relationship that they had formed with victim advocates. I was extremely interested to see what services had been offered to the surviving family members by victim advocates. I found it significant that only one family described a positive interaction with a victim advocate in their case. Sarah and her family had been assigned a victim advocate who has remained close to the family in the
11 years after the murder. The greatest service they provided to Sarah and her family was helping to keep them informed on the progress of their son’s case.

Sarah: We would use them [victim advocates] to communicate between us and the detectives. If we had a question we felt real comfortable about calling Amanda (pseudonym) and she would go to them and find out for us so that we weren’t… I just didn’t want to be a pest but I would have questions from time to time.

Over time their communication with the victim advocate has ceased, but they were very pleased with her support and felt they could still call for assistance if needed.

The remaining families reported disappointment with and lack of assistance from the victim advocacy program. Michelle remembered that immediately following her son’s murder, she received a greeting card from a victim advocate and was never contacted by the group again. She said immediately following the crime, a greeting card did little to help her. Instead, it would have been helpful to have someone trying to contact her and actively assist her as she navigated through the grief. Nancy was never provided with a victim advocate. She said, “I’ve never had a victim’s advocate in 20 years. I received a letter of apology from the State Attorney’s office saying they were so sorry they fell down on their victim’s advocacy with you.” Anna was contacted by a victim advocate and felt that each time the victim advocate contacted her it made her grief worse. However, she describes how the communication ceased shortly after the crime.

Anna: Initially right when it happened there was some counselor […] had got into contact with me through them. And I think I talked to her maybe three times. I never heard from her again. I can’t even remember what we talked about. I just never heard from her again. She was the one who sent me newspaper clippings that I have on Jessica (pseudonym). I would get one and get more pissed off.
Anna told me that the newspaper clippings described her sister’s lifestyle and family in an extremely negative way, and yet the victim advocate had carefully cut out the articles to send to the family.

According to Florida Statute 960.065 the following persons qualify for assistance from victim advocates: Except as provided in subsection (2), the following persons shall be eligible for awards pursuant to this chapter: a victim, an intervenor, a surviving spouse, parent or guardian, sibling, or child of a deceased victim or intervenor and any other person who is dependent for his or her principal support upon a deceased victim or intervenor. However, two families I spoke with stated they had been denied any victim assistance because the slain family member was a felon. In the aftermath of her son’s murder, Julia was overwhelmed with grief and additional financial responsibilities. Yet she was denied assistance from the local victim. “If that person [the victim] does not have a felony, there is hope for you. But if you [the victim] are a convicted felon, they don’t assist the family at all...none.” Madelyn and her family had a similar experience. Immediately following the murder of her son, Madelyn tried to help her surviving children, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren. When I asked Madelyn to describe her experience with a victim advocate she became frustrated. “They don’t help us at all because they [the victim] have a record. They punish the family. He had kids. This is a difficult time.”

I was unnerved by the survivors’ raw accounts of receiving little if any assistance. I believe the limited experience with victim advocates may heavily affect survivors. According to Golan (1986) and Horne (2003), survivors who do not receive proper assistance may develop unhealthy and inadequate coping mechanisms to heal and
adapt to post-homicide environment. Interestingly, though, many of the survivors who reported the absence of a victim advocate assigned to their case also indicated that the services likely would not have been helpful to their healing journey. They all cited the same reason as to why a victim advocate would not have been able to ease their pain: how could they truly understand their pain? Rock (1998) notes that the survivors are not only trying to fill a silence created by death, but they are also trying to fulfill their own needs. However, Rock also notes that the depth and complexity of the survivors’ pain is beyond what any other person could comprehend. Thus his findings lend support to the survivors’ feelings that aid from outsiders may be of little assistance. Mark, for example, said he never had a victim advocate but was quick to explain the services would not have helped him.

Mark: No, I never have. But I’ve gotta be honest with you, most families that I saw didn’t really benefit or want it. But if a victim advocate shows up, it’s a job. They have great intentions and they want to help and do things. But most of the time, most of the reactions I’ve seen is who are you and how could you even begin to understand?

Paul reiterated his father’s feelings, stating, “Every situation is so specialized, how do they relate?” Sophie felt like a victim advocate serves an awkward role, trying to enter into an unknown tragedy and “fix” the situation. “It’s kind of like a stranger coming up to you and try to make everything better, and its kind of like who are you? I don’t know, it’s done… there is nothing you can do to change it.” Grace agreed, the victim advocate would have been of little benefit to her family. “I don’t think a victim advocate could have done any good. There isn’t anything that can make you prepared or get your mind at ease to handle a situation like that.”
The most significant theme emerging from this portion of the interview was an unmet need among the survivors for support by someone who could understand their pain and the different journey that was ahead. To the participants I spoke with, a victim advocate was doing a job. While their intentions may have been genuine, it was an impossible task to expect them to relate to the family.

**Media**

The final group of practitioners that the survivors are forced to interact with in the aftermath of homicide are media professionals. Immediately following a homicide, media personnel are often present to uncover details about the crime and to interview surviving family members. The media often brings unwanted attention to the family and the victim claiming that the public has a right to know the details of the case (Armour, 2002). Traditional homicide literature establishes that media personnel often distort the meaning of the tragedy for the surviving families (Miller, 2009). The cold case homicide survivors in my sample detailed how the media’s portrayal of their loved one and the media’s inaccurate information had caused great frustration and complication throughout their grieving process. The survivors experienced great pain from viewing the media coverage, but overwhelmingly felt the coverage was necessary.

**Portrayal of victim**

The survivors in my study expressed that one of the most difficult issues with the media was the way in which the media portrayed of their loved one. Consistent with previous studies (Armour, 2002), the survivors often felt that their loved one’s image had been distorted and that the community was not shown the true character of the victim.
Michelle’s son was murdered and had a history with drugs. She felt that his murder might have been viewed differently by the police, community and the media solely because her son had a criminal history. While it was painful for her to feel as though the importance of her son’s case had been diminished, she offered a very insightful explanation for this portrayal.

Michelle: I think sometimes that um they put too much emphasis on a victim’s past history, criminal history, lifestyle and all that stuff. And I kind of have a feeling I know what behind that. That is a way how some people feel safe, and they think that person brought all that onto themselves and hey, I can still feel safe and not have to think about that having to happening to me or anybody that I care for because we’re just not into that lifestyle that that victim might have had. And even saying little things such as, well there were so and so many murders that happened this year, but only three of them had victims that didn’t have a criminal past, you know?

She believed the media were insensitive and that instead of focusing on catching the killer, the media often focuses more on the negative qualities of the victim’s life. She stated that the media should simply provide the community with the facts of the case and advised them “not to defame the victim or say things that bother them that could lead to things never solving their case.”

Marianne’s grandmother had been murdered in the country store that she ran. The media misrepresented her grandmother from the beginning. Starting with the first headline, Marianne’s experience with the media was a negative one.

Marianne: The headline said, 'Tavern owner murdered and robbed'. Now, that is still a sore point with me. Tavern. It was, I mean, it was just--- Well, I already told you what a meek, mild little lady she was. And it was a gas station. It’s just not factual. [...] When I first went in, he [the detective] said, 'Is this about the old country store murder? The lady who got murdered there? ' And I said, 'Yes. I'm her granddaughter'. And I said, 'I could hug your neck because it still wrangles me that the headline in the paper was, "Tavern owner murdered and robbed."' And I said, 'It wasn't just that the---' But just the image that, that projects and everything.
No one from the media had reached out to Marianne or the family for comment. She believed that the media viewed her grandmother as “just some old reprobate that ran a tavern out in the woods and that was it.”

For one family, the portrayal of their son and brother was outrageous. In a television special on cold case homicides, Ethan explained that the media had actually used the wrong name in referring to his son, switching his first and middle name. His wife Sarah recalled an even more upsetting error. In a story about a man who was arrested for trafficking cocaine, the media noted that the man was the roommate of their murdered son.

Sarah: No he wasn’t; he didn’t have a roommate. I was ballistic. Even though it may have been the reason for Devon’s murder, but don’t tell everybody they were roommates. I was furious. They weren’t even anywhere near each other. So Ethan sat down and talked to them and we said we would really appreciate if you want to talk about our son you come and ask us and make sure you’ve got your information right.

Their son Robert had also noticed the inadequate and inaccurate coverage his brother’s case had received. When I asked about his opinion of the media coverage, Robert stated “I am not thrilled with it at all.” He recalled the local coverage of his brother’s murder. “The local media here slammed Devon as a drug dealer which just pushed it all wrong. They didn’t dive into anything. They didn’t even interview us.” To him, the media coverage could have been dramatically better, and if done correctly could have aided in finding a solution to the case. “I believe it could always be better because there is just so much you can do, especially quickly, getting it out.”

Elliot was glad to see his brother’s story and picture in the paper. However, he was taken aback when he looked at the picture the newspaper had decided to use. “That’s his jail picture. Why? I mean you could have got a picture. They are just lazy.
There are many pictures of him.” Elliot explained that when people read the paper and see his brother’s booking photo, they assume that he was just another criminal being killed.

Rebecca and Anna shared a similar experience. The lifestyles of their loved one’s had been the focus of the media. They felt that the media portrayed the crime as a service to humanity. In a sense, the murder of their loved one had cleaned up the community in a way.

Rebecca: Brandy was a dancer. She had these children and wasn’t getting any child support or anything and you do what you have to do. I tried to keep anything like that…you know down. She was a dancer…so what? You know that’s like saying…I watch um TV a lot. I watch Cold Case, and I watch Law and Order and sometimes they say, “No humans here” after a girl’s killed, because she was a prostitute or…”Somebody did the world a favor.”

Anna: I think because she had a criminal record and that she was a prostitute and a drug user that they put her on the back burner. You know? That’s one less crime happening today. That’s how they made me feel and that was pretty much the very first article I read in the newspaper. Or that’s how the writer of the newspaper felt.

Anna went on to explain the frustration of the coverage. When she saw the first television news story on her sister’s case the detective stated, “She had no family. I’m her family. I told Detective *** that, that really ticked me off.” Additional, the only two pictures the media had included in their stories was the crime scene photo of her sister nude and face down in a creek bed and her mug shot. When recalling the information that the media had included, Anna said, “It just told her criminal history. I just wasn’t happy. I was angry.” She and her father had been interviewed about the murder, and she believed the media had come into the interview with one focus. “It just seemed like
they twisted everything we said to fit. All they wanted to know is how bad was her childhood to make her become the type of person she was.”

The negative portrayal of the victim further complicates the grieving process for the survivors. Doka (2002) and Spungen (1998) found survivors can suffer from disenfranchised grief, which occurs when the victim has been involved in criminal and/or deviant lifestyles or belongs to a minority group. These survivors are likely to feel less support from the community and can often feel as though they are being re-victimized by the judgment attitude of the media and the community (Rando, 1993; Rynearson, 1988; 1994). As the grief process is complicated by the media’s portrayal of their loved one, it can cause a prolonged grief period and interrupt the natural healing that should occur over time (Armour, 2003). The cold case homicide survivors I spoke with often work to keep their family members’ stories in the media, despite the associated pain. With each passing anniversary of the crime, many families attempt to contact the media to run a story. This annual experience is likely to cause mixed feelings for cold case homicide survivors. On one hand, they feel that coverage is helpful for the case, but on the other hand, seeing the details in print and risking the publication of disturbing character and case facts can cause great distress. The drawn out and reoccurring pain associated with their relationship with the media is another complicated element of a cold case homicide survivor’s journey.

**Difficulty viewing media coverage**

The survivors I interviewed also experienced extreme personal pain and emotional distress after watching media coverage of the homicide. The pain of simply seeing and hearing the crime was extremely difficult for Elizabeth. Her brother’s case was unique in the fact that the victim actually called 9-1-1 to report his own murder. He died on the
phone with the 9-1-1 operator. In a special on unsolved homicide in the area, the news chose to air the 9-1-1 call. The media had contacted her to review the story before it aired, but she had declined. Elizabeth described the traumatic experience of hearing her brother’s voice on the news.

Elizabeth: And the following Sunday, I was in bed, asleep, and I was dozing off and I heard that music and I knew that music. And I knew right then. And they tell when they’re going to do it that it’s going to be a disturbing call when you listen to it. Well, they played it again and they didn’t tell me they were going to do that. So I was totally freaked out. I didn’t listen to it either time. When I found out they were going to play the 9-1-1 call, I just couldn’t handle it. I hadn’t heard his voice since then and he tells you, he describes the man and he tells you that uh, ‘I’m dying’.

Emily did not live in the same state where her daughter was murdered. When she listened to the news stories, she was unfamiliar with the area they described, but she clearly understood the details that they released to the public. The media disclosed “that she was dead and that she had been beaten and they did describe that on the TV. That she had been beaten to death. I know what the media’s like, you know, it’s all sensationalism.” It was difficult for her to hear the dramatic details of the murder.

Robert said “locally, the media pissed me off a few times.” He knew the reporters in the area and assumed they would do a better job for the family. The frustration was not for the pain the media had caused him but rather for the pain he could see in his parents. It was hurtful “to know that my parents were hurt and to see my mom grieving and to see my dad cry or upset. That sent me into a rage every single time.” Other stories covered his brother’s character and the family’s comments about the victim. Those stories elicited positive emotions. “Anything nice they would say about Devon made me cry and think about what a good brother and person he was.”
Paul’s older sister had been murdered and the case received an uncanny amount of coverage from the media. For him, it was not the contents of the coverage that made him uncomfortable. Instead, the attention he received from others was difficult. “It was tough. Being famous for all the wrong reasons. That was probably the biggest challenge for me.” He tried to avoid the attention the media had created. “Trying to hide from it trying to go out, and I shouldn’t say hide from it, but trying to not be recognized-- Yeah, to be normal. As a kid, it was a bit overwhelming.”

Kayla also experienced a practical difficulty as a result of the news coverage.

Kayla: They put it [our address] in the paper so we had to move. They got our address. It is so dangerous. I went to them and asked them, why did they put our address in the paper? They said they get whatever comes over the police bulletin. Ya’ll don’t… I think that is against the law. That is… you don’t know what that does. I went to a lawyer about it, because I wanted to sue them, but it was public record so we couldn’t. I had to move.

With an already limited budget due to the unexpected costs associated with the murder, Kayla was faced with the costs of moving her family into a safe home. She believed that the publication of her address would allow the murderers to find her. Therefore she was angry at the media’s lack of discretion.

Other families had a more positive experience with the media. Julia and Harrison feared that the media would focus on their son’s previous criminal history, but Julia was relieved when she saw the news coverage.

Julia: He did not put the jailhouse pictures of Will in the media. I can thank him for that. They usually go and get a jail house picture because that’s all they have. They didn’t do that. They didn’t release it. And he said he would do everything he could to protect us and he did do that.

Abigail said she was pleased with the job of the local television station, stating that they “did a great job about the cold case and presenting what we were saying and how
we felt.” She truly felt that the reporter had taken the time to sit down with her and listen to the family’s experience. She sent the reporter a thank you card, telling her how grateful she was for her interest and for the thoughtfulness that had been displayed in the final news story. Her only disappointment focused on the lack of leads generated from the coverage. “It’s just so sad that nobody, that they have nobody that has come forward.”

Grace and Clara both had concerns that the media would focus on the negative aspects of their loved ones' lives. Grace feared her brother’s drug use would be used to downgrade the murder. “Jackson (pseudonym) used to smoke dope, but they didn’t emphasize on that,” Grace noted. Clara was apprehensive about the slant the news coverage of her sister’s murder would take. Her sister’s life was complicated and she had recently begun engaging in negative behaviors. However, Clara was impressed with the coverage.

Clara: It was good. I was relieved she did a good job. I was nervous in the beginning and it’s kind of surreal to watch and know that it’s your sister that they’re talking about. Everyone I’ve worked with has been kind and compassionate. We’ve been fortunate. I was nervous. But I was relieved after I read it and saw the tone that they used.

Similar to the survivors’ experiences with law enforcement, the majority of experiences were negative based on the survivors’ feelings that the media were insensitive, sensational and inaccurate. The survivors who had positive experiences with the media felt that the reporters had truly taken time to listen to their story, to report accurate facts and to help inspire the community to report a perpetrator.

Given the contrasting opinions about the media it was not surprising that the families expressed how difficult it was to decide whether or not to communicate with the
media. I anticipated the majority of survivors would state they wished they had not allowed the media access to their family and their story. As Anna specifically stated, she would have changed how she handled the media’s presence. “If I could go back, I would avoid the media.” Contrary to my initial expectations, however, the majority of survivors felt that the media coverage was essential to their case, and regardless of the pain, their cooperation with the media was necessary. Nancy described this feeling.

Nancy: There were times when I just wanted to be alone. And they follow you everywhere. But I gave them permission to do that because I had nothing to hide. And that’s the most important thing I learned in this case. That if you deny them access, they’ll never come back. And you need that coverage.

Despite the frustration and hurt, which was often a side effect of media coverage, survivors told me how they actually took personal responsibility to ensure their case stayed in the media. Nancy shared with me how she demanded a press conference be held on the 20th anniversary of her daughter’s disappearance. “I was excited because it was 20 years and they were still covering the case and I was hoping we would jar somebody’s memory and come up with something.”

Mark said that he would actually generate events or interest in the case and would subsequently invite the media to cover the story.

Mark: I’d call them up or we’d send out press releases. And say, and if I talked to them I’d say look, we don’t have a lot but we’re going to change the reward or we’re going to do whatever the hell it was we were doing, I wish you’d cover it. And they would. And I think part of it was because I never lied to them. Never. You know, I never mislead them, I never told them something big was happening when all it was, was some little thing. And I never turned down an interview. I haven’t to this day and I never will. I don’t care who it is. I don’t care what they want. I didn’t care if they were bad mouthing Christina. I would give that interview because at this stage, call me. Any news is good news.
Interestingly he described not being concerned with the contents of the media articles. If his daughter was mentioned in the article, regardless of the context, it was a positive contribution to the investigation into her murder. In his mind, any story that he could generate increased the likelihood that someone would provide information in his case.

Elizabeth also took the initiative to create an interest in her case, asking the media to cover each anniversary of her sister's murder. She was impressed with the media's willingness to assist her in keeping her sister's case current.

Elizabeth: Every year, when it's the anniversary, I either contact... Last year's the only year I didn't do it, I either contact the local newspaper or the TV station and I did do, I've done it every year, something's gone every year. One of them does a story for me just to get it back out in the public. They're very willing and very helpful. Uh, the Gainesville Sun came one day and we went over in the library and they did a story. Uh, and before ****[the reporter's name] did it, there was a reporter named ****, and he did just a real brief one to get it back out there also. So almost every year there's been something done. Yeah. I try to keep it, you know, in the media.

Emily had the same outlook on the media coverage: the more, the better. When I asked her about her desire to have the story in the media, she expressed the need for coverage.

Emily: I know that the media is sensational but I still feel it's very, very important. No matter whether they say something that's like you said, degrading or whatever, or sensational. If they can get somebody to perk up and to think back on those years or think back about that or where they may have been at that time, I don't really care what the media says as long as they say something. And if it gets or if they are helpful in solving the case, that's what's most important.

Other families described how they kept in contact with the media to ensure coverage.

Harrison: I didn't want to do it, but the only reason I did was because I wanted them to know... I wanted the people to know how much I loved him. I wanted everything to be out.
Ethan: Anytime they put anything in publication to the media or TV or anything maybe somebody will see it…

Madelyn: I want his picture here, there, everywhere.

Kayla: They run his name every month, hoping that somebody will call in. It is hard to see it is there though. It reminds me of it. Every time he was in the newspaper, I cut it out. I’ve got a book with all of his pictures. I like to see it in the news. I want people to know.

Kayla: I think they should do something ever so often to put it back out there. That way, before you even get a chance to forget about it, it is back in your face.

The survivors detailed a desire to feel heard, respected and cared for by the reporters covering their case. In the event that they found the news coverage to be distorted, inaccurate or insensitive, their experience with the media was reported as a negative relationship. However, despite the negative and hurtful experiences described by the survivors, there was a great desire to establish a continuous coverage of the cases. The survivors acknowledged that the media might be able to solicit the information needed to solve their case. Each story printed, regardless of the context, kept their loved one’s name in the paper and provided potential motivation for a witness or perpetrator to come forward. Therefore, similar to their reliance on law enforcement, many survivors believed they needed to maintain a relationship with the media, despite the personal pain it caused, in an attempt to help bring a resolution to the unsolved homicide.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the cold case survivors interviewed expressed mixed feelings and experiences with professionals who played a role in their case. Previous literature confirms that interactions with various persons involved post-homicide often create additional stress and frustrations. Lyon, Moore, and Lexius (1992) found that homicide
survivors’ anxiety is greatly affected by their interactions with the criminal justice system and media specifically. Practitioners’ complicated roles and common use of jargon coupled with the survivors’ dependence on law enforcement, media, mental health, legal and medical professionals often causes great strain on the families affected by homicide (Brown, 1991).

This strain was highlighted by the complexity of the post-homicide professional relationships described in this study. Each of these relationships had created a combination of positive and negative personal experiences, both aiding and complicating the grief process for the survivors. However, the survivors did not focus on their own personal grief when emphasizing the importance of the professionals involved in their case. Instead they highlighted their reliance on the police and media. Ceasing to communicate and cooperate with these professionals was not an option for most of the survivors in my study. They noted that the media and law enforcement were the keys to solving the cold case homicide. Therefore, the survivors were willing to accept the disruptive relationships and subject themselves to the subsequent emotional distress they may encounter along their journey.

According to Horne (2003) and Sprang et al. (1989), this added institutional grief and complex nature of the bereavement creates a need for victim advocates to reach out to survivors. Despite the current survivors’ perceptions that a victim advocate would not be able to assist them currently, if a solution to the case was reached, a victim advocate could be helpful in helping the families understand legal proceedings. Lyon et al. (1992) found that survivors who were offered advocacy services by relevant professionals were likely to experience less stress and greater mastery of information
when interacting with the various bureaucracies. However, the survivors I spoke with had little belief that a professional would be able to help them navigate the grief or their experience. Instead, most survivors felt that only other families who had experienced a homicide would be able to conceptualize the magnitude of this type of traumatic loss.

Chapter 8 examines the most unique stage of the cold case homicide bereavement journey. As mentioned previously, without a resolution survivors are often stunted in their healing process. The survivors in my study were unwilling to believe that their case would remain unsolved forever. Chapter 8 details how the survivors developed a strong hope for resolution and planned for a future in which their case was solved.
CHAPTER 8
ANTICIPATING A RESOLUTION

Cold case homicide survivors are significantly distinguished from traditional homicide survivors as they do not have an identified perpetrator or resolution in their loved one’s case. Despite their attempts to move forward and develop supportive relationships with others, the survivors in my study expressed a significant need for a formal resolution in their case. The majority of survivors recognized that there was a fear associated with the identification of a perpetrator. They acknowledged the murderer could be someone they knew and trusted. However, the survivors maintained a need to know what happened in their case and who was responsible for the murder. For the survivors in my sample this need had manifested into hope and belief that their case would eventually be solved. As they anticipated a resolution, the survivors detailed plans for confronting the offender and recommending sentence. Within this chapter I will detail the most unique themes on the journey of cold case homicide survivors including fear, hope for a resolution, confronting the offender and recommending a sentence.

Fear

It is typical for survivors of homicide to feel fear after a tragic death. There is a fear that the surviving family members could have been victims themselves. Michelle clearly articulated this fear when she said, “they could have killed all of us.” Similarly, Clara stated that she used to wake up every morning with a deep-seeded fear that in an instant someone else in her family could be killed.

Clara: At first I was more anxious between my mom’s death and my sister’s. I didn’t feel anyone was safe. Anyone could leave at anytime.
However, this fear of additional deaths gradually seemed to diminish. Robert described how he found peace and no longer feared he was in danger.

Robert: I used to be fearful about what if this person is after me. That was the fear at the beginning. I don’t fear knowing who it was, because whoever it was, I have already forgiven in my eyes.

For traditional survivors, there is a constant fear that the murderer could be paroled or escape from prison (Armour, 2002). The survivors I interviewed do not and may never face this fear, because no one has been charged with their family member’s death. Instead the greatest fear of the cold case homicide survivors I spoke with was discovering the identity of the perpetrator. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigations, less than 14% of all homicides are committed by a stranger. Based on this statistic, it becomes obvious that in most cases, the victim likely knew their murderer. Therefore the fear shifts to learning the identity of the perpetrator.

Clara: There’s two different types of scariness there. [Not knowing who did it versus knowing who did it] But definitely the [greatest] one of finding out. My greatest fear at the time was finding out it was her husband, the kids’ father.”

Not knowing the identity of the perpetrator caused some survivors to feel as if everyone around them could be the murderer. They found it difficult to bond with and trust others. For these survivors, basic events such as attending church or going shopping become complicated, as each person at these locations was seen as a possible suspect. Abigail described this fear and suspicion.

Abigail: I would like to know who it is, because I go into stores you know I smile, and talk to people and I don’t want to be talking to the person who killed my son. Like I told the sheriff, I don’t know who it is; they could be standing behind me in the grocery line or I could be sitting in some meeting and I could be sitting right with them. You don’t know who it is and who to suspect. What it is, it’s a hard thing for a while, I would go to stores, and you know, I wonder if he is in here.
The majority of the families expressed this same fear of discovering the identity of the murderer as many assumed it was likely to be someone they knew. Their fears were reinforced by the police and media describing the rarity of stranger homicides. Katie recognized that her mother’s killer was likely someone she knew. The family had remained in the same neighborhood and remained close to her mother’s associates. Katie noted this made it especially frightening for her. “It scares me… they could still be around.”

Michelle described the pain of finding out the murderer was likely a friend of her son’s.

Michelle: The police gave me the impression it was his own friends, his own friends, the ones he had grown up with when he was little. So, that was kinda hard to see, you know. Friends that I may have had in my house, and took em home, took em to different places.

She was angry that the murderer may have been in her home immediately following the murder, holding her hand in an effort to ease her pain.

Other families suffer with the burden of their own suspicion regarding the offender’s identity. Some believe they know who did it, but as the years go by without a resolution, they have had to accept the suspected friend or family member back into their lives. The greatest example of this dilemma was Clara who believed her sister’s ex-husband had killed her. Clara feared that her nieces and nephews could be living with a murderer.

Clara: They [the children] are living with somebody else now and what if that person had been the offender ...? They can’t prove someone did it when they can’t prove who didn’t do it.
Over time, she had convinced herself that he was not the perpetrator in order to continue a relationship with the children. However, it was clear that the possibility of his guilt had not completely vanished from her mind.

Grace also feared that she knew the perpetrator. Her former son-in-law had made statements at the funeral that were unusual and sinister in nature. The comments indicated he had been present at the murder, based on the fact that he knew details the police had not released. She feared that she might have a familial relationship with the perpetrator in her brother’s murder.

Grace: It is aggravating not knowing exactly who it is. It is more so to think it could be someone in our family that could have had something to do with it. I think I know who did it. If it was him it would be heartbreaking because I trusted him and he [the victim] trusted him.

The consequence of these fears for many survivors was a struggle with whether or not they wanted a resolution in the case. Ethan said, “[When we learn the identification of the perpetrator,] nothing will change. Nothing’s going to bring him back.” It seems that after so many years of not knowing, many survivors fear that an arrest might make their pain even worse. Harrison openly discussed how for several years he watched as other families found resolutions to their loved one’s murder, it appeared so painful.

Harrison: I didn’t want to know who did it. I don’t feel nothing for them. I don’t know who did it… I looked outside of prison and I seen some of my brothers and sisters what they were going through when they knew who did it; they were suffering when they had to go to court and reenact what happened, and the man who did it is sitting up there and his family is sitting over here and they’re looking at him saying, “Oh, my God.” And his family is making faces at them and their brother done killed the son, and going through the court system, that court system is not perfect and it’s showing injustice… I said my God, they’re going through all this here? I wanted better not to know.
However, as time progressed he told me that he had found the strength to grieve and to accept his son’s death. Once this occurred, he stated his mindset had shifted.

Harrison: Oh, yeah, I want to know, and I want him punished, and I’d be willing to go to court and watch them do whatever they’re going to do to him because it’s wrong. I had mixed emotions about that then but in my case his murder has not been solved.

These conversations about the perpetrator’s identity further illustrated the complex journey these survivors face. While many survivors struggle with a fear of not knowing, they also recognize how difficult learning the perpetrator’s identity could be. Particularly if the perpetrator in their case is a family member, a new type of pain and loss might confound their grief. While cold case homicide survivors have spent years trying to move forward without answers, the fear of being transported back to the initial pain of the homicide once a perpetrator is identified if very real. Harrison explained that the court process would not be easy.

Harrison: I seen some of my brothers and sisters… what they were going through when they knew who did it. They were suffering when they had to go reenact what had happened. The man who did it is sitting up there and his family is sitting over their making faces at them when their brother done killed the son.

Despite this fear, the majority of survivors, including Harrison, eagerly anticipated a resolution in the case and refused to give up hope until they had answers in their case.

Hope for a Resolution

Grace: There have been a couple cold case files that have been solved. It took a while but they did it.

I asked survivors to explain how optimistic they are about their case being solved. A few survivors I spoke with expressed little faith that a perpetrator would be arrested in their case. For some, the lack of evidence makes it difficult to be hopeful. Elizabeth questioned how a conviction would be possible without convincing physical evidence. “I
don’t think it will ever be solved. There’s no real evidence.” One palm print had been recorded from the crime scene. The sister realistically explained that the palm print could be anyone’s, including the delivery man’s.

Emily believed that the high turnover at the sheriff’s office was detrimental to the likelihood her daughter’s case would be solved. The original detectives were no longer working her case, the cold case detective that had taken over was retiring, and Emily became very discouraged. “For us to get any justice for Heather with these older people retiring… I don't see others really picking up where they will leave off.” She feared that after so many years of her daughter’s case remaining untouched and unsolved, the change in investigators would mean that Heather’s case would be filed away for a second time.

A final pessimistic outlook was expressed by Elliot whose brother had been murdered two years prior. When I asked him if he thought the case would be solved, he immediately responded, “I don’t know. It ain’t happened yet. What is going to change?” I was surprised by his response, because I expected the relatively short time period since the murder to be associated with a greater level of hope. However, I found that the families who expressed that a resolution was unlikely were more apt to have a strained relationship or experience with the police than those survivors who believed a perpetrator would be arrested. It became apparent that the more communication the families had with the police and the more involved they felt in the investigation, the more they believed that their case would be resolved.

Other survivors had a different outlook. They believed that a resolution was possible and in many cases, likely. The timing and the reasoning for the answers were
not a major concern for the survivors. Instead, they expressed an overwhelming amount of hope. For some the hope came from their faith in God. “I have my faith that one day before my eyes close, I will see justice”, said Julia. Many survivors drew on their relationship with Christ and their belief that God is all knowing to justify why they thought a resolution would be reached.

Harrison: Now that I know, if God wanted this case to be revealed and He wanted us to know who did it, God would bring it to the open. There’s a reason and purpose why God allowed this case not to be looked into, and it’s His reason… because God got the ability right now to open that case, bust it wide open, and let us know what happened, who did it and what all. It ain’t no lie that can be covered that God wants to be revealed.

Madelyn: You have to confess that in your mind and believe it in your heart. All you need is faith. All you need is that mustard seed. I already know it is going to be solved… I don’t know when, but I know.

One family expressed a very strong faith in the power of the Lord. They had all found peace in the fact that God held the answers to their family member’s murder and that when He was ready for them to know the details of the murder, He would bring them forward. Ethan was confident that the perpetrator would not escape the consequences of his actions. He was sure that the murderer would be held responsible for what he had done, even if it was not here on earth or in his lifetime.

Ethan: I know in my heart God knows it all; He’s [God is] in control. He [God] knows when the time will be; He [God] sees it all, so I feel like it’s not here while we’re alive there’s going to be a judgment and somebody is going to pay for this somewhere down the line – somebody’s going to pay for this.

Sarah had arrived at the same conclusion after an experience she had at a Bible study meeting.

Sarah: I believe that we’ll know one day. When I did that Bible study in church the Lord spoke to me and it was like, “Sarah, you’ve trusted me from the very beginning; you’ve put your trust in Me with Devon’s case and all of that, and you’ve trusted me but you haven’t believed me.” And so that was the
gist of it. I really believe that God is going to let me know a resolution; I believe that we'll see that. I don't know when, where, whatever. I just want it to bring honor and glory to Him when it does.

It took several years for their son Robert to find peace in his faith. After counseling and his own journey with grief, he too agreed that Christ held the key to the solution in his brother’s case. However, his desire for answers had little to do with his own peace of mind, and more for his parents' serenity.

Robert: I have faith that when God wants us to know, He will tell us. Between me and you, I really don't have that big of a deal of wanting to know. Of course the mystery part of wanting to know is there, but my main concern is that I really just want my parents to know before they die.

The remaining survivors draw on their instincts and knowledge of homicide investigations to strengthen their hope. Clara describes how she is hopeful the perpetrator will tell the wrong person, causing a break in the case.

Clara: I think it will be. I don't know why or when. It's just hard to imagine this person not saying anything to anyone and taking it to their grave with them. I feel like it has to. It'd be more of a fight or fear or self preservation than the offer of a reward or money. I watch all these cold case shows and part of me thinks I shouldn't find them entertaining, but I watch them with hope.

Emily shares the hope that someone will come forward with information.

Emily: What I've seen and heard, is that it appears to me as if something just has to drop on their heads and then maybe. You know, a call from somebody. I don't want to say that I don't think that they're not capable, it's just, and I'm sure that this happens to many cases, just something out of the clear, blue sky.

Information from law enforcement officials provided some survivors with mixed feelings of hope. Mark drew strength from updates from the detectives working the case. He told me, “I think this is better leads than we’ve ever had and we’re probably closer to figuring out what happened.” Harrison also found peace with the police
updates. The police believe they had apprehended his son’s murderer on other charges, yet there was not enough evidence to charge him in this particular homicide case. To Harrison, having his son’s murder suspect off the streets was a boost of hope in his pursuit for justice.

Harrison: Deep down inside of me I believe it’s already solved. I think the officer… I think the detectives were honest. I think the detective told me the truth, I think to the best of his ability that he got him.

Other survivors were discouraged by the updates by police. While they tried to remain hopeful that a resolution would be reached, news from law enforcement can diminish their hopes for justice. For Grace, she now debated whether or not the case would be solved.

Grace: To be honest, I don’t know. They keep telling us they know who did it, they know who did it. But they say that [they] can’t charge him because they can’t put the gun in his hand.”

Robert said that staying hopeful is the hardest part of his journey.

Robert: I get confident and it gets crushed. I get confident and it gets crushed. Just leads that I know… for example, when they went to talk to *** and he said he would take a lie detector test, and then when they went back he said no because he had talked to his attorney.

Regardless, these survivors have not given up on the fact that a perpetrator could be arrested. The updates from police can be disheartening at times, but the updates demonstrate that law enforcement is active on the case. With each day they work the case, survivors know it is one step towards a resolution.

Initially I imagined that the survivors I interviewed would have little hope for resolution in their cases. The time since murder spanned from 2 to 44 years, so I expected that the longer the case remained unsolved, the less hope I expected to see. However, this was not the case in my sample. I came to the conclusion that hope for
answers was a factor that allowed the survivors to keep a positive outlook towards life and a reason to remain strong.

**Confronting the Offender**

Our criminal justice system has developed several programs that allow victims to meet their offenders. I wanted to understand the survivors’ desire to come face to face with their loved ones’ killers and wanted to understand what they would hope to gain from this experience. The families that I interviewed were left with so many questions about the particulars of the murder and the offender. The majority of them believed that confronting the offender in court would provide them with answers. Two basic questions emerged. The families wanted to know why the offender committed the murder and what gave him the right to take another person’s life. Below is a sampling of the responses I gathered when I asked what the survivor would say if given the chance to sit down with the offender:

**Marianne:** Why? She was a frail, little lady and she was defenseless and you know, you could have had anything that was there, you know, why did you feel like you had to do it. And I just feel like there was a lot of anger in, you know, the way she was strangled with the man’s belt and then buckled in the chair. So, it just, why was this person so angry?

**Marianne:** What were you thinking? You know? Because we were denied whatever time she had left. You know?

**Julia:** Besides even in your lifestyle, how do you get to the point that you get to say ok, now you’re going to die? How do you get there? What right did you have to take my son’s life?

**Harrison:** What did he do so bad that made somebody want to kill him and take him away from her? Why? We’re still left with that question, why? Why?

**Abigail:** I would wanna know from him, what and who, who and what gives you the right to kill and take another person’s life. No matter if his is blue, black, purple, or white. Why do you think you need to shoot somebody, what would make you that angry at somebody that you need to take their life
and you’re not the person suppose to do that. God didn’t put you on this earth to do that.

Katie: [I would ask him] Why would you do that? She had four kids, why?

Gabrielle: I would ask them why he had to take my husband. Why did they shoot? They should have kept going. He didn’t have anything to do with it.

Elliot: I would ask him why? It wasn’t even that serious. Nobody even fought. Does that make you feel confident taking all these shots? You just like killing people? There wasn’t no reason for it.

Grace: I want to look at him and ask him why? Why did you destroy so many people’s lives?

Robert: I would ask this person, are you sorry for this? Do you have any regret? Is your conscience getting the best of you? Just kind of feel them out and then make my judgment by that. I forgive you if you are hurt. I want to know why. Why did you do it? What were you thinking? What was going through your head?

Madelyn: I want to know what were you thinking. Did you think you were going to get away with taking somebody’s life? How would you like it if I drove up to your house and shot your child and let his ass be on the ground?

Sophie had the same questions for the offender, but for a different reason.

Sophie: I would ask him, what happened? Yeah, just tell me what you did. I need to know what you did. I want to know what happened. I don’t know if I care [why]. Yeah, I would want to know why. I think it was probably because he was high and didn’t know why because he’s dumb, but I would want to know what happened.

To her, the idea of why was not as important as learning the details of the murder itself. Her conclusion was very insightful. Most of the families I interviewed wanted to know how and why the murder occurred. They were hoping that the gaps in their story would be filled if they were able to confront the offender. They were confident that they would be provided with an explanation that might close some of the wounds of the homicide. For example, Abigail was depending on the words of the offender to heal her family. “I would say the same thing you know, why did you do it? If you could tell me why, it’s not
gonna bring him back or anything but it would settle my mind. You know? It would make me feel, it would give me some answers. My family [would have] some answers on what happened or why did it happen, you know.”

Ethan felt that in addition to asking the question of why the killer did this, it was important to meet with the perpetrator on a matter of faith.

Ethan: I’d love to meet him. I’d ask him why, why would you do this? And then I would say do you know who your Lord and savior is? Because I believe in execution; I believe in capital punishment by all means, but nobody deserves to go to hell. I don’t want him or her or whoever to go there, so I would try to witness to that person I think.

In court, families are often given a chance to make a victim impact statement. In this statement they are able to express the grief and pain that the crime has caused. Few survivors had thought about the idea of making a victim impact statement to the court. “[I have never thought about it], because I never thought it would like ever happen,” said Sophie. For the select survivors who did think about the statement, their words were extremely powerful. The most significant statement came from Kayla whose brother was shot and killed.

Kayla: I want to let him know that the decision he made on November 7th, 2008 changed my life, for the rest of my life. My life has changed completely. Without my older brother… he was my older brother but he was like a father to me too, because my mom and my dad split up. I saw my brother every day. I would call him every day or ride past to see him every day. Even when he was locked up, he used to work around the corner at this one place, and I could just ride by and see him. It wasn’t like he was gone. There has never been a day in my life when I haven’t talked to my brother. It is totally different when its like “oh no, not anymore… not ever again.”

She went on to describe her thoughts about the offender’s family.

Kayla: They will never know how we feel. We can never hear Jerry’s voice again, we can never see Jerry’s smile. He will never be a part of us again. We don’t have nothing but his memories. They will never be able to fill that
void. They will be able to go to prison and visit. We have nothing but his tombstone and that is not fair to us.

It was important to Kayla that the court and the offender knew her pain and the injustice her family has faced.

Other families were hesitant to make a statement in court. Clara carefully balanced the need for the offender to hear her story with the pain the event might cause.

Clara: I’m sure they could care less. But I do think about it. Them having to listen to me and face a family and kids. […] I think it depends on who it is. If it were someone that he knew, I think so. If it were someone that he didn’t know, I don’t think it would be worth the trauma of doing it.

Anna did not feel her words would affect the offender, so instead she focused on how her presence in court might serve a stronger purpose.

Anna: I really wouldn’t say anything. I would just make eye contact because I look so much like my sister. All I know is that I want to be there.

In homicide cases, victim impact statements can be extremely powerful and moving, though little is known about how the offenders are affected by these statements. It was Emily’s fear that by making a statement before the court and to the offender that she might be allowing the killer to relive his brutality against her daughter.

Emily: The only thing that I’ve always thought about, is when people give these victim statements, I think that the perpetrator gets a high or a thrill from hearing how he has made others suffer. Besides his victim. That’s just my opinion. And I wonder if maybe people want to get that off their chests, are they feeling that they’re going to get through to this killer? They’re not going to get through to him. And he has no remorse. He’s happy he did what he did. And he’s happy. He’s even happier when he hears what he’s done to the parents and brothers and sisters. He’s happy. This makes him feel more alive that he has made others suffer besides the victim.

Even though she recognized how important it is for a mother to speak out in court, she believed her daughter’s honor would be better preserved if she remained quiet.
Recommending a Sentence

The survivors’ expectations for a resolution led many to consider not only what they would say to the offender but also what sentence they would recommend for the perpetrator. Most of the survivors I spoke with had already debated whether life in prison or the death penalty would be the better option in their case. I asked survivors what sentence they would recommend to the judge in the event of a conviction. Their responses illustrated that the concept of punishment was another complex struggle for the survivors of cold case homicide. I found that the survivors in my sample had multiple views about the type of punishment they would recommend and various justifications for their recommendations.

While the majority of survivors recommended the death penalty, a small group of survivors said they would recommend life in prison or abstain from a recommendation all together. For example, Michelle expressed how difficult it was for her to lose her son, and that she would not want another mother to go through the pain she felt of losing a child. Therefore, regardless of how the death was to occur, she tried to keep that pain in the back of her mind. “I don’t even think whoever did it should get the death penalty. Whether it’s legally or illegally don’t take my child’s life,” said Michelle.

Other survivors who were against the death penalty believed that a sentence of life in prison would be worse for the offender. To this group, life in prison would cause them to think about their crime, the victim and the family that they left in mourning. “I think that the hardest thing would be for somebody like that to sit in jail for the rest of their life,” said Nancy. Marianne focused on her faith in Christ’s justice, and proclaimed her stance against the death penalty.
Marianne: I have to tell you that I don't believe in the death penalty. I'd want him to sit there until their body rotted and because I know, and this is from my strong sense of faith, I know that they're going to have to answer to God. I find comfort in that. And expediting that for someone by electric chair or lethal injection, you know, it's forever. So from that standpoint, I could see it--- I've heard some people say, you know, I could press the button myself. I'd want them to live every miserable day locked up and their freedom taken away.

Abigail expressed her desire for the perpetrator to receive life in prison based on the fact that he had remained free for so many years. To her, he needed to pay for the crime and for the time he avoided the justice system.

Abigail: I wouldn't recommend no death sentence but he needs to have the rest of his life locked up and simply for the reason that he didn't want to come forward and he never did come forward. And he got it away with it for so long. So he needs to spend the rest of his time locked up.

The survivors who would recommend the death penalty had various explanations for their recommendation. This section examines the multiple theories of punishment the survivors used to rationalize their desire for the offender to be executed. These theories include revenge, retribution and incapacitation or deterrence.

Revenge

Several scholars have found that homicide survivors are often filled with rage and feelings of revenge immediately following a homicide (Amick-McMullen, Kilpatrick, Veronen & Smith, 1989; Feldman Hertz, Prothrow-Stith & Chery, 2005). Early in the interview, family members in my sample also expressed feelings of anger and revenge towards the perpetrator in their case. They described the helpless feeling they experienced, which resulted from the lack of progress by law enforcement. Therefore, many survivors detailed how they had contemplated taking justice into their own hands. Michelle told me that this feeling of revenge and vigilante justice had been at the forefront of her thoughts immediately following her son’s murder.
Michelle: I thought about it myself. The police are never gonna get that man, so when I get that name, I’m gonna do what I’ve got to do. If you can stop another mother from feeling like this, you know, you think about it. I don’t care what my kid did. I don’t think he deserved this. …this is something that I should not entertain.

As time went on, she recognized how unhealthy and dangerous this mindset was, so she reported that she no longer has those same thoughts.

The feeling of revenge and retaliation are still fresh for four survivors. They clearly noted how they were so discouraged with the lack of justice in their case. Therefore, with each year the case remains unsolved, the more frustration and anger they feel towards the offender.

Mark: If I could get away with it, I’d kill him.

Rebecca: Give him to me for about 15 minutes. I’ll be a happy camper.

Anna: He is walking through the streets of Gainesville and I’ll find him. If I could put my hands on him, it would be done.

Grace: If I find out why, the police better get him before I get a hold of him.

These survivors all had an extreme amount of unresolved anger towards the offender. I initially thought time would ease the natural stage of anger, but that was not the case.

These survivors ranged from five to 20 years since the murder of the victim. The strong feelings of revenge expressed by some of my survivors prompted me to explore the concept of the death penalty more closely.

**Retribution**

In addition to revenge and anger, many survivors followed a more retributive approach to their recommendation. Under this argument, offenders are punished because they deserve to be. Often the retributive argument is viewed as an “eye for an eye” justification for punishment. The families of homicide victims possess a strong
desire for retribution from the moment the murder occurs (Rynearson, 1988). From the onset of the police investigation there is a need for the perpetrator to be apprehended in order for the surviving family members to feel that an injustice has not occurred. Once an offender is arrested, the survivors’ refocus their desire for retribution on the trial and the resulting punishment (Rynearson, 1988). Some of the survivors in my sample noted that the death penalty would provided a punishment that caused the perpetrator to experience the same fate as their loved one.

While not every remaining survivor said they would outwardly recommend the death penalty, they stated they would have no problem supporting the sentence if that was the decision of the judge. Julia had struggled with the idea of the death penalty prior to her son’s murder. She turned to a passage in the Bible (noted in: Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20, Deuteronomy 19:21 and Matthew 5:38) to justify her desire for the sentence now.

Julia: Now I support it. I didn’t but then again Bible does say an eye for an eye. And I always looked on the side for mercy and wouldn’t let that come to the forefront but now that I’m here...I wouldn’t ask for it. But I wouldn’t object.

Grace cited the same passage in the Bible, noting that if the death penalty was the court’s decision she would be at peace with that.

Grace: But then again, the Bible says an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. You take a life, you give a life.

The retributive argument that the death penalty provides a sense of justice was expressed by the majority of survivors. For many, they were adamant that the death penalty was the only way that justice would be delivered for the victim and their family.
The magnitude of the crime and the suffering that their loved one endured was the most common justification for wanting the death penalty in their case.

Rebecca: I think they should die like she did. She’s been gone since she was 23 years old. They’re going to get theirs. And I would want to watch it.

Katie: I think they should die like she did. -Katie

Elliot: I want the death penalty. If they took his life, they should have their life taken too!

Ethan also described how the murderer was a calculated killer, and should not be allowed to live. He believed that the intentional nature of the crime deserved a punishment with the same outcome: death.

Ethan: I would want him executed. The way I look at it, the way the murder took place it was intentional, he knew what he was doing, or she knew what she was doing, whoever knew what they were doing. If it had been accidental, it would have been totally different. This was direct – it’s murder. And if somebody does that, I don’t think they need to live. I believe in the death penalty.

Kayla made a strong case for the death penalty for a different reason. She wanted the family of the offender to recognize how much pain their family member had caused.

Kayla: I am for the death penalty. I really want him to die. Their family needs to know how it feels to have someone out of the blue… how are you going to bury him? How you going to pay for a church? How you going to do all this? We didn’t get a letter in the mail saying Sarah is going to be dead on November 7th. We didn’t have no warning. We didn’t have none of that. You took his life, and you should have your life taken. You took his this fast and you should have it taken that fast too.

To her, even the death penalty might not ease her pain. Although it was the sentence she wanted, it was not swift enough to impose the same level of hurt that the murder caused her and her family.
Incapacitation and Deterrence

Other explanations for the recommended sentences include incapacitation and deterrence. Both theories, deterrence and incapacitation, provide a sense of security by insuring that the perpetrator does not have the ability to reoffend. For some cold case homicide survivors, life in prison without the possibility of parole provides them with the reassurance that the perpetrator will not have another opportunity to reoffend. While a large portion of scholars agree that the death penalty has no general deterrent effect (Radelet & Akers, 1996), the support for the death penalty among cold case homicide survivors might be to impose more of a specific deterrent (i.e. to deter a future homicide from being committed by the offender in their case). In fact, many homicide survivors’ claims mirror an argument made by Sunstein and Vermeule (2005), who suggest that if the death penalty can prevent one innocent life, either by a specific or general deterrent effect, it is morally justified and a necessary punishment.

Quotes from Grace and Mark illustrate how both life in prison and the death penalty prohibit others from experiencing death at the hands of their loved one’s killer. Grace did not directly recommend the death penalty for the offender in her case. Instead, she emphasized that the punishment needed to guarantee that the perpetrator could not hurt anyone else. Because both the death penalty and life in prison would prevent the offender from killing another person, Grace saw both options as satisfactory outcomes.

Grace: I wasn’t put on this earth to judge anybody... whatever the court decides. I just want to make sure he isn’t on the street again. I am not opposed to the death penalty, but it isn’t for me to say who dies and who doesn’t.

Mark noted that the nature of the person who could commit such an act should not be present on this earth. He explained how the nature of his daughter’s death indicated
that the person who killed her had killed before. If left alive, Mark feared the person would surely kill again.

Mark: You know, they’re just horrible. These guys. I believe in capital punishment. But particularly in this case. I mean, these guys were just the scum of the earth. This isn’t like, Christina went out on a date and the guy got drunk and accidentally strangled her or something. I mean, these guys are just hardcore killers, criminals, rapists and kidnappers.

One explanation for the overwhelming support of the death penalty could be due to the hypothetical nature of the question. For the survivors I interviewed, there was no knowledge of the perpetrator’s identity, leaving the survivors to focus on their loss and the heinous nature of the murder. Earlier in the dissertation, I discussed how many survivors feared the murderer was someone they knew. If the perpetrator turned out to be someone the survivors knew, the family might re-evaluate their desire to seek the death penalty. In fact, literature indicates that the possibility of the death penalty may actually prolong the grief of survivors (Radelet and Borg, 2000).

**Conclusion**

Cold case homicide survivors experience a unique phase in their bereavement journey as they anticipate a resolution in their loved one’s murder. Unlike traditional survivors, these individuals have grieved for years without answers in their case or an apprehension of a suspect. The survivors in my sample had developed a fear of the unknown perpetrator. A few of the survivors feared that the murderer could return and harm the rest of the family. However, the majority of survivors did not fear for their personal safety. Instead, they feared that learning the identity of the perpetrator could reveal that a close friend or family member was responsible for the murder. Despite this fear, the survivors acknowledge a need to know who the killer was. Regardless of the years that had passed since the murder, this need sparked an unwavering hope within
the survivors: a hope that they would experience a solution in their case. With a strong belief that a solution was possible, many survivors had planned what they would say to the offender and what sentence they would recommend in court. They wanted to know how and why the homicide had occurred. Several survivors felt that the offender would be able to fill the gaps in their current understanding of the murder. Based on the magnitude of their grief and the years that the offender had remained free, the majority of survivors believed that the death penalty would be the most appropriate sentence for the offender.

It is a common perception that a resolution in these cold case homicides would provide great peace and allow for complete healing. However, a resolution may begin another traumatic event for the survivors as they then face a grueling and emotional court process. The survivors themselves note the difficulties that may be associated with learning the identity of the perpetrator and experiencing the complex court process. Will an answer truly help the survivors enter into healing, as many people anticipate, or will it send them back to the beginning of the grief journey? It is possible that we will not understand the potential effects of a resolution in these complex cases until future research follows these cold case homicide survivors both before and after a perpetrator is apprehended.
CHAPTER 9
CONCLUSION

In one of the first examinations of traditional homicide survivors, Burgess notes: “In cases where the style of attack is not clear cut and the assailant never apprehended, there is no feeling of closure to the crime (Burgess, 1975, p. 393).” While a profound statement for the time of her study, information on traditional homicide survivors, and even more specifically cold case homicide survivors, has remained scarce. What little we do have suggests that the concept of closure is unobtainable and perhaps should not even be the goal in the traumatic grieving process (Armour, 2002; Feldman Hertz, et al., 2005). Nonetheless, Burgess was a pioneer in suggesting the complexity of life in general and the bereavement process in particular for survivors of cold case homicides.

This dissertation provides a more thorough understanding of the lived experienced of cold case homicide survivors after the death of their loved one. Three main findings emerge from the research. First, my study suggests that the bereavement process of cold case homicide survivors is a non-linear journey; it is marked by significant steps forward as well as formidable and seemingly intractable obstacles that preclude the progression of healing. Second, I found that although the grieving experience of cold case survivors can be understood partly through the framework of traditional homicide grief models, there are unique differences that must be noted. Finally, despite these differences and the unique journey each survivor faces, there are common needs and goals that cold case homicide survivors share. I discuss these findings below in terms of the more specific themes that emerged from my data and then turn to the practical and scholarly implications of my work.
The Journey of Cold Case Homicide Survivors

The healing process for cold case homicide survivors is not linear. However, through the interviews with my survivors I was able to chronologically arrange some of the major themes and experiences of the grieving process. Chapters 4 through 8 provided analysis of key issues related to bereavement in the aftermath of an unsolved homicide. These chapters detailed the stories of the survivors’ experiences and suggest the non-linear aspect of their journey. Six key points emerged from the data: (1) survivors’ anger is prolonged and directed differently; (2) coping methods that are therapeutic to some are detrimental to others; (3) fellow survivors and religion seem most helpful to survivors in dealing with their grief; (4) survivors often feel judged by friends and family; (5) survivors perceive practitioners’ lack of communication as a lack of concern; and (6) whatever the time period that has elapsed since the homicide, the majority of survivors remain optimistically fixated on a resolution in their case.

In the aftermath of tragedy and loss, it is common for survivors of all types of death to experience moments of anger (Bowlby & Parkes, 1961; Kubler-Ross, 1969). For homicide survivors, the anger is intensified due to the intentional and violent nature of their loved one’s death (Kashka & Beard, 1999). Traditional survivors struggle with anger that manifests initially into guilt, blaming others and blaming the victim. However, these feelings quickly shift when an offender is identified. Their focus then becomes achieving justice for the victim and ensuring that the offender is punished for the homicide. The cold case homicide survivors in my sample demonstrated that the anger experienced in the aftermath of an unsolved homicide is even more powerful and manifests itself in unique ways. While the cold case homicide survivors’ short-term anger appeared to mirror the traditional grieving process, their long-term anger is quite
different. The anger of cold case homicide survivors lingers years after the death and cannot be directed at perpetrators, as they are unknown in these cases. Therefore long-term anger and blame often become directed at a failure to apprehend a suspect. These feelings are often manifested as self-blame and blame of the practitioners who have failed to uncover the identity of the killer. This prolonged and displaced anger is a distinctive feature in cold case homicide grief and appears to be a major obstacle in the healing process.

In an attempt to rebuild their lives, survivors engage in various methods of coping with the homicide. My survivors recounted many formal and informal ways that they attempted to heal. In their experiences, formal methods of counseling and bereavement groups were not as helpful as they had hoped. This conclusion could often be attributed to the survivors’ perceptions that non-homicide survivors conducting the therapy or groups could not relate to their loss. Even homicide survivors whose cases were cleared could not truly understand their pain and grief. While survivors often followed the recommendations of bereavement specialists and well-intended family and friends, the expected solace their suggestions promised was not always found. For example, memorializing the victim through events such as candlelight vigils or victim rights’ rallies was described as comforting to many of my survivors. However, a few described how these acts designed to aid in their recovery actually caused them greater distress. These findings suggest that the healing journey is quite specific for each individual survivor. Current recommendations that prescribe formulaic strategies for grieving may be far off the mark, especially for this group of survivors who experience such a unique bereavement journey.
Despite their differences, the survivors in my study did seem to find solace in some common coping mechanisms. Of all the strategies used by my survivors, religion and interaction with other homicide survivors proved to be the most fruitful to their journey. Despite research indicating that homicide often challenges the survivors’ religious beliefs (Kashka & Beard, 1999), I found that a relationship with God was the greatest source of strength, and it provided the survivors with a conceptual framework to make sense of the homicide. All but four survivors identified a pre-existing relationship with God. After the homicide, their faith was strengthened and provided their main source of comfort. The religious survivors were careful to distinguish that they never blamed God for the homicide, despite moments of doubt and anger. Many expressed that religion had offered them peace for two reasons: first, they believed that God would reveal an answer to their case, and secondly they believed in an afterlife that would allow them to reconnect with their loved one in heaven.

Other homicide survivors, regardless of case status, also helped to alleviate the pain of the homicide. By sharing experiences and advice, other survivors helped to guide the individuals in my study through the grieving process. The survivors in my sample were extremely receptive to assistance from other survivors as they felt these were the only people who truly understood what they were going through. Noticing the impact that these other survivors had on their journey, many in my sample noted that they would be willing and pleased to have an opportunity to aid individuals who might find themselves in a similar situation. Many felt that by helping others in the aftermath of a homicide, they might find a sense of purpose in their own dilemma.
As the survivors struggled with their grief, they often noted that they relied on their family and friends for support. In many instances, these individuals were supportive and grieved alongside the survivors in my sample. However, some survivors also noted the complexity of these relationships, describing how friends and family often times placed judgment on how they expressed their individual grief. The survivors who internalized their grief felt others judged them for their lack of emotion. On the other hand, the survivors who were open with their emotions describing how they were often told by family and friends that they needed to move forward with their lives. This perceived judgment was intensified when family and friends had chosen other ways to express and cope with their own emotions. In these instances the family and friends expected that the survivor grieve in a similar manner to those around them (Clements, 2005). This expectation is an unachievable one, as each individual will handle the aftermath of homicide in different ways. Several scholars of traditional homicide bereavement have noted time does not heal pain (Asaro & Clements, 2005; Clements & Henry, 2001; Redmond, 1989). Therefore, my survivors’ experiences with family and friends resemble the experiences of traditional, cleared-case survivors. One distinct and crucial difference is that many of the survivors in my sample expressed they would not be able to fully allow themselves to heal until a perpetrator had been apprehended. Without that critical event, the survivors again identified a major hurdle in their journey: the inability to fully grieve and cope with the loss. For many, this created additional strain on their relationships: some members in their family would chose to move forward without a resolution, while others in the same family remain consumed with grief.
Post-homicide, the survivors are thrust into dependent relationships with numerous professionals. For traditional survivors, these relationships are likely to cease after a resolution is reached and prosecution occurs. Conversely, cold case survivors remain reliant on law enforcement and the professionals to find a perpetrator in the case. As the years passed and communication waned, survivors believed that those most critical to their case were no longer dedicated to resolving their case. Failure to return phone calls, inability to answer questions and lack of follow-up on leads caused the survivors to feel as though their case was trivial and insignificant. These feelings further aggravated the pain caused by the homicide. Despite the emotional toll these relationships have on the survivors, they placed a great deal of trust and faith in the related professionals. Until a perpetrator is identified, these survivors believe it is necessary to continue to maintain strong bonds with the police and the media. Without these relationships, no matter how personally hurtful at times, they fear their cases will be forgotten and remain unsolved forever. Whether this dependence and continued frustration significantly impedes the grief journey of cold case homicide survivors is an open question that future research should address.

Regardless of the length of time that had elapsed since their loved one’s murder, the majority of survivors expressed great hope that their case would be solved. This continuation of hope provided a cause to remain optimistic. Once hope faded, the survivors believed they would essentially be forgetting their loved one’s case and ending their quest for justice. Instead of allowing this to happen, the survivors planned for a future that included a resolution in their case. At that point, the survivors were hopeful that they would be able to confront the offender and understand why the
homicide had occurred. They also felt they would be able to play a pivotal role in the conviction and sentencing of the offender. Until then, the survivors found themselves at a standstill in the grieving process. They could resume some sense of normalcy, but lived with the fact that their journey remained open-ended.

Finally, Masters, Friedman, and Getzel (1988) recognized that the most complicated grief might be experienced by those who do not have a resolution in their case because there is an everlasting notion that the killer is still at large. However, a significant question still remains unanswered: will a resolution in these cold cases allow the survivors to heal or would it further complicate their grief process? According to existing research, even when a resolution is reached in a case and the perpetrator is punished, the concept of closure does not exist (Armour, 2002; 2006; Kashka & Beard, 1999). In fact, in an effort to achieve justice, the family is often harmed repeatedly throughout the court process. Once an offender is apprehended, the family of the victim must confront numerous interactions with the court system including pretrial hearings, the trial itself, sentencing, and sometimes parole of the offender (Masters, et al., 1988). Each of these stages of the criminal justice system require the survivors to be exposed to the vivid details of the homicide and relieve the intense emotions felt immediately following the death. Despite many beliefs that the death penalty is the ultimate form of justice for the families of homicide victims, this too may further complicate the bereavement process. Radelet and Borg (2000) point out several elements of the death penalty that might actually be detrimental to the survivors of homicide. For example, they conclude that the death penalty process concentrates limited resources on a few select cases, thus eliminating the resources for non-death penalty cases and families.
Also, if a homicide case does not result in the death penalty, the family of the victim may be left wondering why their loved one’s case was not worthy of such a punishment. Finally, the long-term nature of the death penalty is likely to lead to years of appeals and potential retrials. With each stage of this process, the family will again be subjected to the brutal and horrific details of the case. Radelet and Borg conclude that while the argument is often made that the families of homicide victims deserve the death penalty as the ultimate sense of justice, it may do little to bring peace to the survivors. Therefore, I believe that while a resolution in the case and punishment of the offender may, at some point, lead to judicial closure, it may do little to bring about emotional closure for the survivors (Armour, 2006).

My survivors also highlighted the struggles they faced when trying to balance healing with justice. It was clear that even the survivors recognized, whether consciously or subconsciously, that a resolution in their case may come with little solace. Two major obstacles were highlighted by the survivors. First, learning the identity of the perpetrator may complicate the grieving process. It is clear that cold case homicide survivors struggle with not knowing who killed their loved one. Without the identification of the perpetrator, the survivors clearly struggled to displace their anger and blame towards themselves and others. Despite their expectation to know the offender’s identity and to see that they are subsequently punished, the survivors also recognized that there is a chance the killer is also someone they know and trust. Several survivors in my study expressed their suspicion that a friend or family member might be responsible for the murder. If these suspicions were to become reality, the survivors are likely to suffer even further complications, based on the idea that they
must now cope with the fact that someone they trusted is responsible for the murder. Secondly, the survivors had a need to know why the homicide had occurred. They expressed that confronting the offender in court might bring them closer to understanding the justification for their loved one’s death. However, the survivors themselves noted that the offender may not even understand why the homicide occurred. For example, if the offender’s justification included victim-blaming or the excuse that the use of drug and alcohol caused the crime, the explanation is likely to insight greater frustration. Again, while theoretically an answer in the case can provide survivors with the opportunity to heal, scholars and survivors have both expressed that a resolution may also lead to further complications causing the survivors to regress in the healing process. Additional research is needed to examine the experiences of cold case homicide survivors both before and after a resolution is reached.

**Practical Implications**

The stories of my survivors indicate that there are limited resources and significant hurdles that are unique to the bereavement journey in the years following an unsolved murder. Their struggles revealed significant unmet needs even years after the murder of their loved one. I suggest two major recommendations to help assist future survivors of unsolved murders: (1) survivor-led support programs and (2) additional training and victim assistance materials for professionals who interact with the survivors. If it is possible to establish support from other survivors and to create more beneficial relationships with the media and law enforcement involved in the case, cold case homicide survivors may be able to navigate their journey of grief more easily.
Survivor-Led Support Groups

Many of the survivors in my sample stated that existing coping programs were not helpful to them on their bereavement journey. One of the most significant complaints was that a psychologist, counselor, bereavement group leader or victim advocate could not possibly understand their pain unless they too were homicide survivors and, in particular, cold case homicide survivors. Therefore, it is critical that survivor-led programs are created to help reach out to homicide survivors and encourage them to seek support. Not only may these programs encourage individual healing for survivors who are recipients of the service, but they may also inspire the survivors to serve others experiencing a similar situation, which can have extremely therapeutic effects as well. Two large-scale breast cancer support programs, (Bosom Buddies and Pink Ribbon Girls) offer strong organizational models in this regard.

Bosom Buddies is a national organization that provides support for people who are currently fighting and/or who have survived breast cancer. Two women who personally fought breast cancer established the organization to alleviate the anxiety and fear that result from a breast cancer diagnosis. These women recognized that it is critical for patients to have support from and be able to identify with someone who has already experienced the battle. The program is designed to create “a ‘breast cancer chain of survival,’ with the intention of redefining perceptions of breast cancer and promoting a positive mindset of survival, recovery and quality of life” (Bosom Buddies, Inc.). To assure those affected by breast cancer never feel alone, they are provided a “buddie” who provides guidance and support throughout and after the battle with breast cancer. Support comes in several forms including telephone calls, inspirational videos, public meeting and special events. Each component of the Bosom Buddies program is
designed to teach those affected by breast cancer that life during and after treatment can be beautiful.

The Pink Ribbon Girls is another support system for people affected by breast cancer. The organization encourages young women to share their breast cancer experiences in an effort to educate and inspire others to plan for a life beyond breast cancer (Pink Ribbon Girls, 2011). This program was also started by two breast cancer survivors who were determined to assist others who faced the struggle with breast cancer by offering support, education and awareness to patients and their family. Message boards, fundraisers, and prayer groups are among many of the organization’s events which allow members to take part in fulfilling the program’s overall mission: “we hope to inspire survivors to grow and live beyond it” (Pink Ribbon Girls).

Based on the statements made by my survivors, I believe survivor-led programs such as these are essential for easing the pain caused immediately after a homicide and for the years to follow. The survivors themselves recognized how their experience with homicide would allow them to understand others in a similar situation. These personal experiences have inspired many to reach out to others in pain.

Nancy: You have to do something positive because it could help so many people. There is a feeling that you get when you help other people. Because you’re giving of yourself and helping them.

Sarah: He’s [God has] used what we’ve been through to help other people. […] When I have to go through that with somebody else, I usually just hug them and cry with them. And they know I’ve been there so that means a lot. And really you don’t have to say anything; just hug them and cry with them or whatever.

Harrison: I believe God takes us through so we’ll be able to help somebody else. […] He wanted me to learn from what I went through to help another person, and then when I realized what was going on and opened up, now I can see her pain, I really can.
Michelle: I find myself more of a listener you know. And if they ask me something, you know, I can tell them what my experiences were. But more so than a few times, they kind of want to talk. You know? I think my experiences were bad… a lot of theirs were worse, you know? It would be nice to have somebody that you can talk to.

These survivors’ sentiments suggest several ideas for the development of effective survivor-led programs. First, an ideal survivors’ network would work closely with local law enforcement and victim advocacy groups. When a murder is reported, a phone-tree type system would be in place to allow veteran survivors to make contact with the surviving family, offering initial support and guidance. After funeral arrangements have been attended to, the veteran survivor would again reach out to the family who at this point has had more time to process their loss. However, unlike the experience the survivors had with victim advocates, the survivor network would maintain regular contact with the family offering encouragement, first-hand advice and assistance. Within the organization, specific programs for families with unsolved murders would be offered. For example, veteran survivors could organize groups to aid the cold case families in distributing flyers, running ads in newspapers and raising money for financial needs and rewards to help solve their case. Survivor-led personnel counseling and group meetings would also be useful components of survivor-led networks. These networks would not only serve the purpose of outreach, but also would help the veteran survivors who were actively serving those in need. Both components of the organization, the veteran and new survivors, would be able to work together for a common goal of peace and healing.

In my recommendation, it is important to note that not all survivors are ideal candidates to mentor and counsel others in a similar situation. As previously discussed
in the dissertation, survivors who are still extremely fragile and struggling to progress in the bereavement process may not be the type of survivor to aid others. Instead, the model survivor to lead a bereavement group or counsel other survivors would be someone who has found a way to navigate the grief journey, and despite the ongoing pain have found a way to successfully function in their daily lives. I believe Ethan and Sarah were prime examples of such survivors and would mirror the type of survivor that would serve as optimal source of support for others experiencing a similar loss.

**Recommendations for Professionals**

Law enforcement personnel and media professionals are some of the first people to interact with homicide survivors. These interactions often remain throughout the course of the investigation and have a significant impact on the survivors’ post-homicide experiences and journey. The majority of participants in this study reported negative experiences and strained relationships with law enforcement and the media, yet also noted how fundamental they are to the journey forward towards a resolution to their case. The survivors had simple, yet profound recommendations to improve the quality of their relationships with these professionals.

**Law enforcement officials**

The survivors recommended three ways in which the police could improve their treatment of the cold case homicide survivors they serve. First, the survivors indicated that there is a need for personal humility, kindness and compassion on the part of the officers who are working their case. Secondly, the police need to actively listen to the family members of the deceased. Thirdly, and possibly most significant, the police need to establish a stronger system of communicating with surviving family members.
The survivors in my sample wanted the police to recognize them as grieving family members who were fighting a personal struggle with grief. This was not a job for the survivors, and they expressed that law enforcement should recognize their personal pain. Anna’s advice to police was simple. “Treat people like they are human. Stay patient.” Clara also captured the necessity of law enforcement showing sympathy to a cold case homicide survivor’s situation.

Clara: Just be compassionate and talk about loved ones with respect and know that they were loved no matter what was going on. Just treat them that way and don’t be dismissive. That would have been the worst thing if they had been dismissive.

Clara’s statement was especially poignant as she highlighted the need for the police to respect the victim, regardless of lifestyle or demographics. Many survivors expressed how the police did not seem to care, and Clara’s advice reminds us that this perceived lack of concern or dismissive attitude can be extremely damaging.

One way the police can change the survivors’ perception that there is a lack of concern is to actively listen to their stories and tips. Like Clara, Julia felt that the way in which the police react can indicate a “who cares” attitude.

Julia: Listen to them. Listen to the family. Listen to everything they are telling you. Don’t be dismissive. Because they are giving you a wealth of information. Don’t make an assumption ‘oh these guys were out there dealing drugs, and therefore this ain’t even anything we are concerned with. Just another one of those guys…’

By listening to the families, the police may learn previously unknown and important details in the case. Several survivors remarked that they had thought of potential leads months and years after the homicide had occurred. Robert reaffirmed the importance of listening to the families’ ideas and to remain open to suggestions in the case.
Robert: Listen, importantly, listen to the families. A lot of times they have a lot of background you’re never going to learn anywhere else. Friends. Outside friends. Outside associations. People’s cars. Really just so much. So really listen. Don’t always go by the book. You know, probably like the five step program you have to go by. To always keep an open mind and not be closed minded.

Another way that the police can combat the survivors’ perception that they are not included in the investigation is for law enforcement to maintain an open and honest line of communication with them. Often the survivors noted that the police need to be willing to share details of the case with the family.

Marianne: The family really wants to know and just to tell them the specifics. You know, if they are brave enough to ask, then they deserve an honest answer about, you know, I mean, I'm not talking about showing them any crime scene photos or the autopsy photos or anything like that, but just to answer the questions, you know, honestly.

The survivors recognize that there are some facts and pieces of evidence that law enforcement must keep confidential. However, acknowledging potential leads or progression in the case can be enough to let the survivors’ know their case is important.

Grace: I know there are some things that they have to keep confidential. It would be nice if they have leads or anything like that, at least contact the family and say we have leads, we are following up on them, and we will call you when we find something out. Don’t sit back and wait for us to call you. Just call us and let us know you are working it.

Mark notes that communication with survivors can be difficult for law enforcement. They deal with many families who often have different expectations and different desires. He advises police to try to understand each family’s needs and to meet them accordingly.

Mark: They have to make an effort to read the person and what their needs and expectations are. Some people have real heavy expectations, some don’t have anything at all. Some people want to know details and some don’t. And to try and fulfill within what they’re allowed to do. To try and fulfill those expectations.
The communication does not always have to be fruitful in nature or provide information to the survivors. Sarah stated that honesty and transparency still provides comfort, even if it appears few leads are available. “If you don’t have any clues and you don’t have any ideas tell me that.” Regardless of the context of the call, the idea that the police are maintaining avenues of communication is extremely critical. Anna recommended that the police schedule times to call the families. “Stay in better contact. A weekly phone call, a monthly phone call.” The survivors noted that when communication ceases with police, it feels as though their loved one’s case is forgotten.

Marianne: Keep the lines of communication open. Because over time […] they might just think that law enforcement doesn’t care. You know?

**Media personnel**

The advice that survivors offered for media personnel was similar to that offered for the police. The main recommendation noted by the survivors was that the media should be sensitive to the family left behind in a homicide. Secondly, the media should be careful not to sensationalize murder stories and to unnecessarily defame the victim.

With each homicide, a family is left behind. They are subjected to the community’s reaction to their loved one’s murder and are exposed to the media coverage of the homicide. Therefore, media personnel should remain cognizant of the surviving family members as they develop each related story. Sensitivity should be one of the priorities that the reporters maintain throughout their coverage.

Grace: They need to think that their family has just lost a loved one and that they need to take their time a little bit more. Be compassionate to the family. Put themselves in their shoes. This could be me.

Marianne: A huge dose of empathy, I guess. Or awareness of that these people are in just the worst state of shock they could ever possibly be in. I mean, you’re never prepared for this thing. And to be more sensitive, that's what I
was looking for. To be more sensitive and give the people an opportunity to, you know, say what they want to say.

If the family expressed an interest in sharing their story with the media, it is critical that the coverage is accurate and thorough. Anna suggested that media personnel meet with the families in an effort to develop a strong understanding of their reactions.

Anna: Go to the person’s house and sit down face to face and talk with the family. Over the phone you’re not really getting anything.

The media should also acknowledge that some families will not be receptive to communication with reporters. The family’s stance on communication with the media should be noted and respected. If a family does not want to be involved in the media coverage of their loved one’s case, the media should seek other means of gathering information.

Michelle: The only thing I can say is that any of them, just be sensitive because there are people who do want to talk and people who do not want to talk. And I would not pressure anybody that didn’t want to talk into talking. And that’s it. And they can get any information that they want to get pretty much off anybody. They have access to it.

Many survivors expressed that the coverage of their loved one’s murder was sensationalized and denigrated their loved one’s character. In instances where personal details do not aid the quest for a perpetrator, inclusion of such material should be avoided. Negative portrayal of the victim may have adverse affects on the investigation.

Michelle: They do get a little bit insensitive when it comes to putting stuff in like the negative stuff about the victim when really the most important thing right then it to get it out there. Somebody is taking somebody else’s life and anyone who knows anything to give them a call. I think that should be pretty much it.
Marianne: And you know, like, portraying my grandmother in a positive light, you know? And going from there, rather than oh well, we have this old tavern owner, you know? It sets the stage.

It is important for professionals to acknowledge the needs and desires of those they serve. The cold case homicide survivors I interviewed expressed excellent recommendations that could easily be adapted by the media and law enforcement personnel involved in homicide cases. Overall, a sensitivity and concern for the victim and survivor were key. Additionally, open communication with the survivors provides encouragement that their loved one’s case is still important and relevant to the professionals that are essential to the case’s resolution. Communication logs could be created to encourage the police to maintain regular communication, return calls in a timely manner and reach out to survivors on special occasions such as the anniversary of the murder. A workshop for media professionals and law enforcement personnel could provide advice on how to balance the professionals’ goals with the survivors’ needs.

**Scholarly Implications**

The current study makes several contributions to existing criminological and sociological research. Little information on the survivors of homicide exists in established literature, while even less research has examined cold case homicide survivors specifically. Exploring this under-researched group has provided insight to existing bereavement literature, highlighting how these cold case survivors follow a similar pattern to established traumatic grief and homicide bereavement models, with some unique and significant differences. This exploratory study lays the framework for further closing the gap in homicide bereavement literature.
My research gathered personal stories that are rich in nature and can be examined through various lenses. Although I focused on the bereavement literature, data could also be examined from the perspective of victimology theories and models. Studying the survivors’ stories in this manner would provide additional incentive to recognize cold case homicide survivors as a unique group of victims in need of specialized victim service and advocacy programs.

By exploring the experiences of cold case homicide survivors in a qualitative nature, my study provides a more nuanced and thorough understanding of their lives after homicide. With this knowledge, more informed quantitative research examining a greater number of survivors becomes feasible. Such large samples would allow the examination of systematic differences among survivors of cold case homicides, and between them and other victim groups. For example, examining how grieving varies by gender and race is an important question to consider in future studies. Whether racial differences exist with regard to how cold case homicide survivors perceive their treatment by practitioners, the impact of age on the grieving process, and the role of religion in the bereavement journey should also be studied. Also important would be examining how the survivors’ level of optimism for a resolution in their case is impacted by the elapsed time since the homicide.

Moreover, the stories and journeys shared in this study indicate that cold case homicide survivors experience similar grieving patterns of traditional homicide survivors, with a few particular distinctions. In order to fully analyze the similarities and unique aspects of the two groups of survivors’ bereavement paths, a comparison study would
be needed. Measuring the emotional, physical, and mental hurdles faced by both groups would make a significant contribution to homicide bereavement research.

I have maintained contact with the survivors in my sample and I am hopeful that some of these survivors will experience a resolution in their case. A comparison study of grief before and after a resolution would be quite important. In particular, does a resolution provide the anticipated comfort that the survivors in my sample foresee? Does the identity of the perpetrator change the punishment they would recommend? Does the identification send the survivors back to the beginning of their grief journey? Do the blame and anger survivors’ express towards law enforcement and the media shift to the offender? All of these questions remain open to future study.

In sum, my study provides significant insights for scholars to begin expanding existing literature on cold case homicide survivors. This specific group of victims is growing and should be acknowledged in the research. Until now their stories have remained untold, their calls for help unanswered, and their identity as a unique group of victims overlooked. I am hopeful this dissertation informs future research, conversation and action from scholars across multiple disciplines.

Limitations

There are several methods of evaluating qualitative research and grounded theory in particular. According to Charmaz (2006) four elements must exist for a grounded theory study to be methodologically sound including credibility, originality, resonance and usefulness. Other scholars argue that reliability and validity remain important elements for evaluating qualitative research (Echevarria-Doan & Tubbs, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By utilizing these methodological standards to evaluate the current
research while acknowledging the overall boundaries of qualitative research, four minor limitations are noted.

The first limitation of my study involves the methodological limitations of in-depth interviews. The method of open-ended interviewing allows for the participants to over or under-emphasize their experiences. The data I collected is limited to what each survivor remembered and could identify as relevant to the questions posed during the interview. It is also possible that the emotional state of the survivor at the time of the interview could have had an influence on the type of response I received. Throughout the interviews I tried to note non-verbal responses, gather additional information (i.e. journal entries, letters, newspaper clippings) to stimulate memory or substantiate their reports, and often asked the survivors to elaborate on specific events or emotions that they had described. However, due to the highly sensitive nature of the topic, the potential for emotional bias should be noted.

An additional limitation was found within the participants themselves. Due to the sensitive nature of the subject, some of the participants were more hesitant to discuss certain topics than others. Certain survivors found themselves able to easily express their experience and emotions in great detail, while others provided very little elaboration or concrete examples of their feelings. Various factors related to the survivors, the victim, the crime and me as the researcher might have impacted how comfortable and open the survivors were. For example, gender or age differences between the survivors and me, embarrassment of the victim’s lifestyle or a fear of being judged may have been influential. I did not directly observe these effects, and I found that the survivors often let down their emotional walls to share intimate details despite
their demographics or initial hesitations. For example, Harrison admitted that he did not want to participate in the study, but his ex-wife “made” him. In the end, Harrison served as one of the strongest voices in this study and told me that the interview had allowed him to share emotions and thoughts he had never told anyone else. The experience was therapeutic and helpful to him, despite his initial resistance.

Thirdly, when examining the established elements of sound grounded theory research, I have yet to establish the strength of this study’s resonance and internal validity. Currently I am in the process of sending copies of my dissertation to several of the survivors who participated in this study. Their feedback and level of agreement with my conclusions will help to solidify how accurate my dissertation findings are to the actual lived experiences of cold case homicide survivors. It is important to note that this limitation does not indicate that resonance and internal validity do not exist, but simply that further research and feedback is needed before these components can be accurately evaluated.

Finally, the current study does not unveil a complete grounded theory. Although the data has been coded and arranged by various themes, further work is needed to construct a detailed and fluid process. Due to the complex nature of the cold case homicide survivors’ experiences, it will take further work to articulate the steps the survivors take on their non-linear bereavement journey. However, the current study provides the rich data and critical framework required for developing such a complete theory.

**Conclusion**

The grief journey that cold case homicide survivors must navigate is a complicated and difficult one. The path is not linear in nature and without a resolution in their case
the survivors’ ability to fully recover may be blocked. While several elements of the grief journey encourage forward progression, other elements can cause the survivors to regress.

The survivors’ stories in this study brought forth personal experiences of extreme pain, positive memories and abiding hope. From the moment the survivors learn of the homicide, their lives are reshaped forever. Findings suggest that while each survivor navigates their grief in unique ways, several common sources of assistance exist. Family, friends, other survivors and religion were the most helpful to the survivors in my sample. This study highlights a significant need for additional resources and services specifically designed for survivors of cold case homicides, perhaps most importantly, survivor-led bereavement programs. Professionals who interact with these survivors currently provide little to alleviate their pain. Training and assistance materials that focus on the unique struggle faced by cold case survivors might help better inform and guide the professionals who have the potential to serve a critical role in the grieving process. For their part, scholars have the ability to provide a critical voice to the often forgotten survivors of homicide. My dissertation has accomplished two goals: first, to inform these scholars, researchers and related practitioners of the unique journey faced by cold case homicide survivors, including its many challenges and complex, open-ended nature; and second, to provide a platform for these survivors to find their voice, that has, until now, been lost.
APPENDIX A
IRB CONSENT FORM

Informed Consent
Protocol Title:
Breaking the ice: An in-depth look at the survivors of cold case homicides

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Purpose of the research study:

The purpose of this study is to provide a voice to the survivors of cold case homicides, while gathering information about these individuals that can assist law enforcement, the media and advocacy programs.

What you will be asked to do in the study:

You will be asked a series of open-ended questions. It is entirely up to you whether you want to answer these questions and how in-depth you would like to go with your answer. At the end of the study, the opportunity to discuss any additional information we have not discussed will be given to you.

Audio Recording Options:

To ensure accuracy of your accounts and to allow me to actively engage in the interview, I am requesting permission to audio-tape our conversation. If you choose not to be recorded, the interview will continue with handwritten notation. There will be no penalty for declining to be recorded. However, if you do choose to be recorded, the audio tapes will be locked in my supervisor’s office and will be immediately destroyed upon transcription.

_____ Yes, I agree to have this interview tape recorded.

_____ No, I do not agree to have this interview tape recorded.

Time required:

1 hour-3 hours

Risks and Benefits:

The main benefit that has been expressed by research is that you will have the opportunity to help others by telling your story. To some degree this experience may benefit you as talking about your experiences can aid in the recovery process. That being said there is a potential that this interview may trigger an emotional response and you can either chose to stop the interview or take a break from the discussion, without any required explanation. The principle investigator will have a kit of victim service information that will be provided to you at the end of the interview, including local group and individual therapy options, victim advocate information and relevant website listings.

Compensation:

No compensation will be provided for participation.
Confidentiality:

Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Your information will be assigned a code number. The list connecting your name to this number will be kept in a locked file in my faculty supervisor’s office. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, the list will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report.

Voluntary participation:

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating.

Right to withdraw from the study:

You have the right to withdraw from the study at anytime without consequence.

Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:

You may contact me: Ashley Peake, Department of Sociology and Criminology & Law, P.O. Box 117330, University of Florida, Gainesville FL 32611-7330; email: ashley44@ufl.edu

-or-

My advisor: Lonn Lanza-Kaduce, Department of Sociology and Criminology & Law, P.O. Box 117330, University of Florida, Gainesville FL 32611-7330; email: likkll@crim.ufl.edu

Whom to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study:

IRB02 Office, Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250; phone 392-0433.

Agreement:

I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the procedure and I have received a copy of this description.

Participant: ________________________________________________ Date: ______________________

Principal Investigator: __________________________________________ Date: ______________________
APPENDIX B
DEMOGRAPHIC FORM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Number</th>
<th>Date of Interview</th>
<th>Time of Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Start: Finish:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At this onset of this interview, I am unfamiliar with your specific homicide case. To fully understand the case we are about to discuss, I would like you to complete the following questions, to provide me with a background of the case.

**Participant Information:**

- **Current Age**
- **Relationship to victim**
- **Gender** Male Female
- **Race**
- **Income** less than $25,000 $25,000 to $50,000 $50,001 to $75,000 $75,001 to $100,000 more than $100,000
- **Marital Status** Single Married Divorced Widowed Other (please specify):

**Victim Information:**

- **Age at the time of Incident**
- **Gender** Male Female
- **Race**

**Incident Information:**

- **Date (victim's name) went missing**
- **Who reported him/her**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>missing?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How did you learn that he/she was missing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was your first reaction to the news that he/she was missing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date his/her body was Found</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who discovered his/her body?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did you learn that his/her body had been found?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was your first reaction when you were told that his/her body had been discovered? (If you were the one who discovered his/her body, what was your initial reaction?)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Background
1. I want to start by having you tell me your story.
   - People have described the murder of their loved one in many different terms
     (for example, a loss, a death, a murder, or a homicide). How do you feel
     most comfortable referring to _____________’s case?

Law Enforcement
2. Can you describe your general thoughts about law enforcement prior to _____________’s death?

3. Had you experienced any interaction with law enforcement prior to _____________’s death?
   - Can you describe the interaction including how positive or negative the experience was?

4. Describe the police investigation of __________’s case?
   - How would you describe the way the police handled your case?

5. Do you currently communicate with the police?
   - If YES:
     - How often do you communicate with them?
     - Do you have a particular person you contact? Who?
     - Who usually initiates the conversations?
     - What do you talk about?
   - If NO:
     - Why did communication cease with the police?

6. Can you tell me about a time when you had a positive experience with the police involving ____________’s case?

7. Can you tell me about a time when you had a negative experience with the police involving ____________’s case?

8. If you could advise police officer how to work with families of unsolved homicides, what advice would you give to them?

9. On the topic of police relations, what advice would you give to a family who is experiencing a similar situation?
Media
10. Can you tell me about the media attention that _______’s case received?

11. If you can, think back to the 1st time you saw _______’s case mentioned in the media. What do you remember from the coverage? How did it make you feel?

12. Now, think back to the last time you saw _______’s case in the media. What do you remember about this coverage? How did it make you feel?

13. How do you think the media has influenced your case and the investigation in a positive or negative way?

14. How did the media influence your grieving process?

15. Can you remember a time when a media report provided inaccurate or inappropriate information about _______’s death? Please describe the incident.

16. Prior to running a story, do the media contact you to either inform you or ask for your permission to run the story?

17. What advice would you give to media personnel covering an unsolved or cold case homicide in regards to working with the survivors?

18. With regards to media pressure and coverage, what advice would you give to a family experiencing a similar situation?

**BREAK for participant to complete the self-report questionnaire.**

Coping
19. How have your feelings about yourself and your life changed since _______’s death.

20. From my past experiences with homicide survivors, many people speak of how their role in the family structure was altered when their loved one became the victim of a homicide. Can you tell me about a situation when you felt as if your traditional family role, (i.e. a mother, father, sister, ext) changed in reaction to _______’s death.

21. Can you tell me how your relationship with friends and family was affected by _______’s death? (If this does not solicit a response, ask if friends and family were supportive and helpful in the grieving process or if they were absent and detrimental to the grieving experience… or ask for example) ADDED

22. IF SURVIVOR IS A PARENT: What affect did the process have on your relationship with your surviving children? ADDED

23. Did faith play a role in your grieving/coping process?
• Can you describe the role of faith and religion in your life immediately following the homicide?
• How does faith/religion play a role in your life now?

24. Thinking back to the time of the incident, how did you and your family try and cope with the news of ___________'s death (i.e. therapy, support groups?) How are you coping with ___________'s death now?
• Do you feel like organized therapy and counseling services are adequately prepared to assist unsolved and cold case homicide survivors?
• Can you think of suggestion or advice for victim services/advocates, that would have made your grieving process easier?

25. What has been most helpful in your healing process? ADDED

26. What has been most detrimental to your healing? ADDED

27. Can you describe physical/health problems that have experienced as a result of __________’s death. ADDED

28. What practical issues (i.e. financial stress, employment) have you experienced as a result of __________’s death ADDED

Miscellaneous:
29. When you think about _____________’s death, do you find yourself saying things like “If only I had…” or other forms of self-blaming? Can you elaborate on these feelings?

30. Some family members have said they maintained their loved one’s room and possessions after their loved one’s death, in the same order their loved one had left the room in. How did you handle the possessions and living space that belonged to __________ after his death?

31. Do you feel that others experiencing an unsolved/cold case homicide can truly understand your situation?

32. Can you describe your expectations or level of confidence that __________’s case will be solved?

33. Do you fear learning the identification of the offender in this case? ADDED

34. Have you ever thought about what you would do or say if someone was caught? ADDED

35. Would you want to make a victim statement/confront the offender? ADDED

36. What sentence would you recommend for the offender in __________’s case? ADDED
• Based on answer, what is your opinion about the death penalty. ADDED
Survivor's additions:
37. Are there any ideas/recommendations for other families or agencies you would like me to know about?
38. Are there any special moments, hardships or experiences you would like to tell me about your family and/or ______________ that I have not addressed?
APPENDIX D
SURVIVOR REFERRAL FORM

Survivor Support Services

Local Resources:

**Alachua County Victim Services** (Gainesville, FL & surrounding areas)
HURTS (Homicide Survivors Uniting Recovering Through Support)
Phone: (352) 264-6760
Toll Free: (866) 252-5439

**Bereaved Survivors of Homicide, Inc.** (Orlando, FL & surrounding areas)
Contact: Laurie McKenna, Victim Advocate
Phone: (407) 254-7248

**Gainesville Police Department** (Gainesville, FL & surrounding areas)
Shirley Davis, Victim Advocate
Phone: (352) 334-3208

**Florida Hospital Pastoral Care** (Orlando & surrounding areas)
Phone: (407) 447-3388
*Referral services available for tailored support and non-religious programs*
[http://www.flhosp.org/pastoralcare/communityresources.htm](http://www.flhosp.org/pastoralcare/communityresources.htm)

National Resources:

**Parents of Murdered Children, Inc.**
Phone: (513) 721-5683
Toll Free: (888) 818-POMC
E-mail: natlpomc@aol.com

**National Center for Victims of Crimes**
Phone: (202) 467-8700
[http://www.ncvc.org](http://www.ncvc.org)
Search: Homicide Survivors

**Dougy Center for Grieving Children and their Families**
Phone: (503) 775-5683
Toll Free: (866) 775-5683
Email: help@dougy.org
[www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org)

Books:

**Homicide Survivors: Misunderstood Grievers,**
By Judie A. Bucholz
The book is about families that have faced murder and how they have dealt with the trauma. It offers an interpretation of personal accounts of homicide survivors in order to understand the particular nature of homicide bereavement. The author herself is a homicide survivor.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What To Do When the Police Leave</td>
<td>Bill Jenkins</td>
<td>A book filled with factual guidance vital to families suffering a traumatic loss.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Forgiving Place: Choosing Peace After Violent Trauma</td>
<td>Richard R. Gayton</td>
<td>The author’s wife was murdered in their home during a robbery. This book concentrates on handling the emotional legacy of intentional violence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just Us: Overcoming and Understanding Homicidal Loss and Grief</td>
<td>Wanda Henry-Jenkins</td>
<td>Rev. Wanda Henry-Jenkins wrote this book following the murder of her mother. Wanda identifies three different cycles of mourning when someone you love is murdered: Crisis, Conflict and Commencement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard Work Journal: A Guided Workbook for Coping With Homicidal Loss and Grief</td>
<td>Wanda Henry-Jenkins</td>
<td>This is a companion workbook to Just Us for anyone who has had a family member who is murdered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Time for Goodbyes</td>
<td>Janice Harris Lord</td>
<td>This book is filled with insight and usable advice on how to cope with sorrow, anger and injustice after a tragic death.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surviving: When Someone You Love Was Murdered</td>
<td>Lula M. Redmond</td>
<td>A professional’s guide to group grief therapy for families and friends of murder victims.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books for Kids:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Terrible Thing Happened (Grades k-3)</td>
<td>Margaret Holmes</td>
<td>A gentle story for children who have witnessed any kind of violent or traumatic event, including homicide.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After a Murder: A Workbook for Grieving Kids (Grades 1-8)</td>
<td>The Dougy Center</td>
<td>This hands-on workbook helps children learn that they are not alone and how other children have coped. Activities and word games normalize intense feelings and explain confusing actions of police, the media and the courts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reactions (Grades 3-8)</td>
<td>Alison Salloum</td>
<td>A workbook to help young people understand common reactions to the experience of trauma and grief.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When Someone You Know Has Been Killed (Grades 6-9)</td>
<td>Jay Schleifer</td>
<td>An exceptional resource that speaks directly to youth who are suffering trauma and grief.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*For emergency assistance please contact your local law enforcement/emergency personnel immediately. *If you have any additional questions or need assistance after participating in this study please contact Ashley Peake, Principal Investigator, ashley44@ufl.edu
LIST OF REFERENCES


Redmond, L. (1989). *Surviving: When someone you loved was murdered*. Clearwater, FL: Psychological Consultation and Educational Services, Inc.


Webster, D. (1830). *The Murder of Captain Joseph White: An argument on the trial of John Francis Knapp, for the murder of Joseph White of Salem in Essex County, Massachusetts, on the night of the 6th of April, 1830*.


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ashley Reagan Peake was born in Pensacola, Florida. She grew up in Gulf Breeze, Florida, graduating from Gulf Breeze High School in 2002. She earned her bachelor’s degree in communication arts with a specialization in public relations from the University of North Florida in 2004. In 2006, she entered graduate school at the University of Florida where she would earn her master’s degree in criminology, law and society in 2008. Her master’s thesis focused on the media’s portrayal of parental responsibility in juvenile crime. She earned a professional certificate in forensic death investigation through the University of Florida School of Pharmacy in 2009. Ashley received her Ph.D. from the University of Florida in the summer of 2011. She is currently serving as an Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice at The Citadel in Charleston, SC.