

SMU REB File #23-087- The Medium Behind the Message: An Examination of the Delivery Method of Victim Impact Statements in Canada.

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Victim impact statements (VIS) allow victims to express how a crime has affected them physically, psychologically, and financially. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many sentencing trials were moved online. This study examined victims' experiences with VIS and the justice system, evaluating if the presentation medium affects sentencing. Study 1 interviewed victims via Zoom, revealing they find the process more comfortable and accessible online but prefer in-person or written submissions. Study 2 assessed participants' reactions to real VIS presented in video, audio, or transcript formats. Results showed the medium did not affect victim-related factors or sentence length. However, participants recommended alternatives to incarceration (e.g., probation) more often after reading a VIS, particularly in stalking cases. The type of crime also influenced perceptions; a VIS detailing sexual assault led to higher harm ratings and longer sentences compared to stalking. These findings have implications for victims, judges, and the justice system.