

From Trauma to Hope

Findings on Resilience and Hope among Domestic Violence Survivors

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In 2023, we interviewed survivors (n=54) from diverse areas and backgrounds and surveyed survivors who participated in interviews (n=37).

From our findings, we drew several recommendations for practitioners, policymakers, and funders that would capitalize on or further strengthen survivors' resiliency:

- Give survivors opportunities to help make decisions about policy, funding, program development, and system reforms.
- Regularly check in with survivors about what justice looks like and how their needs and preferences change.
- Empower survivors to engage their friends and families in legal system proceedings or victim services if and when they want.
- Fund programs and initiatives that offer survivors unconditional cash assistance.
- Reduce barriers to culturally competent mental health services and legal support.

Read the accompanying final report at urban.is/49Plt5P.

The full journey of a domestic violence (DV) survivor is never fully understood, is often full of twists and turns, and consists of interactions with different people and systems that may play important but often episodic roles on their path to recovery, healing, and justice.¹ Though research offers many insights into these aspects of survivors' journeys, what often remains on the periphery is their strength, resiliency, resourcefulness, and hope in the face of adversity.

Our team of researchers from the Urban Institute and Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, with funding from the US Department of Justice's Office on Violence Against Women, conducted a multisite study on the perceptions of justice, accountability, safety, and healing held by survivors who have historically been underserved and less included in research. Specifically, we sought to speak with survivors from LGBTQ+, immigrant, rural, and Native American communities. In this summary, we center survivors' voices to describe the **people and things that contribute to their resiliency** and document how their **strength, resiliency, hopes, and dreams** have helped them along the way.

THE MOST INFLUENTIAL PEOPLE AND THINGS FOR SURVIVORS

Survivors exhibited a phenomenal amount of inner strength and determination that allowed them to cope with adverse circumstances. In many stories, we heard how survivors' attempts to find justice, especially through the legal system, were difficult, and how their lives were upended, which often left them needing to find a new home, rediscover their own self-worth, or rebuild social networks. But through all the challenges, and with support from others, they were able to persevere. In the majority of interviews, survivors' inner strength and ability to cope were notably present. When asked what thing or person made the biggest difference in their safety and healing, one survivor replied, **"Myself...I've been working on myself, realizing my own worth."**

A community of support including victim service providers, support groups, friends, and family was important for survivors' healing, safety, and sense of justice. For most survivors, having multiple people and organizations in

their community of support provided meaningful resources after their experience of harm. Survivors repeatedly credited case managers, legal advocates, and lawyers with helping them understand their options, navigate the legal system, or access programs. For others, housing and financial assistance from their support network were crucial. Some said the emotional support they received from victim service providers helped them realize their healing journey would take time.

Survivors' chosen communities helped them find safety, services, and housing. Some survivors noted that their friends frequently checked in and ensured they had support. One shared about their roommate, who made space for them and helped them unlearn behaviors picked up during their relationship. Another said their neighbor treated them as family, helped them navigate each step of the healing process, and watched their children while they were at court. Other survivors, however, preferred not to engage friends and family. Therefore, it is critical for practitioners to check with survivors about when and how to engage their friends and family.

Therapists were influential. Almost 70 percent of surveyed survivors said they had participated in counseling as a response to their harm or would be interested in doing so. In addition, interviewed survivors conveyed that therapy gave them a sense of justice. It is therefore crucial that therapists be responsive to the needs of diverse survivors as they provide treatment, encouragement, and validation through their journeys.

SURVIVORS' HOPES AND DREAMS FOR THE FUTURE

Survivors hoped to be able to move on with their lives, with many envisioning a future where they could be independent, spend time with family, and take the time to live again. When asked about their hopes for the future, about 35 percent of interviewed survivors said they envisioned a brighter future for themselves and their families. For example, moving on for one survivor meant focusing on their son's well-being and protecting him from the abusive behavior he'd been exposed to.

Some survivors hoped to buy their own property and/or move away from their current location. For instance, one survivor was planning to move out of their current state, not because they were running away from their situation but because they would feel safer once they could more easily avoid their ex-partner. Another purchased their own home with plans to spend more time taking care of their granddaughter.

Many survivors aspired to build up their education and careers, and some aspired to give back to other survivors. Over 30 percent of survivors hoped to focus on their education and careers. One wanted to finish law school and become a lawyer that advocates for women, particularly DV survivors. Another survivor we interviewed was already working at the victim service organization where they received help and hoped to become a therapist for other DV survivors. A survivor who recently finished their master's in social work planned to work with survivors directly.

Some survivors expressed hope that they would eventually see the DV response system change. System change was an important goal to eight survivors, who wanted legal system and alternative responses to the harm that women, survivors of color, and queer and transgender survivors experience to be improved. These survivors hoped those in direct service provision would work toward culturally competent understandings of different groups' experiences. One survivor had begun attending city council meetings to advocate for change in the legal system.

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Another survivor ultimately wanted to focus on creating a world where people can live with love, support, and respect for each other.

NOTE

¹ We use the term domestic violence to refer to the experience of physical, emotional, sexual, and economic abuse by a current or former intimate partner, sometimes also known as dating violence, intimate partner violence, or gender-based violence.

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