



RESEARCH REPORT

Striving toward Justice

Diverse Domestic Violence Survivors' and Practitioners' Perceptions of Justice, Accountability, and Safety

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Executive Summary

The concepts of justice, accountability, and safety are often used in cases of domestic violence (DV). Yet survivors are rarely asked what those terms mean to them and what makes the biggest difference to them in their paths toward achieving them. In this study, we aimed to understand perceptions of justice, accountability, and safety—including beliefs about the effectiveness of traditional responses and restorative practices—held by diverse survivors, particularly those who are underserved and less included in research. Specifically, we sought to engage survivors from immigrant, rural, LGBTQ+, and Native American communities. Given the impact practitioners have on DV cases and survivors' experiences, understanding their perspectives and the extent to which they align with survivors' can also provide key insights for improving practice.

From 2021 to 2024, a team of researchers from the Urban Institute and Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago partnered with four organizations with established records of serving survivors from marginalized communities to capture survivors' voices and produce critical knowledge about the availability, accessibility, equity, and effectiveness of the spectrum of responses to DV. We explored survivors' and practitioners' perceptions of the criminal and civil legal systems, intimate partner abuse solution programs for people who cause harm, restorative justice programs, transformative justice practices, and community-based services. We gathered these perceptions through interviews with 54 survivors, interviews with 42 practitioners who work with survivors and their partners, and a survey of survivors ($n=37$) and practitioners ($n=16$) who had participated in interviews.

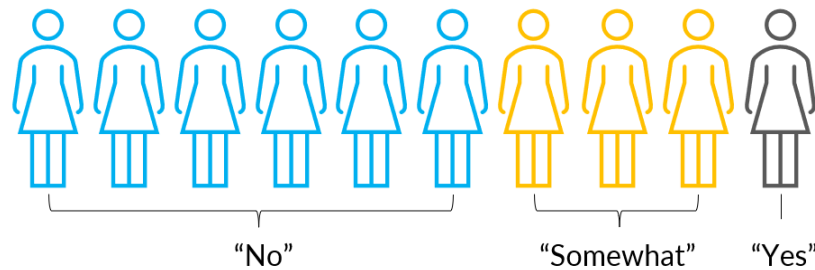
Key Findings

We found a large amount of variation in survivors' and practitioners' definitions of justice, accountability, and safety. Notably, nearly 60 percent of survivors reported that they did not feel they had gotten justice (figure ES.1), many had little hope that their partners could or would take responsibility for the harm they had caused, and most shared that their paths to safety were difficult and scary at times. As this report shows, survivors' experiences with formal systems and informal supports and their paths toward safety also vary vastly. For nearly half of the 46 survivors who defined safety, safety means having physical separation from one's partner. Notably, many survivors pointed to the importance of having the financial means to free themselves from unhealthy or unsafe relationships.

FIGURE ES.1

Nearly 60 Percent of Survivors Did Not Feel They Had Gotten Justice or That Harm Was Repaired

Interview question: “Did you get justice or feel harm was repaired?”



Source: Interviews with 54 survivors conducted by the Urban Institute and Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago between April and November 2023.

In addition, the different groups of participating survivors shared perceptions unique to their needs and identities. These included the following:

- Many LGBTQ+ survivors reported that legal system actors or staff were not fully equipped to protect them, particularly in situations when their partners used tactics to portray them (i.e., the survivors) as aggressors.
- Immigrant survivors reported that the decision to reach out for help and leave their partner was particularly difficult because they depended on their partner financially or were unsure how to navigate an unfamiliar legal system in a new country. Nearly every immigrant survivor said they weren't aware of their rights or what support was available.
- Survivors from the rural South, especially those with intersecting racial, gender, and sexual orientation identities, had mixed experiences. Some reported positive interactions with police officers, and others shared concerns about reporting their partners to the criminal legal system for fear of getting their partner incarcerated.
- Native American survivors shared that DV was prevalent in their communities but that support options for survivors and interventions for their partners, including substance use treatment, were limited.

Practitioners' and survivors' perceptions of justice are similar in many ways, and many practitioners noted that justice means what their clients define it as. Interestingly, 34 percent of interviewed survivors defined justice in terms of “fairness,” whereas only 7 percent of practitioners did so; 44 percent of practitioners indicated that the legal system is responsible for delivering justice, compared with 30 percent of survivors. Moreover, practitioners from different sectors seemed to

understand the primary challenges survivors face when seeking justice and accountability and that survivors want and need to be trusted, heard, and empowered to make decisions.

Even after struggling to find safety for themselves or their children or when formal systems failed to meet their needs, survivors found strength within themselves or in their personal networks to move on. When asked who the most influential person in their healing was, survivors mentioned themselves, friends, family or chosen family, roommates, and advocates. Many survivors noted that their friends provided constant support by frequently checking in and ensuring they were not alone or had someone with them when near their partner. Those survivors who were able to move on shared their hopes of getting more education, caring for their families, and finding ways to help other survivors in similar situations. Despite many challenges, survivors' determination and resiliency showed strongly through the interviews, and we are grateful to each of them for their willingness to share their story with us in hopes that conditions will improve for other survivors in the future.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Our goal was to highlight the diversity of survivors' backgrounds and experiences while identifying their shared needs and perspectives regarding justice, accountability, and safety. A key recurring theme was that it takes a village to achieve justice and accountability in DV cases. Service providers affect survivors' perceptions of whether their partners are held accountable as much as the legal system helps survivors heal. And less traditional stakeholders, including health and mental health providers, religious institutions, employers, and other community groups, also play important roles. We hope our findings can prompt stakeholders across sectors to consider how they are meeting the needs of all survivors and how they are contributing to survivors' sense of justice.

We also identified actionable recommendations, some of which are applicable to all sectors and some of which apply to direct services, the legal system, alternative justice programs, and policymakers and funders. Many stem directly from the participants' desire for empowerment and choice and for practitioners to take all forms of DV seriously. They are also designed to address some of the pervasive barriers we identified to achieving justice in the community or legal system, such as a lack of awareness of services or legal options among survivors and practitioners, language inaccessibility, and a lack of culturally informed and appropriate responses. We also encourage programs and agencies to assess their responses and encourage researchers to include survivors in research and evaluations on this topic.

Striving toward Justice: Diverse Domestic Violence Survivors' and Practitioners' Perceptions of Justice, Accountability, and Safety

Domestic violence (DV) affects millions of people across the United States and causes serious consequences for survivors, their families, and communities (D'Inverno et al. 2019; Morgan and Truman 2020).^{*} It is also clear that survivors with certain intersecting identities experience higher rates of violence and greater barriers to seeking and receiving help (CDC 2011; NCVS 2017).¹ Because survivors are not a monolith and because intersectionality matters,² their perceptions of what they need to heal and how to hold their partners accountable are also varied. Yet the field lacks systematic evidence of this variation centered on survivors' diverse voices. Because of this knowledge gap, practitioners may not always respond in ways most helpful to survivors, and systems designed to provide safety and justice often fall short.

From 2021 to 2024, the US Office on Violence Against Women funded the Urban Institute to conduct a multisite study on the perceptions of justice, accountability, safety, and healing held by diverse survivors of domestic violence. The purpose of this study was to center survivors' voices while producing critical knowledge about the availability, accessibility, equity, effectiveness, and perceptions of the spectrum of responses to domestic violence. These responses include those occurring through the criminal and civil legal systems, intimate partner abuse solution programs for people who cause harm,[†] restorative justice programs, transformative justice practices, and community-based services.

^{*} We use the term domestic violence to refer to a person's experience of physical, emotional, sexual, and/or economic abuse by a current or former intimate partner, sometimes also referred to as dating violence or intimate partner violence. Similarly, we primarily refer to people who experience DV as "survivors" unless "victim" is more accurate when discussing the legal process or other research. Lastly, except in direct quotes, we use the terms "partner" or "partner who caused harm" rather than "batterer," "abuser," or "abusive partner" in an effort to use person-first language and recognize that harm-causing is not a static part of a person's identity.

[†] In our interviews and surveys we referred to programs for partners who have caused harm as batterer intervention programs because of this term's prevalence and familiarity to survivors and practitioners; we also occasionally used the term "abusive partner intervention programs," a term used in some emerging programming. In this report, we also refer to them as intimate partner abuse solution programs, an emerging term that may be less recognized but emphasizes solutions and moves away from labeling partners. See Langton and coauthors (2022).

We aimed to understand how historically underserved survivors define justice, accountability, and safety; how they describe their needs, experiences, and preferences; and how they identify the strengths and challenges associated with traditional and alternative approaches to justice. We also examined the extent to which survivors' and practitioners' perspectives of justice align.

To achieve these goals, Urban, in collaboration with Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, implemented a multimethod approach. We conducted semistructured interviews with 54 survivors from diverse places and backgrounds, conducted semistructured interviews with 42 practitioners who work with survivors and their partners, and administered a short web-based survey to survivors ($n=37$) and practitioners ($n=16$) who participated in interviews. We then facilitated a stakeholder roundtable to inform interpretation of the findings and develop guiding principles for practice.³ Members of a practitioner consortium supported each stage of this study by serving as subject matter experts and making connections with historically underserved groups that are less accessible to researchers. In this report, we present contextual background on this study's subject and methods. We then detail our nuanced findings featuring the voices of survivors and practitioners, identify some limitations, and conclude with recommendations for practice, policy, and research.

Background

It is estimated that about 1 in 4 women and 1 in 9 men experience physical, psychological, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse. But the rates at which different groups experience victimization, their service needs, and their experiences vary widely. It is well documented that survivors from American Indian and Alaskan Native communities; those who identify as Black, as LGBTQ+, or as immigrants; and those with disabilities or living in rural areas experience higher rates of DV (Breiding and Armour 2015; CDC 2011; Morrison et al. 2024; NCVS 2017; Peek-Asa 2011; Rosay 2016; Williams, Oliver, and Pope 2008). Certain aspects of these identities even affect the types of control and abuse survivors may experience—for instance, threats to “out” LGBTQ+ survivors, get immigrant survivors deported, or interfere with equipment people with disabilities need. Moreover, these groups are less likely to report abuse to law enforcement or providers, for reasons including isolation, physical and language barriers, a lack of services, and distrust of responders (Reaves 2017).

After DV, survivors may turn to a range of victim services and/or the legal system. One study of the DV help-seeking behaviors of 369 women found that 50 percent of women “broadly engaged” formal and informal networks and up to 35 percent avoided legal system responses in seeking help (Cheng et al. 2020). Survivors' decisionmaking, behavior, and readiness to seek and receive help can

be shaped by ongoing relationships with partners, difficulty recognizing their experiences as abuse, social stigma around what is mostly considered a private matter, and distrust of authorities (NIJ 2009; Taccini and Mannarini 2023). Furthermore, legal and community-based response systems may not be as readily available to or attentive to the specific needs of survivors of color, LGBTQ+ survivors, and rural survivors (Kattari et al. 2017; Kulkarni 2019; Peek-Asa 2011). Moreover, researchers have difficulty reaching these survivors (Brown and Herman 2015; Mengo et al. 2022). Few studies have directly engaged survivors from marginalized communities to gather their stories, understand how systems do or do not serve them, and see what successful paths to justice, safety, and healing would look like for them.

Survivors and Justice in the Current Legal System

The criminal legal system has long been the primary response to domestic violence in the US (Goodmark 2020). Success in DV legal cases is often defined in terms of prosecution rates, granted DV protection orders (DVPOs), and closed cases—yet prosecution rates for DV are low and DVPOs see high violation rates and lack enforcement (Cordier et al. 2019; Dawson and Dinovitzer 2001). In working toward these outcomes, legal system actors may inadvertently harm survivors, such as by retraumatizing them through repeated interviews, prosecuting against their wishes, or engaging them in lengthy and complex processes (Gezinski and Gonzalez-Pons 2022; Katirai 2020).

In a 2022 Alliance for Safety and Justice survey of crime survivors, less than one-third preferred increasing arrests, strict punishment, and incarceration (Alliance for Safety and Justice 2022). Even in cases where incarceration is warranted, research shows that it *increases* a person's likelihood of using violence (Freeland Braun 2012; Travis, Western, and Redburn 2014), likely because prisons and jails are traumatizing and violent environments (Bloom 2015; DeVaux 2013). Marginalized survivors, especially those who identify as Black or LGBTQ+, may be less interested in participating in criminal legal proceedings, as they may rely on their partners economically, have children together, be conscious of structural racism and disparities, or feel unsafe working with state actors (Decker et al. 2020; Goodmark 2022; Waters 2016). Retributive justice responses to DV may work for some survivors, but developing a broad understanding of what justice can look like for survivors is important for understanding how to best serve survivors of all backgrounds and identities.

Movement toward Alternative Structures for Justice

Survivors, practitioners, and policymakers have become increasingly conscious of how the legal system may not fully meet survivors' needs. They have designed nonpunitive measures to stop people from abusing, such as trauma-informed intimate partner abuse programs; restorative justice programs in hospitals, jails, and the community; and programs and responses rooted in transformative justice. Trauma-informed programs for people who cause harm consider participants' life histories and needs when supporting them to meaningfully change their behavior (Ervin, Nembhard, and Nmai 2024; Langness, Ervin, and Duane 2022). Restorative justice models generally seek accountability by centering survivors' wishes and voices to help their partners recognize the harm they have caused. Some of these approaches have roots in Indigenous traditions, but in the modern US many are linked to the criminal legal system as sentencing alternatives or rehabilitative programs. Although such approaches are still scarce in the DV field, existing examples include restorative healing circles, survivor-offender mediation, and survivor-led speaker series in jails (Cissner et al. 2019; Levine and Meiners 2020).⁴ Transformative justice is a framework for preventing and repairing harm by developing solutions outside state structures; it can include identifying and working against contributing conditions, such as poverty (Dixon and Piepzna-Samarasinha 2020).⁵

Because programs that incorporate restorative and transformative justice frameworks often exist outside of the criminal legal system, they are far less prominent than the traditional approaches of prosecution, incarceration, DVPOs, and intimate partner abuse solution programs. Although restorative justice is increasingly used in the criminal legal system, not many formalized programs using transformative theory are available to survivors. In this study, we explored all traditional and alternative approaches to better understand survivors' wishes and hesitations and to learn from practitioners familiar with alternative approaches.

Research Goals and Design

This study's aim was to offer actionable guidance for service providers, so they can be better informed of the options for addressing violence in survivors' lives and advocating on their behalf; for legal system stakeholders, to guide their development, implementation, and improvement of systems and programs; and for policymakers and funders, to help them prioritize approaches that best meet survivors' diverse preferences and needs. The following seven core research questions guided our pursuit of this goal:

1. How do domestic violence survivors define justice, safety, accountability, and success as they relate to their experiences of domestic violence, and how do these definitions differ across diverse subpopulations of survivors and from practitioners' definitions?
2. To what extent do domestic violence survivors engage with, have their safety needs met by, and achieve justice through current criminal legal system responses?
3. To what extent are domestic violence survivors familiar with restorative and/or transformative justice principles that may contribute to alternative justice structures? To what extent are these survivors interested in and able to engage with alternative justice approaches? To what extent are they able to achieve justice and meet their safety needs through these approaches?
4. What short- and long-term outcomes do survivors experience or hope to achieve as a result of justice-focused interventions, both for themselves and for their partners?
5. To what extent are alternative justice approaches equally available, accessible, and resulting in successful outcomes for all survivors?
6. To what extent do survivors' perceptions of current justice responses and potential alternatives align with those of practitioners?
7. What is practitioners' role in assuring survivor safety and justice?

Study Design and Methodology

We intentionally designed this study to engender meaningful survivor engagement and empowerment, with an eye toward recruiting survivors who are underserved and less included in research. To meet this objective, we partnered with leaders from four community organizations that work with such survivors and have established trust with them: the Asian Women's Shelter in San Francisco, which provides culturally grounded DV intervention and prevention, particularly for immigrant, refugee, and LGBTQ+ survivors; Mending the Sacred Hoop in Minnesota, which provides training and technical assistance to address DV against Native women in the state and nationally; Hugh Lane Wellness Foundation, which provides services and training to improve the health of LGBTQIA+ people in western Pennsylvania; and the North Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence, which serves survivors statewide through member programs and which helped recruit rural survivors and survivors of color for this study. We worked closely with all partners to design the

research instruments, advertise the study, recruit participants through their networks, and co-interpret our findings, described more below.

To achieve our study's goal and answer the research questions, we used the following methods:

- We developed interview and survey protocols with our practitioner consortium and vetted the protocols with survivors.
- We **interviewed survivors** ($n=54$) from diverse geographies and backgrounds.
- We **interviewed practitioners** ($n=42$) who work with survivors or their partners.
- We administered a short web-based **survey to survivors and practitioners** who participated in interviews. Only completed surveys were analyzed (survivors $n=37$, practitioners $n=16$).
- We facilitated a **roundtable with survivors, policymakers, and practitioners** in January 2024 to discuss preliminary findings and develop guiding principles for practice.

SURVIVOR AND PRACTITIONER INTERVIEWS

The purpose of the semistructured interviews was to understand participants' perceptions of justice, safety, healing, and accountability; learn about their experiences with the legal system and alternative programs; and collect their recommendations on how to make services more accessible, available, and suitable (see the appendix for the interview protocols). We sought to interview survivors with different help-seeking experiences who were 18 or older and had experienced DV within the past five years. We also took precautions not to put survivors in more danger. The research team provided survivors with information about the interviews in private settings and let them decide whether they were able to participate. Before beginning each interview, the team received informed consent from the survivor or practitioner to ensure they understood that their participation was voluntary and confidential. We also informed survivors of their options if they felt distressed during the interviews and enabled them to reschedule.

The interviews were held between February and November 2023 by two members of the research team, one of whom took verbatim notes. No audio or video recordings of the interviews were made. The majority of interviews were conducted virtually over Zoom, and these participants were advised of the security measures taken and informed they could be off camera and change their display name. However, participants could also choose to be interviewed in person during site visits to San Francisco, Pittsburgh, and Durham in summer 2023.⁶ For practitioners and survivors who speak English, interviews lasted one hour. For survivors with limited English proficiency, interviews lasted up to an hour and a half and were conducted using consecutive interpretation provided by trained

interpreters employed by the Asian Women’s Shelter; before these interviews, the research team held a training to orient the interpreters to the interview protocol and answer their questions. All survivors who participated in interviews received a \$50 Visa gift card (a physical card if they interviewed in person or a mailed or emailed card depending on their preference) to thank them for participating.

Recruitment. We worked closely with the practitioner consortium to recruit practitioner and survivor participants. To recruit practitioners, members of the consortium identified professionals in their communities from the victim service field, the criminal and civil legal systems, battering intervention programs, and alternative justice programs. They informed them about the study and facilitated warm introductions with the research team, who then worked directly with the practitioners to answer questions and schedule interviews.

To recruit survivors, the consortium identified advocates, case workers, and other practitioners in their networks who had established trust with survivors and enlisted them to advertise the study. The consortium members provided these recruitment partners with detailed information about the study and the interview process to share with survivors after case management meetings or other services. The partners were also given a recruitment flyer with a QR code that people could use to express interest through a secure electronic sign-up sheet and the research team’s contact information. To protect survivors, the flyer did not name DV or survivors. The recruiting partners distributed it electronically to survivors who had completed services, posted it in public settings in their agencies, and shared it through community-specific listservs, online support groups, and their personal networks.

Survivors who expressed interest online could securely share (with only the researchers) their preferred contact information, their preferred modality (virtual or in person), and their preferred time frame. Then the research team reached out to schedule. For in-person interviews, a practitioner partner coordinated the recruitment, scheduling, and logistics. In addition, in September 2023, all previous survivor participants were emailed the flyer with a request that they share the invitation with any other survivors they knew who might be interested in participating, particularly those who had not engaged in traditional services.

Interview sample characteristics. Of the 54 survivors we interviewed, 18 were from California, 15 from Pennsylvania, 14 from North Carolina, and 7 from Minnesota. We did not collect survivors’ demographic information, to ensure their confidentiality and privacy. But our interview analyses revealed that survivors were diverse in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity, racial and ethnic background, age, and geography (whether they lived in rural or urban areas). (For the demographics of interviewed survivors who opted to take the survey, see table 1 below).

Of the 42 practitioners we interviewed, 11 worked for victim service providers, 11 worked in community-based legal services, 7 held community-level leadership or response coordination positions, 4 were prosecutors, 4 worked for programs for partners who cause harm, 3 were from legal system victim services, and 2 were from health-focused organizations. The practitioners also spanned the four regions of focus, with 9 in the Northeast, 19 in the South, 5 in the Midwest, and 9 in the West.

Analytic methods. We cleaned the notes from the semistructured interviews and imported them into NVivo, a secure software for managing and analyzing qualitative data. We developed and tested a coding scheme that included themes and patterns from the collected data. Five members of the research team were assigned to code transcripts, which were then analyzed around themes and patterns in the coding scheme. Coded and analyzed qualitative data were reviewed by a senior researcher and checked against original notes from several themes to ensure analyses accurately captured the reflections.

SURVIVOR AND PRACTITIONER SURVEYS

The goal of the surveys was to complement the interviews by collecting demographics and providing a quantitative way to assess alignment between survivors' and practitioners' perspectives. As such, the instruments we developed were brief (they could be completed in up to 15 minutes) and consisted mostly of closed-ended questions. The survivor survey instrument included 43 nested questions covering the respondent's background; their experiences and satisfaction with criminal and civil legal system responses; their familiarity and experiences with alternative approaches, including restorative justice; the effectiveness of responses they had received; barriers to and facilitators of their engagement; and what responses had been taken toward their partners via the legal system, batterer intervention programs, or services. (See the appendix for the survivor survey instrument.) The practitioner survey instrument included 64 nested questions covering the respondent's background; their perceptions of criminal legal system responses; their perceptions of alternative approaches, including restorative justice; their role in survivor safety; and barriers to survivors being able to engage.

Recruitment and administration. At the end of each semistructured interview, the research team described the survey to the participant and requested permission to send them a link to it. If they consented, the researcher confirmed an appropriate email address and then sent the secure confidential link immediately after the interview concluded. All survivors who responded to the survey were thanked with a \$25 gift card, which was mailed or emailed depending on their preference and the contact information they gave. The secure online software program Qualtrics was used to collect survey data. We used Qualtrics to create additional translations of the survivor survey, which were reviewed by a qualified interpreter and made available to participants.

Survey sample characteristics. Only 16 of 42 practitioners we interviewed took the survey. The research team deemed this response rate too low for a meaningful or representative analysis of practitioners' responses. Of 54 interviewed survivors, 47 surveys were administered and 37 were completed for a completion rate of approximately 69 percent. The majority of these 37 survivors were women (70 percent) and were heterosexual or straight (56 percent), but survivors reported a wide range of other gender identities and sexual orientations, including 16 percent who identify as transgender. The 3 who self-described their sexual orientation listed themselves as ambisexual, omnisexual, or lesbian or dyke. Participants also had diverse racial and ethnic identities.

TABLE 1
Demographics of Survivor Survey Participants

	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Woman	26	70%
Nonbinary or gender nonconforming	5	14%
Man	2	5%
Prefer not to answer	2	5%
Self-describe: Trans-Masculine	1	3%
Two spirit	1	3%
Race/ethnicity		
White	10	28%
Black or African American	7	19%
Native American	7	19%
Asian	5	14%
Latine	3	8%
Prefer not to answer	2	6%
Self-describe	2	6%
Geographic area type		
Urban	11	36%
Suburban	9	30%
Rural	7	24%
Prefer not to answer	6	18%
Sexual orientation		
Heterosexual/straight	20	56%
Pansexual	5	14%
Queer	4	11%
Bisexual	4	11%
Gay/lesbian	4	11%
Self-describe	3	8%
Asexual	1	3%
Prefer not to answer	1	3%

Source: Survey of survivors of domestic violence administered by the Urban Institute and Chapin Hall research team in summer/fall 2023.

Notes: n=37. Totals may not add up to 37, as respondents could skip questions and select multiple choices.

Our participants indicated a wide geographic distribution, with 36 percent living in urban areas, 30 percent living in suburban areas, and 24 percent living in rural areas. Moreover, 30 percent live in the Northeast, 22 percent live in the South, 16 percent live in the Midwest, and 8 percent live in the West. (We believe some respondents provided the region relevant to their locality in their state rather than the region of their state in the US.) In terms of the level of education completed, 19 percent graduated high school or obtained their GED, 23 percent completed some college, and 30 percent graduated college. Regarding employment, 35 percent of respondents were employed full time, 14 percent were part time, and 21 percent were unemployed. Respondents' average age was 34; the minimum age was 20 and the maximum was 58. Lastly, 84 percent were US citizens and 22 percent reported having a disability.

Analytic methods. To analyze survey responses, we extracted raw data responses from Qualtrics into Stata statistical software. From there, we reviewed the data, examining and reporting frequencies and the descriptive statistics reported above. We also used some survey responses to supplement findings from qualitative interviews and present them in figures below.

STAKEHOLDER ROUNDTABLE

Held on January 26, 2024, the Perceptions of Justice Stakeholder Roundtable virtually convened six members of the Urban and Chapin Hall research team; eight practitioners, three of whom also self-identified as survivors; five survivors who participated in the study; and three representatives from the Office on Violence Against Women. The practitioners represented the four sites of the study (the Asian Women's Shelter, Mending the Sacred Hoop, Hugh Lane, and the North Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence). The survivors had expressed interest in participating at the end of the survey and were selected to represent three regions of the US and diverse identities. Two members of the research team met with each survivor individually before the event to discuss the goals, the technology, the other attendees, the agenda, and what steps could be taken to maintain their anonymity.

At the roundtable, the research team presented key findings from the study, such as how survivors and practitioners define justice and who they see as responsible for justice, survivors' experiences with the legal system and interest in alternative approaches, and what made a difference for survivors' safety and healing. The team also shared examples of guiding principles developed by other organizations that the research team had identified and reviewed. The roundtable participants then engaged in individual reflection, breakout group conversations, and large group discussions to identify core values and discuss how guiding principles could be implemented in communities. Based on the review of related principles, analysis of the study's interviews, and recommendations from the

stakeholder roundtable, the research team identified nine guiding principles for justice responses (see Dusenbery 2024).⁷

Findings

This section presents the results of the interviews and surveys, organized by the key themes that emerged. These findings emphasize the diversity of survivors' backgrounds and experiences while also identifying different groups' shared values, needs, and perspectives.

Personal Definitions

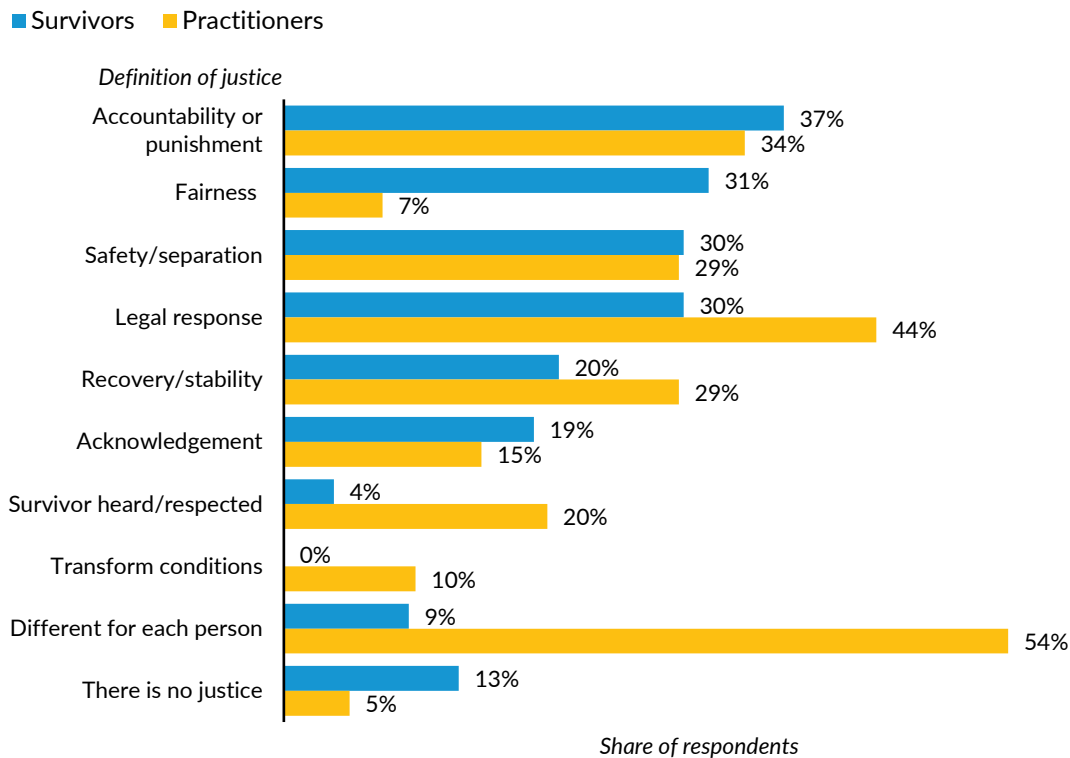
Survivors were given the opportunity to define in their own words what “justice,” “accountability,” and “safety” mean to them in the context of harm by a partner, acknowledging that these are big, frequently used concepts but that they mean something different for each person. Practitioners were asked to define these same terms in the context of domestic violence and what success looks like in these cases.

WHAT IS JUSTICE?

Nearly every survivor offered a definition of justice for DV, and their responses varied as widely as their experiences. Some definitions were straightforward—for example, justice is “equality” or “when you get what you deserve”—but the majority contained multiple concepts or themes (figure 1). Several even identified multiple stages or a sequence of what should happen; for example, if harm still occurred after a first acknowledgement or consequence, then justice would require the legal system.

FIGURE 1

How Survivors and Practitioners Define Justice



Source: Interviews of domestic violence survivors and practitioners conducted by the Urban Institute and Chapin Hall research team in summer/fall 2023.

Notes: Survivors n=54. Practitioners n=41

Survivors most frequently defined justice as accountability or punishment (e.g., consequences, restitution, karma) and fairness (e.g., equity, equality, truth). The next-most-common definitions, both of which were referenced by 30 percent of survivors, were legal responses (e.g., court processes, jail, filing charges, fair representation) and safety/separation (e.g., protection, distance). For example, one survivor said justice is “primarily getting the harmed partner to safety. Justice is not the same as retribution, so the primary focus should not be on punishing the abuser but protecting and helping the abused.” Survivors also closely tied justice to survivors’ recovery and stability, with about 20 percent defining it in terms of internal healing, peace, and having received services. About 20 percent of survivors saw it as acknowledgement and effort by the partner to change or awareness among the community, with a much smaller percentage associating justice with feeling heard or respected by practitioners. Lastly, 13 percent of survivors believed that justice is unachievable for DV and 9 percent that it is different for each survivor.

Acknowledgement of what happened did happen is a basic starting point. Some form of accountability too. Some attempt to prevent future harm to this particular person and the community. And some form of reparation, maybe financial or reputational. –Survivor

Practitioners referenced the same themes but with several notable differences. Survivors and practitioners were largely in agreement about equating justice with accountability, safety or separation, and acknowledgement by the partner or community. Moreover, survivors' recovery was referenced by 29 percent of practitioners (compared with 20 percent of survivors). One practitioner illustrated these concepts as survivors "being able to successfully escape their abusive relationships and be able to start over and thrive emotionally and economically." But unlike those of survivors, practitioners' definitions rarely involved fairness. Practitioners were more likely to see justice as survivors' being heard and respected and as related to the legal system; these practitioners defined justice as engagement in the legal system or as outcomes such as incarceration of the partner, divorce, custody, or a DVPO.

Several themes likely resulted from practitioners responding based on their experiences serving many survivors, whereas survivors spoke based on their own unique experiences. For example, practitioners were less likely than survivors to say justice may not be possible in DV cases (only 5 percent) and much more likely to say justice is different in each case (54 percent). These practitioners defined justice as helping survivors achieve their self-identified goals, which could include finding safety, seeking closure, achieving healing, or feeling heard by the courts. As one practitioner said, "I try to come at it from the perspective of being client-centered and trauma-informed. Doesn't matter what I think is justice, what justice looks like for them varies greatly." Several also affirmed that cultural identity may affect those different definitions; one shared that "Indigenous populations especially have a reasonable fear of working with the prosecutor's office, so justice may look like charging, but there needs to be a lot more oversight on those cases." Lastly, 10 percent of practitioners identified broader systemic changes as key to justice to "transform the conditions that led to harm" and address the reasons someone causes harm.

Justice for me is our best attempt to fix broken systems, to make something better even if can't make it right. –Practitioner

WHAT IS ACCOUNTABILITY?

Reflective of their definitions of justice, accountability for a third of survivors meant for their partner to admit their wrongdoing and take the steps to address or repair the root causes of their behavior. For example, one survivor wanted their partner to name the harm they had caused through a written statement and find a way to provide restitution. About a quarter of practitioners similarly defined accountability as acknowledging and repairing harm, potentially through counseling, therapy, or participation in abuse solution programs. About 13 percent of survivors and 15 percent of practitioners believed that survivors' and partners' friends, family, and fellow community members should be involved in getting accountability from partners. For survivors, this largely involves making these parties aware of the harm and ensuring they do not excuse the behavior.

Furthermore, 12 percent of survivors wanted their partners to face consequences or punishment for their actions, either through the criminal legal system or by society. But practitioners differed regarding whether accountability should or even can be achieved through the criminal legal system. Some said that although this system can often be complicated and imperfect, the criminal legal system may be necessary as “the only agency that can make people do anything.” But several others believed that the criminal legal system is wholly incapable of delivering accountability to survivors. Like with justice, a few survivors believed there is no path to accountability for DV.

WHAT ARE SUCCESSFUL OUTCOMES IN DV CASES?

Practitioners were the only group asked what success means in their cases, and like with other definitions, half of the respondents acknowledged that successful outcomes for their clients differ by case. Success may depend on survivors' goals, the severity of violence, and the presence of children. For example, one practitioner said success means total separation and no contact if there are no shared children but established boundaries if there are. Another practitioner felt that incarceration or community supervision might be warranted in serious or dangerous cases, whereas success in other cases can be achieved through DVPOs, intimate partner abuse solution programs, or probation. A third of the practitioners who defined success equated it with stopping the violence and creating safety for survivors.

Practitioners in victim services were more likely to define successful outcomes as survivor empowerment, which can consist of being listened to and having choice, and as survivor healing. More legal service and legal system practitioners included protection orders or prosecution in their definitions of success (five respondents), but they added that it includes other components, such as counseling for the partner who has done harm, tools for the survivor to move on, and freedom. Several responded from a service perspective, defining successful outcomes as getting more survivors to seek services or feel comfortable returning to providers, or providing responses that are trauma informed. Lastly, one defined success as “systemic change from a preventative perspective [and] having the resources and things we need to address added stressors.”

WHAT IS SAFETY?

Because safety was such a common and integral part of survivors’ and practitioners’ definitions of justice and success, it is important to understand how each group sees safety. For nearly half of the 46 survivors who defined safety, safety means having physical separation from their partner, which consists of being physically away, having no contact or communication, and the partner not knowing where the survivor is. About 15 percent of survivor respondents included in their definitions that physical safety would come from protection orders, the police, incarceration, and the criminal legal system more broadly. For another 11 percent, safety means having emotional security and safety, including hope, time to heal emotionally, or the absence of fear. Survivors also mentioned that safety meant having the economic support necessary to leave and stay away from the partner.

Finances is the top thing keeping people in unhealthy relationships. The mental part is there but can push through that and get out if you have the money. —Survivor

An additional 17 percent of survivors defined safety as a relationship in which there is no verbal, emotional, or physical abuse and which has healthy boundaries and good communication. Lastly, three survivors said they did not know how to define safety because they did not yet have it, and one felt there is no safety in DV situations, pointing to the level of danger and the work that remains when it comes to safety.

For practitioners, safety in DV situations is specific to each survivor and should be survivor-driven and culturally specific. But in general, safety is largely related to physical separation and emotional

well-being. Some practitioners also believed that safety does not always mean the survivor has left the relationship with their partner. For example, one said, “It’s really important for providers [and] advocates to listen to survivors and help them in safety planning to determine what safety looks like for them. Conversations about what feels empowering, a way they can feel safer even if they aren’t leaving.” Practitioners also think safety means having immediate access to the resources necessary to be away from the partner, such as financial security, short-term shelters, or long-term housing, which aligns with survivors’ perspectives about economic-related safety needs. Lastly, one provider clarified that “safety does not always equate justice.”

Survivors’ Preferences and Needs

In our interviews, we asked early on about survivors’ preferences and needs and whether they felt their needs were being met. Some wanted the people who harmed them to go to jail, others just wanted to be isolated from them, and some said they believed the people who harmed them should go through what they went through. Eleven survivors wanted the people who caused them harm to change their behaviors and get needed therapy so their abusive behavior could stop and not affect anyone else. Another eight survivors wanted an apology and some form of accountability. Lastly, five survivors explicitly expressed that they wanted financial independence from the people who harmed them.

The survey asked survivors to define what “just” responses to their partners are. Most did so in ways that differ from traditional definitions of “justice” (table 2). Mental health services were selected far more often than any other option. Four of the eight most common responses involved supporting the survivor’s economic security.

TABLE 2
How Survivors of Domestic Violence Define Just Responses to Their Partners

	Frequency
Response to the question “I would say the following is a just response to my (ex) partner”	
Mental health services for my (ex) partner	22
Mental health services for me	18
Social services for me (e.g., help with gaining employment finding affordable housing)	13
Payment of restitution to you or fines and fees to the court	8
Incarceration of my (ex) partner in jail or prison	8
Social services for my (ex) partner (e.g., help with gaining employment finding affordable housing)	8
Court-ordered removal of firearms	7

	Frequency
Response to the question “I would say the following is a just response to my (ex) partner”	
Court award of no contact orders, a shared home or car, or child custody or support to me	6
Voluntary participation by my partner in BIP or APIP	6

Source: Survey of domestic violence survivors administered by the Urban Institute and Chapin Hall research team between April and September 2023.

Notes: APIP = abusive partner intervention programming. BIP = batterer intervention programming. $n=37$. Totals may not add up to 37 as respondents could skip questions and select multiple choices.

Practitioners were asked what they believed survivors’ preferences were, and they identified similar ones as survivors, namely that survivors want the people who caused harm to realize their behavior was wrong and to change. They also underscored that survivors’ preferences range from carceral responses to rehabilitation. Many practitioners believed survivors want economic security and safe housing. Above all, practitioners believed survivors just want the violence to stop.

Though survivors noted a wide range of unmet needs, several responses were common. Financial stability was the most commonly reported unmet need. Many survivors noted that they wanted an apology from the person who harmed them, or at least some form of accountability, but that they never got it. In addition to these, survivors reported being unable to address their trauma, get a sense of resolution, and stop feeling isolated and alone.

We sought to understand whether practitioners identified these same needs. Practitioners, like survivors, noted that financial needs are often unmet. They further explained that survivors can often benefit from cash disbursement but that this is not an option for most survivors. Related to financial support, the second-most-common unmet need practitioners noted was a safe home.

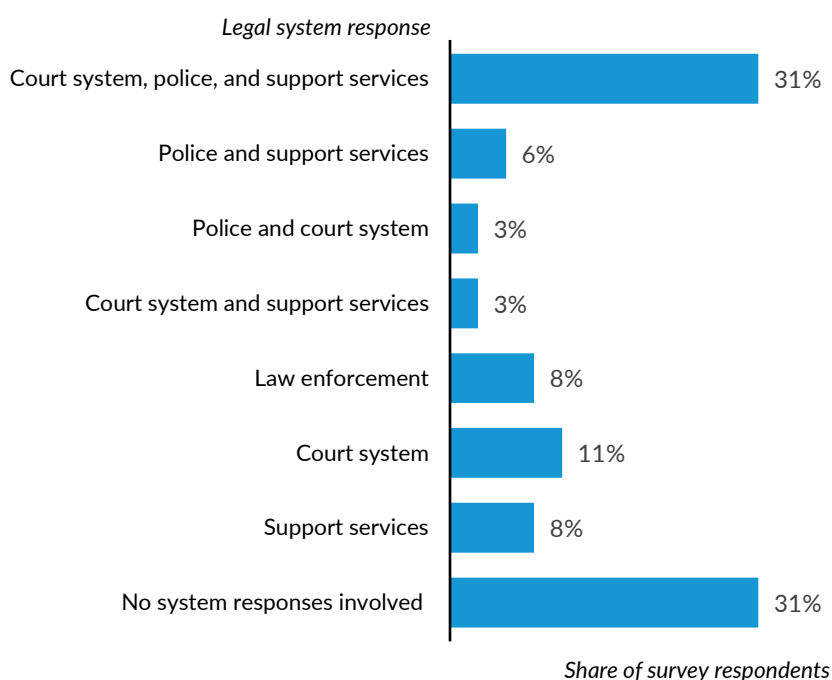
Practitioners disagreed, however, on how often survivors have unmet needs. Several practitioners believed survivors often do not feel justice and have many unmet needs, whereas others said a large majority of survivors do get justice. Interestingly, one practitioner explicitly mentioned that it is difficult for them to assess how many survivors are satisfied because their definition of success does not always match the survivor’s. Another common response was that survivors may not be able to have their needs met because the traditional legal systems they cycle through are inflexible and cannot adequately respond to untraditional circumstances, including LGBTQ+ relationships, language barriers, and cultural norms.

Engagement with and Perceptions of the Legal System

A number of survivors pursued legal system options to address the harm that had been done to them. In fact, we found that 61 percent of surveyed survivors (22 of 36) involved a legal system response through the police and/or the court system, which includes prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges, or other court staff (figure 2). Of note, most survivors surveyed either did not engage the police or court system at all or engaged both systems with support from an advocate; very few involved police and court systems on their own without support from an advocate.

FIGURE 2

Types of Responses to Domestic Violence Survivors Accessed in the Legal System



Source: Survey of domestic violence survivors administered by the Urban Institute and Chapin Hall research team between April and September 2023.

Note: n=36.

In our interviews we asked survivors to reflect on their experiences with the civil legal system. The most common involvement they reported with that system was through DVPOs. Divorce and custody were the next-most-common types of involvement. Several survivors had not been involved with the civil legal system, because it was not relevant to their situation or, for 13 percent of survivors interviewed, because they intentionally avoided it.

A larger share of survivors interviewed (18 percent) said they avoided any involvement with the criminal legal system. Some elaborated that they felt uncomfortable interacting with police and the court system because of their race. Among those who reported interacting with the criminal legal system, the majority said they called or interacted with the police. But similar to the trends in the field (Travis 2009), several did not move past filing police reports or did not proceed to file charges in court. Reflecting on their interactions with the police, 4 survivors had positive experiences, but 10 shared that the police were not helpful. One survivor said, “I did not feel believed even though I was the one that called them.” Several said the criminal cases for the incidents in which they were harmed were dismissed because of a lack of evidence. Six were not aware of what happened with their criminal court cases after they called the police.

BARRIERS TO AND FACILITATORS OF LEGAL SYSTEM ENGAGEMENT

Survivors raised several barriers to engaging with the legal system, the most common of which was the “income gate.” Survivors said that to get the results one wants in civil court, one needs to hire an attorney, and good attorneys are expensive. The second-most-common barrier was survivors’ fear of contacting and interacting with the police. Some mentioned that marginalized communities, including Black and LGBTQ+ people, have cultural mistrust of police. The next-most-common barrier was the amount of time it takes to go through the court process, which felt overwhelming and burdensome to survivors. In addition to the emotional toll of months passing without feeling their cases were being resolved, survivors found it difficult to balance work and court appearances.

Victims should be allowed to talk to a person who can understand, like a counselor, and through them, go to the police. I don't know how much police and court can understand sensitive issues when talking about your life, your issues. –Survivor

We found that practitioners correctly understood that the fear of talking to police is the most common concern survivors have about engaging in the criminal legal system. But their other responses diverged from those of survivors. Practitioners mentioned the fear of retaliation as a barrier far more frequently than survivors. In addition, they highlighted the initial barrier of knowing who to contact and what next steps to take to pursue a civil or criminal response. Another common barrier they

named was the language barrier that people with limited English proficiency experience when trying to navigate the court system.

As for facilitators, the vast majority of survivors said their lawyer was the most helpful facilitator of legal system involvement. Other than this, responses varied widely and included victim advocates, family, and social workers. Unlike survivors, practitioners did not mention lawyers as facilitators of survivors' legal system involvement. They did, however, believe that legal advocates are important facilitators of legal system engagement, as they serve as intermediaries between survivors and the police and courts. They also believed that staff at local organizations help survivors in legal system processes, including by letting them know of their options and preparing them for court proceedings.

Survivors were also asked whether they think the civil and criminal legal systems are generally more accessible for some groups than others, and the vast majority agreed that both systems are. Most highlighted multiple groups as having less access to the legal system, including low-income people, marginalized racial and ethnic groups, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ people, people with mental illnesses, and people with limited English proficiency.

It's kind of common knowledge at this point that it's [the legal system] more accessible to cisgender, heterosexual, rich white men. As you take those statuses away it becomes less accessible. There's an income gate for everyone. Everything requires an expensive lawyer or expensive court filing fees. —Survivor

The vast majority of practitioners agreed that the legal system is less accessible to some groups, as only one believed that the system is equally accessible to all. Language was the most commonly cited barrier to accessibility: nearly half of interviewed practitioners mentioned the lack of interpretation available, and several said the system is less accessible for immigrants. Poverty or a lack of financial or economic resources were the next-most-commonly cited factors that make the system less accessible (36 percent of practitioners), followed by race (28 percent) and sexual orientation and gender identity (21 percent). Practitioners discussed the bias that professionals in the system may have toward people of color and LGBTQ+ people and the hesitancy and mistrust that may keep people in these groups from engaging with the system. Several participants also highlighted the particular challenges that survivors with intersecting marginalized identities face, especially LGBTQ+ people of color.

NEEDS MET BY THE LEGAL SYSTEM

Survivors we interviewed who had engaged with the legal system reported many different perspectives on whether the civil/criminal legal systems helped them feel safer. Several reported that law enforcement made them feel less safe or didn't help their safety, whereas others reported that law enforcement had positive effects. Of survivors who said the system made them feel safer, some credited the civil system, legal help, and their attorney, and some said their protection order made them feel safer but that it wasn't respected by their partner or community. Lastly, a few survivors reported that they were still scared and did not think the incarceration of their partner would keep them safe.

The survey also asked survivors who had engaged with the legal system what factors made them feel safer (table 3). Protection orders were the most common response, which is not surprising given survivors' definitions of safety and given that this is how they most commonly interact with the system. But the next three factors—DV courts, legal system safety planning, and advocacy support—reflect the importance of having staff that understand the dynamics and risks of DV.

TABLE 3
Legal System Responses That Contributed to Survivors' Safety

	Frequency
Response to the question "The top three most important factors overall that helped me feel safe were..."	
Civil protection or restraining orders	9
Domestic violence or family violence specific courts	6
Safety planning for during an investigation or court process	5
Assignment of an advocate for the person who was harmed	5
Prosecution of people who cause harm	4
Law enforcement emergency response	4
Housing assistance or employment assistance	3
Assignment of counsel for the person who was harmed	3

Source: Survey of domestic violence survivors administered by the Urban Institute and Chapin Hall research team between April and September 2023.

Notes: n=37. Totals may not add up to 37 as respondents could skip questions and select multiple choices.

When asked during interviews whether the legal system provided them justice, survivors were more likely than practitioners to talk about justice through the legal system in terms of civil court actions not specific to DV (divorce, custody) or financial remedies, rather than prosecution or protection orders. Practitioners were also asked whether they believe the legal system brings survivors safety, and other than one participant who said it does so most of the time and one who firmly said no, most said it depends on the particular survivor, the jurisdiction, the response, and

whether the laws are applied and legal professionals are trained. No practitioners strongly believed that the legal system gives survivors a sense of justice. Some said it definitely does not, while many replied that it depends or that it sometimes does. The most commonly cited reasons survivors don't receive justice through the legal system were the amount of time the process takes and the trauma or retraumatization that often occurs because of system professionals' biases and lack of awareness and training. Practitioners said these factors affect survivors' perceptions of justice even when they achieve the outcomes they want.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE LEGAL SYSTEM

Survivors had numerous recommendations for how the civil and criminal legal systems can respond better to DV. The most common recommendations concerned survivor awareness and support, followed by empowerment and victim-centered responses. Survivors wanted to increase other survivors' awareness about abuse, the civil process, response options, and protection orders. They wanted better communication when partners who have harmed them are released and options for getting that information other than by phone. They also wanted better advocacy and resources during criminal and civil cases, whether from system advocacy departments, case workers, or community-based support providers that could help with housing, transportation, information, and safety during proceedings. Regarding victim-centered recommendations, 36 percent of the 54 interviewed survivors wanted the legal system to take DV (especially nonphysical abuse) more seriously, listen to and believe survivors, and respect their preferences. Others wanted better cultural competency in services regarding LGBTQ+ survivors, survivors' religious beliefs, and other backgrounds and more language interpretation and translation, including a language advocate for law enforcement.

About a quarter of interviewed survivors recommended providing training in general or providing training specifically for police, attorneys, or judges on how to better treat victims. Survivors thought these practitioners need to better understand DV, how it affects survivors, and how to manage a courtroom and need to better exhibit empathy. Furthermore, 20 percent of survivors wanted survivors to have better legal support, including affordable civil legal support, emergency funds for legal support, free law clinics, and reduced attorney fees. Regarding legal proceedings, survivors recommended better investigations in both the civil and criminal systems by attorneys and law enforcement; use of specialized DV units, mediators, and social workers as co-responders; options not to arrest, see the partner, or appear in court; and creation of a separate DV emergency line. Several survivors had specific ideas about DVPOs, including aligning risk of harm and consequences; creating guidelines on cross-protection orders, especially in cases involving LGBTQ+ partners; allowing longer-term orders; and addressing children and financial relief more often in orders. Lastly, some survivors

offered suggestions for reforming the system, such as simplifying it or reducing the time it takes, defaulting to incarceration less often, and abolishing the police.

Practitioners offered similar recommendations, particularly regarding the need to be more trauma informed, victim centered, and empowering. Many also raised the need to improve or expand training for law enforcement, attorneys, and judges, especially to increase understanding of DV and cultural competency. Other common recommendations that aligned with those of survivors were to make the process less complicated or burdensome, make attorneys more affordable, and help survivors understand their options and resources, especially early in the process. Unlike survivors, several practitioners recommended more ways for restorative justice or mediation to occur in the system.

Interventions and Supports for Partners

We asked survivors and practitioners about what services or supports survivors' partners or ex-partners had engaged in. Most survivors were not aware whether their partner was in any kind of program, and some were not aware that programs for partners who cause harm are available. Survivors whose partners were in such programs had mixed perceptions. Some felt their partner's participation was a good option that would make the survivor safer, but others felt that participation did not have meaningful effects. This aligned with what some practitioners shared: that more evidence was needed to assess the effectiveness of such programs. One practitioner noted, "I think the perception for a long time was, does it work? And now that we're more aware of restorative and transformative justice, it's more of a question about how we provide care for people who've used harm."

When asked about their perceptions of such programs even if their partner had not attended one, survivors felt that the programs could be helpful for people experiencing harm, but that they might not work for their own partners or ex-partners. Although not many survivors had partners who had participated, when asked what results they wanted from such programs, they reported that they wanted their partners to better themselves, whether they remained together or not. Survivors recommended that these programs help participants understand the harm they have caused and empathize with the people they have harmed, be longer or better advertised, and train facilitators in trauma and abuse in queer relationships.

Practitioners shared that although it can provide survivors relief for people who cause harm to participate in programs, only a few programs are available in their communities and they lack standardized curriculums, facilitation guidance, and oversight. Practitioners believed strong facilitators are needed to make the most of these programs, that there should be cross-training between

programs for partners and DV advocacy programs, and that program metrics should focus more on how well they engage and relate to partners who cause harm instead of focusing predominantly on attendance. In addition, practitioners shared that there was a lack of culturally competent programs. LGBTQ+ partners may only have one LGBTQ+-specific option in their community, so they may have to out themselves to other participants in the program if they want culturally appropriate programming. Other providers are not trained in LGBTQ+ dynamics or partner with providers that hold more traditional views. In immigrant communities, interpretation is limited or programming is not conducive to the needs of certain cultures. Many Native American communities use healing circle practices and victim-offender interventions,⁸ but their availability and accessibility are not well researched. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many programs added virtual group/individual sessions, but practitioners had mixed opinions of them, as some noted that they improved accessibility whereas others raised concerns that such programs need to be in person to be effective.

Practitioners were more aware of programming options for partners, but they were more skeptical of these programs than survivors. Generally, the practitioners we spoke to were not confident that these programs as they currently operate reduce harm, but some were hopeful that they could help people who cause harm learn about their harmful attitudes and change. Many pointed out that referring agencies, such as courts and prosecutors, and program providers have a long road ahead to reduce the stigma of these programs so that prospective participants feel comfortable enrolling of their own volition (if available) or at least recognize the value in completing all the sessions if they are referred as a condition of their sentence. Some programs are facilitated well with a delicate mix of accountability and therapy, and practitioners shared that participants have expressed that these groups have been the first places they have felt they can open up. More evidence is needed, however, on what aspects of these programs work and for whom. As a few practitioners pointed out, criminal legal agencies and local governments play an important role monitoring these programs' facilitation. In addition, practitioners recommended that the programs work more with victims and make them aware of their partners' attendance.

I do see the value of men or even women getting education, to share the experience of what you've done. But you also want to get to the change part and change the way they think [and/or] correct abusive patterns. It's important for them to hear other perspectives, and how their actions could have caused hurt. –Practitioner

Interest and Engagement in Alternative Justice Approaches

Perceptions of alternative justice responses emerging in the DV field are a large focus of this study. We define alternative justice responses as programs or interventions focused on justice, accountability, and/or repairing harm outside of traditional punitive measures; these responses could involve just the survivor, the survivor and partner, or larger groups. Though unstructured and informal alternative options exist, examples of more structured approaches include restorative justice programs, mediation, group/family conferencing, and education initiatives and community-led advocacy/reform initiatives about DV. To honor survivors' range of conceptions of justice, we also include as alternative justice approaches services for survivors that may contribute to their sense of justice and healing, such as supports for economic security, therapy or counseling, and support from religious institutions.

Over 55 percent of survivors interviewed expressed interest in alternative justice approaches, even if they were unsure whether specific options, such as mediation, financial assistance, and therapy, were available to them. Our survey asked about specific alternative approaches (table 4). Therapy or counseling was the approach of greatest interest to survivors, but a large share also sought economic security and payment for harms. Despite this interest in these alternative responses, survivors indicated they had struggled to find information about programs and services available to them or their partners: 54 percent of survivors said finding this information was not easy, 27 percent said it was, and 16 percent preferred not to answer.

TABLE 4

Survivors' Interest in Alternative Approaches to Responding to Domestic Violence

	Frequency
Response to the statement: "I was, or would be interested in the following..."	
Therapy, counseling, or healing practices/services for me and/or my partner.	25
Supports for my economic security and safety, such as temporary housing for my family, access to safe permanent housing, immediate financial assistance.	19
Payment for the harms caused outside of payments ordered by the criminal or civil legal systems.	16
Family mediation or family group conferences (where me and family members I choose come together to discuss this situation and find a resolution).	13
Participation in community-led reforms to institutions (agencies, legal systems, schools) to help prevent the harms from happening to someone else.	10
A formal apology from my partner, possible in the presence of a trained facilitator.	9
Opportunities for other community members to come together with me and my partner to discuss and take responsibility for the harm caused.	7
Participation in (myself or partner) community-led memorials or educational initiatives to educate the public about what happened and prevent it from happening to others.	6
Opportunities to tell my partner how the harms they caused affected me.	5

Source: Survey of domestic violence survivors administered by the Urban Institute and Chapin Hall research team between April and September 2023.

Notes: n=37. Totals may not add up to 37 as respondents could skip questions and select multiple choices.

Asked in the interviews what alternative justice options were available in their communities, survivors were mainly aware of counseling or group therapy, likely because they were the options in which survivors were most interested and had most often participated. A third of participants reported receiving therapy, mostly as individual counseling, but some survivors did counseling with their partners. Through therapy, they learned sustainable tactics for mitigating harm. Counseling gave these survivors a sense of justice.

Another 16 percent of survivors received immediate housing/shelter support and financial assistance. A handful of survivors were interested in economic support but did not know of any such resources in their communities. Two engaged in educational opportunities, where they educated others in their communities about their experiences of DV to raise awareness and prevent similar harm from occurring to others; these two also felt they achieved some sense of justice. About 14 percent of survivors were not interested in family therapy or mediation and church programming. Several knew they could talk to religious organizations, but didn't view them as options for responding to their DV.

Several practitioners were not aware of any alternative justice responses to DV in their communities. A few said they would use them if they were available. A smaller number said their communities did have alternative responses but that they did not find them helpful or thought investments needed to be made primarily in traditional options. A handful of practitioners believed there is a need for alternative responses but that current alternatives are not ready for DV cases.

Because research and practice have increasingly looked to restorative justice responses to harm, we sought to understand whether DV survivors have accessed them in particular. Rather than refer to it as restorative justice, we asked survivors whether they knew of opportunities in their areas that would help them confront the person who had harmed them, get an apology, and move toward restoring harm, possibly with the help of a mediator. We also asked whether programs in their areas facilitated group conferences with family or community members. Almost all survivors were not aware of any such programs. But survivors were split on whether they would have accessed them if they existed. Their most common concern was getting their partner to participate meaningfully in such a program. Several others discussed that it would be difficult to open up to a mediator or share their story with someone in their community because of the stigma they feel is attached to their experience. Moreover, in the survey we asked survivors why they did not use restorative justice if it was available. Of those who responded, 15 were simply not aware of any restorative justice programs in their area, 11 did not think such programs would be helpful, and 8 said they did not think they would be safe in such programs or were too scared to engage in them.

Practitioners' perspectives of restorative justice in DV cases were mixed. Twelve percent said they believe survivors would be interested in restorative justice responses, with several elaborating that a survivor's interest and participation in restorative justice can be halted by their partner's unwillingness to participate. Some practitioners shared that although restorative justice approaches could benefit survivors, they had concerns that being in contact with the partners could risk survivors' safety. One practitioner with experience engaging friends and families in a community-run program also pointed out that it is hard to mediate such programs well and navigate familial dynamics while centering survivors' interests.

Survivors offered some recommendations for improving and increasing the use of alternative justice responses. Seven recommended that DV prevention should be taught in schools and that such education needs to start early, adding that this could be the most effective prevention tactic. One survivor who identified as LGBTQ+ shared that practitioners should not make assumptions about relationships based on appearances, particularly with same-sex and trans relationships. Some survivors recommended providing survivors in crisis direct cash transfers for immediate safe housing. A handful of others recommended free counseling for people in trauma.

Practitioners' recommendations differed from survivors'. Several shared that funding for community-based organizations should be increased so the work can live there. In addition, some practitioners believed that alternatives need to prioritize survivors' safety and promote accountability, particularly if the alternatives are used instead of (rather than in tandem with) traditional legal system responses. Lastly, most practitioners shared that any alternative response should be survivor focused.

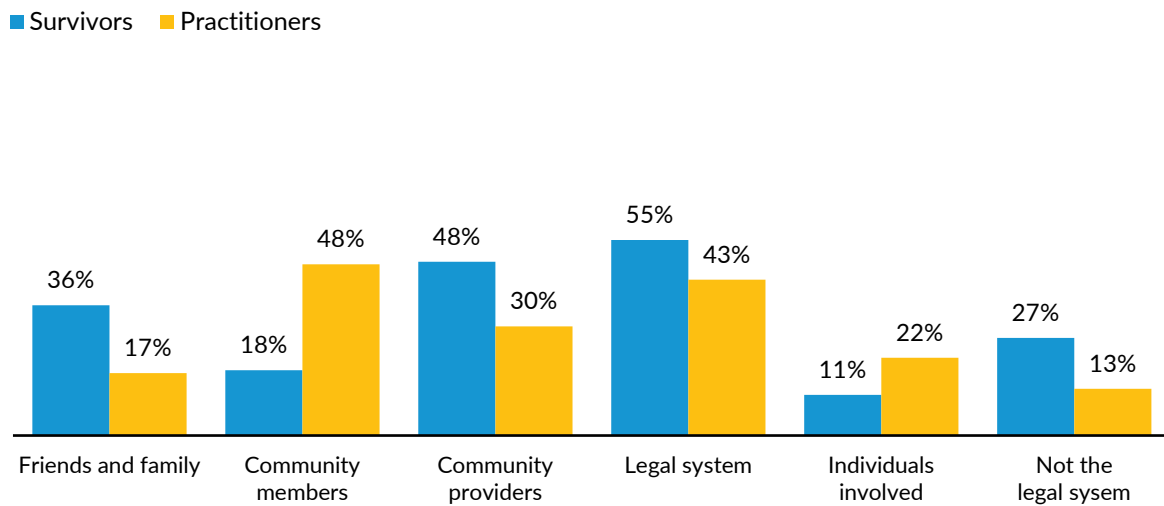
The Role of Practitioners

Survivors and practitioners were asked who they think is best able to help get justice or hold partners accountable for DV, and slightly over half of the survivors and practitioners who responded listed multiple people or groups as sharing responsibility.

It takes a village to help an abuser to understand the behavior they are engaging in is not correct. All the steps of the criminal legal system process show that it is not correct, community shows it's not correct by making services available to better yourself, law enforcement shows it's not correct by arresting. –Practitioner

As shown in figure 3, 55 percent of survivors said the legal system is best positioned to deliver justice however the participant defined it. Among these survivors, a third identified law enforcement as the actor responsible for justice and a third identified courts or judges, with the remaining third identifying the whole legal system, lawyers, or programs for partners. Some survivors, however, shared that the legal system should or is supposed to offer justice but often does not, and 27 percent explicitly said the criminal legal system is not best positioned to provide justice and accountability. The next-most-common responses were community providers (48 percent) and friends and family (36 percent). Community providers ranged from advocates and DV service providers to therapists and other social service organizations. When discussing friends and family, survivors shared some nuances, including that survivors might be hesitant to get them involved or put them at risk, that they might not be trained or equipped to respond, and that they had enabled or excused the abuse. Only 18 percent said other community members and 11 percent said the individuals involved.

FIGURE 3
Who Survivors and Practitioners Think Are Best Able to Deliver Justice or Accountability



Source: Interviews of domestic violence survivors and practitioners conducted by the Urban Institute and Chapin Hall research team in summer/fall 2023.

Notes: Survivors *n*=44. Practitioners *n*=23.

Roughly similar shares of practitioners believed community members (48 percent) and the legal system (43 percent) are best suited to get justice and accountability, followed by community providers, the individuals involved, and family/friends. Community members included neighbors, elders, religious institutions, and employers. Larger shares of survivors than practitioners responded that friends and family, community providers, and the legal system are best able to help get justice or accountability, whereas larger proportions of practitioners said that community members and the

individuals involved are best positioned. More survivors explicitly said that the criminal legal system is not best for getting justice and accountability.

PRACTITIONERS' PERSPECTIVES OF THEIR ROLES AND EFFECTIVENESS

Practitioners in every sector (direct services, legal services, and the legal system) elevated advocates' role in supporting survivors in their journeys to find justice. One community-based advocate shared that when law enforcement responds to incidents of DV, they call them from the scene so the advocate can support survivors and discuss their options. Three legal system practitioners said the role of law enforcement-based advocates is to assess survivors' needs at the scene, help with protection orders (e.g., help with the form, serve the partner, occasionally testify in civil cases), and provide referrals to services. Six other respondents said community-based advocates' role is to keep survivors safe, explain their legal or other options, and address needs that the legal system cannot. For example, one direct service provider encourages victims to file protection orders and do "full-fledged safety planning so they know how to get out of the situation if they need to." Another legal services practitioner said, "We wouldn't be able to do the work without the advocates, especially the ongoing safety planning."

Nine legal services practitioners talked about their role, which includes representing survivors in different types of court, supporting their civil legal needs (e.g., family law cases, protection orders, housing, bankruptcy, consumer protection, expungement, benefits assistance), explaining how the court system works, and managing expectations. Some felt it was important to be clear with survivors about what attorneys could and could not control. They also shared the importance of referring survivors to advocates and the police and vice versa, and of collaborating with the prosecution and other agencies. Several prosecutors shared that they are constrained by the need to follow the rules consistently and that when witnesses will not participate, "you kind of have a responsibility to say when you don't have what it takes to prove the case." But they also recognized the importance of their role in helping survivors understand what is happening and empowering them when possible. One specifically acknowledged that survivors have very little control over criminal court cases, but that survivors' lack of agency may mean less retaliation or manipulation from the partner in response.

Common frustrations and challenges referenced by practitioners include judges not understanding DV, legal services and advocacy organizations being short-staffed and overwhelmed, the cost of attorneys, and poor referral systems. One service provider highlighted, "That can be a hard thing for new advocates to understand—that the goal of advocacy isn't to break up every relationship, but to provide the tools the victim-survivor wants." One legal services practitioner shared that they

sometimes need to have safeguards in place to protect attorneys from people who cause harm. Three legal system staff specifically cited the challenges with procedural justice⁹ and said that sometimes they go against the survivors' wishes to keep them safe. As one said, "Sometimes we are in the position [where] we are not able to just listen to [the] victim-survivor. They are still under the thumb of [the] defendant. It's my job to keep them safe. Sometimes it means the opposite of what they want. It's not enjoyable."

What helps practitioners fulfil their roles with survivors is often the same thing that helps survivors: support from advocates or other practitioners to understand the process and options or address survivors' broader needs (e.g., housing, employment). This includes support from culturally aware providers and empowerment-oriented case managers. Strong referrals, relationships across systems, and collaboration were the second-most-cited asset for practitioners' work. Respondents also highlighted multilingual access models, staff training on trauma-informed responses and harm-reduction models, training on DV dynamics, and opportunities to do internal strategic planning to address trends and large-scale goals.

Practitioners were also asked how they build trust with and support survivors. The two most common strategies were (1) believing survivors and helping them feel heard, such as through active listening and empathy, and (2) being transparent about the process and their options. These were closely followed by empowering survivors to make decisions after getting that information. Other practitioners referenced giving survivors resources or support and being present or giving their time. Several others emphasized the importance of being authentic (including sharing one's own experiences as a survivor), being accessible (e.g., in terms of administrative barriers, language, and physical location), acknowledging the difficulty of reaching out and expressing appreciation, and following through or keeping one's word.

SURVIVORS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRACTITIONERS' ROLES AND EFFECTIVENESS

Throughout the interviews, survivors elevated practitioners' roles, which ones made the biggest difference, and other general experiences with them. Eight highlighted the importance of, or positive experiences they had with, advocates and direct services, whether involving general support, housing, financial support, education about abuse in queer relationships, or help with the legal system. Several survivors shared that they were referred to victim services by law enforcement, legal services, therapists, or medical professionals.

No woman should go into a courtroom without an advocate. The advocate is their person that can allow them to debrief what the judge said and can discern what you heard versus what the judge actually said and make a plan from there. It's a way of staying on track and focused and staying with the issues at large. —Survivor

Three other survivors highlighted doctors or hospital staff as important resources, for example because they were the first people the survivors disclosed their abuse to or they facilitated a restorative justice program that they participated in. Three survivors also elevated their therapists as having played an important role in their recovery. Several highlighted the critical role of attorneys who helped them in the legal system and of other legal system actors who served as resources. Several survivors expressed some challenges with victim services, however, including limited eligibility, inflexible shelters, staff who were overworked and too focused on the short term, and a lack of awareness of abuse tactics in queer relationships.

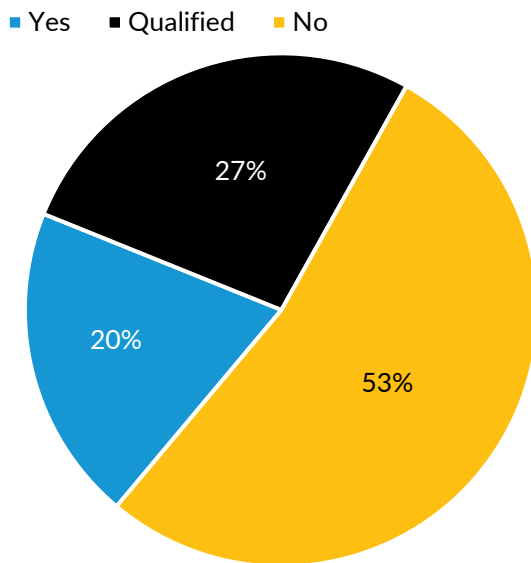
Survivors had mixed perceptions about whether they felt they could direct the process and felt listened to in both community-based or alternative programs. A few responded that they “totally felt listened to” or that they were “in control of the process and we moved at the speed I needed to move at,” but others said that this was the case only some of the time or depended on what programming they were trying to do. Another survivor shared that survivors need practitioners who are invested and make survivors feel seen and understood, but that those qualities are “lacking a lot.”

Outcomes for Survivors

In addition to the outcomes of legal and community-based responses, we wanted to know to what extent survivors emerged from the whole of their experiences with a sense that harm had been acknowledged and repaired, justice had been achieved, and they had gotten what they wanted or needed. As figure 4 shows, most survivors reported that they did not get justice or feel the harms they experienced were repaired. Practitioners we interviewed overwhelmingly reported the same.

FIGURE 4

Share of Survivors Who Felt They Got Justice



Source: Interviews of domestic violence survivors conducted by the Urban Institute and Chapin Hall research team in summer/fall 2023.

Note: n=49.

Regarding harm, 29 survivors reported that their partner did not acknowledge the harm they had caused, and that they instead often denied they had done so or showed a lack of remorse when confronted or in court, or even claimed to be the victim. For example, when asked whether their partner acknowledged the harm, one survivor responded, “Absolutely not. My ex was intent on claiming they’re the victim of my behavior, tried to use the legal system on me, called police on me, took a restraining order out on me, and claimed victimhood. It’s been very violent.” Several survivors reported that they left their partners and didn’t give them an opportunity to address the harm, whereas several others reported that the abuse continued or got worse after they brought up the harm.

Eight other survivors reported that some apology or effort to acknowledge harm was made but that it was insufficient, either because it was too late, the trauma was too deep, the survivor just wanted to be left alone, or they did not feel it was genuine. One survivor reported, “I think when it was convenient for them to appear remorseful, but I don’t feel like it was ever genuine. Or any genuine remorse to repair the relationship. There were times when I convinced myself it was going to get better, but for my partner, I see the struggle that he has, and I don’t think he has the ability to understand the need to be genuinely remorseful.” Only two survivors reported getting genuine

acknowledgement from their partners and that their partners' attempts to repair and improve their behavior were well received. One shared, "I can say there was real remorse and confusion. I told him I know what you are going through, I don't have hard feelings. But you gotta get help. If you do find places, you gotta be honest and gotta work with them."

Of the 49 survivors who reported whether they felt they got justice for the harm done to them, 53 percent responded negatively, 27 percent reported a partial sense of justice or gave a qualified answer, and 20 percent responded affirmatively. Several reported a firm "no" or "absolutely not," but many others who responded negatively elaborated why. One asserted, "I don't think there is ever any sort of justice you can receive because you're stuck with that trauma the remainder of your life." For some it was because they were too afraid to report the abuse to begin with, for others because they pursued legal action and did not get the outcome they wanted. Several also reported discrimination or other barriers related to their identities and backgrounds (involving their race/ethnicity, language, or income, for example) that kept them from pursuing justice.

Just how many different instances of harm are okay before someone gets stopped? Certain people because their privilege and access are never going to be reconciled in the current system. –Survivor

Many of the survivors who gave qualified responses shared that in some way they got justice because they were free from their abusive relationships, but that nothing was resolved or their partners did not face other consequences. In the words of one survivor, "In some ways, yes because I'm away from the abuser and they don't know where I am. But also, it doesn't seem like anything was solved. Once I went to court, they dismissed it anyways and I feel like that's not okay. I felt like they just got away with murder, and it felt like the judge didn't care about what happened to me." A few others expressed uncertainty because their cases were ongoing, they never sought justice, or they were not sure whether justice was possible to begin with. One shared, "I'm not totally getting justice but I'm on the way. I have the help of a legal person. I'm in the process of getting justice." Of the eight survivors who did feel they got justice, four attributed it to outcomes related to the legal system or mandated treatment for their partners, three to services and supports that helped them heal and move on, and one to the fact that they had separated from their partner.

Survivors shared several other insights about their overall outcomes and how they felt when their preferences were not met. A few felt peace, “cautiously optimistic,” and that the outcome was fair, but others felt they never got a chance at a positive outcome because they never reported the DV to the police or a service provider. Twelve survivors specifically stated that what they wanted did not happen. Some of the biggest gaps between preference and outcome were cases in which survivors wanted financial restoration and a group intervention or other required education for their partner. When asked how their preferences being unmet made them feel, survivors shared that they felt angry, hurt, “pretty terrible,” sad for their partner, that their trauma was not addressed, and that they were “treated badly” by their community.

Practitioners were asked to what extent justice is achieved for survivors, and their perceptions varied less. Almost all said that survivors generally do not get their needs met regarding justice and accountability, using phrases and terms like “less than I’d like to think,” “very rarely,” “barely,” or “sometimes.” One practitioner explained that survivors

see behavior continuing and nothing is happening to have the behavior change. Even if they get out of the relationship, if they have kids, then still the behavior can continue. So many clients don’t feel there is justice, they have to subsume this into their existing.

In addition, practitioners were more likely than survivors to equate that lack of justice to outcomes or experiences with the legal system. Their examples included losing a trial because of how challenging it is to prove DV in court, the ineffectiveness of protection orders, how hostile the criminal legal system is for immigrant survivors, how outcomes depend on getting a judge that believes survivors and/or understands DV, and how complicated family law is in court. Practitioners reported that they try to work with survivors to understand their preferences and help manage their expectations, but that survivors often end up frustrated anyway. Practitioners also referenced the lack of control survivors have over the process and outcomes, how slow the process is, and the lack of flexibility in the system.

Many practitioners recognized acknowledgments of harm as a successful outcome or as what survivors want, but nearly none reported how often they think it occurs. One expressed frustration with their inability to get partners to meaningfully address harm through programs, saying, “Even if you put [someone] in the program. You can’t mandate them. Don’t know how to get people to address the harm behind the harm, what got them there, and how do we confront and address that? You can’t make them until they’re ready. Participation is not engagement.” Lastly, several practitioners acknowledged that outcomes depend on survivors’ definitions, which vary.

Survivor Resiliency

To better understand and uplift survivors' resiliency after experiences of harm, we asked survivors and practitioners what most influenced survivors' sense of healing, safety, and justice. They identified a community of support that includes victim service organizations, providers, support groups, friends, and family as the most influential thing. Independence and safety, particularly having a safe environment to be in after experiencing harm, were also important to survivors. One survivor noted that to alleviate the emotional stress a survivor has experienced, it is important for them to have a sense of freedom from harm. Another survivor said that feeling like they were not dependent on another person after their experience was how they recognized that they were healing. Several survivors noted that receiving support and resources from service organizations was crucial to their healing. Some survivors discussed the emotional support they received from an organization, which helped them realize that healing from their DV experience would take time and reassured them that the experience was not their fault. Other survivors said that the material assistance they received, including housing support and financial support, was also crucial to their sense of healing, justice, and safety.

Survivors found that the people who most influenced their healing were friends, family (including chosen family), roommates, and partners who helped them find services and housing and provided them with the safety necessary to leave their relationships. One survivor shared about their current roommate, who made space for them to live with her and helped them unlearn some behaviors they had picked up during their relationship. Another survivor said that their neighbor and friend became like family and helped them navigate each step of the process by watching their children while they were at court and helping them move. Other survivors noted that their friends provided constant support by frequently checking in and ensuring they were not alone or had someone with them when they were near their partners. One legal system actor said they make a special effort to file paperwork that enables survivors to bring family members to court hearings.

Survivors also identified staff at victim service organizations, including case managers and lawyers, as people who positively influenced their sense of healing, safety, and justice. One survivor shared about an advocate at a women's shelter who was willing to go the extra step and pay for their court expenses so they did not have to worry about the cost of filing with the court. Therapists were also influential people for many survivors, who said it was often helpful to have a therapist validate their feelings and provide encouragement.

We also asked survivors about their hopes and dreams, which included being able to move on with their life and to be independent, spend time with family, and generally take the time to live again. A few survivors were focused on their children, particularly their future well-being. One survivor said they hope they can protect their son by focusing on his education and preparing him to go down the right path in life. Their hope is that he ultimately does not end up reflecting the behavior he has seen. For a handful of survivors, achieving independence includes buying their own property or moving away from their current location. One survivor said they are planning to move out of their current state, not because they are running away from their situation but because they will feel safer once they can more easily avoid their ex-partner. Another survivor purchased their own home with plans to spend more time taking care of their granddaughter.

[I'm] generally excited, being able to envision more of a future for myself. I felt so stuck I could only see my life a few months at a time. —Survivor

In addition, many survivors aspired to build up their education and careers. A few shared that they are pursuing more education with hopes of not just bettering their own lives but giving back to others. Two hoped to get their nursing degrees, while another wanted to go back to finish law school and become a lawyer that advocates for women, particularly survivors of DV. One survivor, who was currently working at the victim service organization that helped them, hoped to become a therapist for the DV community. Another survivor who had just finished their master's in social work planned to work with survivors directly. Some survivors hoped they would eventually be able to see the system change. For example, one hopes for the system to be more accountable to how survivors of color and queer and transgender survivors as well as women are treated. They hope those who work directly with survivors will work toward cultural competence in understanding the experiences of different groups. Another survivor wanted to see a change in how the legal system treats survivors and had begun attending city council meetings to advocate for this change. Lastly, another survivor's hopes and dreams for the future included a different world where people can live with love and respect and help support one another.

Challenges and Limitations

This study was intended to address gaps in research on DV survivors' preferences about justice and situations in which alternative responses may be best for them. It was designed to recruit and engage with diverse survivors who experience unique barriers to accessing and receiving appropriate services and supports. We were able to achieve our goal and gather pertinent qualitative information. But, as with all studies on DV survivors, ours is subject to some limitations. Its limitations are as follows:

- We focused on collecting mostly qualitative information and understanding each survivor's story through in-depth interviews. We did not aim for a statistically representative sample size, which can be problematic when each subgroup (i.e., immigrant survivors, LGBTQ+ survivors, rural southerners, Native Americans) faces unique challenges in accessing supports. We have systematically analyzed the qualitative information across interviews and presented themes; we cannot, however, make inferences for the groups our participants come from.
- The findings are based on individuals' self-reports and represent survivors' perceptions at the time the data were collected. We recognize that survivors' needs and perceptions can change based on how much time has passed since the violence occurred, the severity of abuse, where their cases are in the legal system, and where they are in their healing journeys. We hope future research can trace how survivors' needs and perceptions change over time.
- We primarily partnered with community-based agencies that have built trust with survivors from marginalized communities. Though important for ensuring participants were recruited in a trauma-informed manner, this approach may have missed some survivors who distrusted formal supports or were otherwise less help-seeking. Similarly, the practitioners that participated might be naturally more attuned to the topics of this inquiry. As such, we may have missed some practitioners whose perceptions do not align as closely with those of survivors.
- We experienced particular challenges recruiting survivors from Native American communities owing to entrenched distrust of external research projects. Midway through the study we discovered that some tribal charters prohibited working with researchers. Though we included Native American participants in our findings, we recognize that this group of participants is small and does not represent the diversity of experiences in Native American communities.
- Out of 42 interviewed practitioners, only 16 started the survey. The research team deemed this sample size too small for meaningful analyses. The low rate of survey participation among

practitioners could owe to several reasons, such as large workloads and the absence of incentives for practitioners to complete it.

Recommendations

This report illustrates the wide diversity of survivors' needs regarding justice, accountability, and healing and their experiences in pursuit of those aims. Whether their experiences were positive or negative, we can learn much from survivors about how to build a more comprehensive and effective system of justice responses for domestic violence. The recommendations below emerged directly from this study's findings, whether synthesized from the interviews or contributed by individual participants. Because survivors engage with numerous systems, we have identified recommendations for improvement and innovation in each system, including for any practitioners who interact with survivors, direct service providers, the legal system and alternative justice programs, policymakers, and funders. The following overarching recommendations, however, span all systems:

- Give survivors a seat at the table, whether by providing them leadership roles in the community, empowering them to decide about policy and funding, or enabling them to inform the development of programs and system reforms.
- Engage in multidisciplinary collaboration, preferably through formal mechanisms like task forces, fatality review boards, and DV response teams. This enables valuable cross-training and information sharing about legal system and restorative justice options and processes, survivors' needs and the services available to support them, and how to make interactions more trauma-informed. Some groups, like fatality review boards, have also effectively identified system gaps.
- Identify how to empower survivors to make decisions about their situations and cases, which might require changing protocols, guidelines, and policies and providing additional training to practitioners. These decisions should also be informed by an understanding of their rights and options. Because we found that nearly all survivors lacked familiarity with the legal system, creative solutions like short videos that explain local systems or awareness campaigns targeted at specific groups of survivors in marginalized communities could be beneficial.
- Increase and improve practitioner training, tailored to the practitioner's sector and the demographics of the community they serve. Potential topics include DV dynamics and the

dangers of sustained psychological abuse, LGBTQ+ abuse dynamics, trauma-informed response, cultural competency, and legal system and/or alternative justice options.

- Provide language access in all settings where survivors may need assistance, including by using qualified interpreters with trauma sensitivity in community programs and the legal system, providing translated written materials, and training practitioners on how to work with survivors who have limited English proficiency.
- Increase public awareness of DV, its prevalence and harms, and the resources available for responding to it, which would help destigmatize abuse, improve help-seeking for survivors, and prompt community leaders and legal system professionals to take DV more seriously.

All parts and players in the [survivor response] system need to improve their capacity. If we serve the most marginalized people, we can better serve all. That kind of model is so important to think about. If you can make your program effective for those with the least power and most barriers, then it will be better for everyone. –Practitioner

Recommendations for Practitioners and Agencies

As reiterated throughout this report, the chief recommendations for how all practitioners can better respond to survivors seeking justice are to take all forms of abuse seriously, listen to and engage survivors, and be more aware of survivors' cultures and backgrounds. More specifically, survivors want practitioners to be open-minded about nontraditional power dynamics and how abuse and trauma appear in different communities. These findings also indicate that practitioners, regardless of their sector, could redefine what success looks like and what metrics could be tracked regarding justice and accountability.

DIRECT SERVICE PROVIDERS

Our recommendations for direct service providers are as follows:

- Incorporate justice and accountability topics in case management, advocacy, and other direct services.

- » Begin conversations with survivors early on about what justice looks like to them, and check in with them about how their needs and preferences change. When appropriate, explain the limitations of the legal system and of solutions available through your agency.
 - » When survivors participate in legal systems or alternative justice programs, safety plan with them to prevent risks of retaliation or harm during interactions with their partners.
 - » Consider how outcomes related to economic security, healing, and safety can contribute to clients' sense of justice.
- Participate in training or education on the legal system and alternative options and processes so you can answer survivors' questions and assist them as they go through those systems. Expose staff with different seniority levels and years of experience to multidisciplinary task forces or opportunities to provide training for legal actors.
 - Broaden the scope of identities your organization serves, and identify and address barriers related to age, income, family size, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

LEGAL SERVICE PROVIDERS AND LEGAL SYSTEM ACTORS

Recommendations for legal service providers and legal system actors include the following:

- Improve communication with survivors by providing clarity about the process and their options (especially early on). Develop skills in active and empathetic listening, tailor communication methods to survivors' preferences, and keep survivors better informed of decisions and case status. One way to improve communication is to embed advocates within law enforcement agencies or prosecution offices.
- Require that all professionals be regularly trained on trauma, abuse dynamics generally and within specific communities, and engaging with victims in their specific roles.
- Reform protocols to give survivors more opportunities to share their preferences about their engagement and what happens to their partners, and implement clear guidelines regarding how and when to follow those preferences. One strategy is to implement procedural justice practices, which involves making legal system outcomes feel fairer to people by improving how the system engages with them. For example, allowing survivors to bring advocates, friends, or family to court hearings can ease their anxiety and help them view court processes more favorably.
- Legal system agencies should review their implementation of trauma-informed practices, barriers that remain to adopting trauma-informed and victim-centered approaches, and

whether survivors who engage with them are revictimized. Agencies should include survivors in these reviews to gather their input in an anonymous and trauma-informed way.

- Identify and enact agency-wide policy solutions to reduce the time and financial investment that participating in the legal system requires of survivors.
- Explore and evaluate structural changes to how the criminal legal system responds to domestic violence, including by implementing co-responder models for law enforcement to offer trauma-informed support on the scene that does not carry the threat of arrest, DV-specific units with advocacy components, or formal mediators or restorative justice diversion programs.

ALTERNATIVE JUSTICE PROVIDERS

Recommendations for alternative justice providers include the following:

- Ensure any restorative justice or healing circle programs that take DV cases are tailored to the unique challenges of these cases and the needs of survivors.
 - » Prioritize survivors' safety and needs regarding interacting with their partners or families. This could include conducting preliminary assessments of partners' readiness to participate and whether family members can be assets.
 - » Consider when in a survivor's healing is best to approach restorative justice and remind them they can revisit the option later if they don't feel ready.
 - » Ensure programs employ staff who can effectively respond to DV cases, including by identifying and training potential mediators in DV dynamics, safety considerations, and abuse tactics in specific communities. Programs should also consider employing facilitators that match the demographics of the communities served.
 - » Center session schedules and attendees around survivors' preferences and needs.
- Increase survivors' awareness of alternative justice programs that can take DV cases or provide DV-specific responses, particularly via advocacy and support services.
- Provide survivors opportunities to participate in alternative justice efforts that do not involve direct interaction with their partners, including prevention education, victim impact panels or education for other people who caused harm, or institutional and policy reform.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of restorative justice programs in the community and in the legal system to identify best practices for serving DV survivors generally and for serving those from underserved groups.

Recommendations for Funders and Policymakers

Recommendations for funders and policymakers include the following:

- Reduce the financial barriers to legal support by funding or otherwise providing free or low-cost legal representation and/or advocacy for DV survivors, and by reducing attorney fees and court filing fees.
- Fund programs that provide survivors unconditional cash assistance, microloans, or other kinds of financial support for housing, transportation, and other needs for them to be safe, recover, and even participate in justice responses.
- Develop, fund, and evaluate culturally specific and LGBTQ+-specific programs or services.
- Reduce barriers to mental health treatment, including by increasing the availability of providers in general and of culturally specific providers in particular, the affordability of therapy, and awareness of options.
- Include mental health providers, medical providers, substance use assistance providers, housing providers, and religious organizations in conversations about justice and accountability.
- Increase funding for direct service programs to support the staffing levels they need to respond in a timely manner to survivors' wide-ranging needs and over the long term, particularly given how long legal system cases often take. This funding would also help these programs educate or otherwise partner with justice-focused programs and systems.
- Provide targeted funding to support multidisciplinary teams at the community level.
- Examine and/or support voluntary programs for people who cause harm or mandatory programs that allow voluntary participation at no additional cost to the partner.
- Explore ways to get survivors information about resources and contact information. Potential creative solutions as identified by survivors included a dedicated DV emergency line to trained first responders; local community-specific, non-emergency resource hotlines in communities that lack them; and inclusion of resources on insurance or medical patient portals.
- Promote more community awareness and education, especially at early grade levels, which will serve as critical prevention but will also help enable the community acknowledgement and understanding that survivors often need for their definitions of justice and accountability.

Conclusion

Survivors and practitioners define justice broadly, in ways that range from punitive consequences to acknowledgement of harm. Moreover, safety is inextricably linked to perceptions of justice, as is survivors' sense of individual recovery and economic security. As in other studies, survivors who participated in our study largely just wanted the abuse they were experiencing to stop, and many wanted their partners to get help, though there was little consensus on what that should look like. We broadly found that achieving justice in domestic violence cases is not the responsibility of just one sector. Service providers have as much of an effect on accountability as the legal system does on how survivors heal. Less traditional stakeholders, including health and mental health providers, religious institutions, employers, and other community groups, also play important roles.

All survivors need safety, healing, and justice regardless of their identities, but aspects of their identities clearly affect their perceptions of and experiences with the different systems and professionals that are supposed to help them get safety, healing, and justice. Survivors who identify as LGBTQ+ in particular reported a lack of services and programs specific to their relationships and needs, and reported having experienced discrimination from the legal system. In addition, survivors with limited English proficiency reported many barriers in the community and within the legal system. Survivors of color expressed fear of harm, discrimination, or disbelief from police and other legal system professionals. Lastly, all groups cited poverty or economic insecurity as a major barrier to achieving justice, especially through the legal system. This involved the costs of legal support, transportation and safe housing, the effects of taking time off work, and concerns around their partners losing their jobs.

Practitioners' perceptions are largely aligned across sectors as well as with the perceptions of survivors, particularly regarding survivors' needs, preferences, and the barriers they face. Both groups strongly agreed that survivors need to be empowered, believed, listened to, and respected. Survivors did not always experience this from the practitioners they interacted with, however. Community-based advocates appear to be more equipped to empower and give choice to survivors, whereas survivors experienced more negative interactions with law enforcement or judicial professionals. Practitioners and survivors both emphasized the importance of advocacy and legal support to help survivors understand their personal preferences regarding justice and accountability, navigate the options available to them, address their safety needs, and connect them with other providers. These roles are particularly important given survivors' lack of awareness of legal system processes and alternative options, which too often leaves them thinking their only option is to call the police. There is also a clear need to make legal support more affordable and accessible for survivors.

Given how frequently the legal system featured in definitions of justice, accountability, and safety, it is clear the current system is an important—and sometimes even effective—source of protection and relief for some survivors. But it results in frustration, retraumatization, and additional harm for far too many others. Despite the desire or efforts of the legal system practitioners we spoke with to empower survivors, those working in the system may be more constrained by policy, contrary goals or guidelines, or a lack of staff training. The focus in the field on creating alternatives and “more doors that survivors can knock on” is therefore a welcome effort. Regarding responses outside the current legal system, in many US communities, there remains a lack of awareness and/or availability of restorative justice and other alternative programs. Survivors and practitioners both reported mixed levels of interest in such programs, had mixed perceptions of their effectiveness, and had some concerns about survivors’ safety in them. If they are trauma-informed and victim-centered, however, these approaches hold a lot of promise for achieving the empowerment, accountability, and possibly economic restitution that most survivors seek.

The survivors we spoke with exhibited a phenomenal amount of strength, determination, and resiliency. Although we encountered understandable feelings of anger, sadness, and disappointment, most survivors felt optimistic for their or their children’s futures. Many also conveyed, through their responses and their appreciation for the opportunity to participate in the study, how empowering telling their stories is. This clear desire among survivors to improve responses for others should lead to greater inclusion of survivors as experts in programs, policy, and research.

Notes

- ¹ “Five Things about Violence against American Indian and Alaska Native Women and Men,” National Institute of Justice, last updated May 2023, <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/249815.pdf>.
- ² “What Is Intersectionality, and What Does It Have to Do With Me?,” YW Boston, *YW Boston Blog*, March 29, 2017, <https://www.ywboston.org/what-is-intersectionality-and-what-does-it-have-to-do-with-me/>.
- ³ The guiding principles that emerged from that event are available in a March 2024 Urban brief: Malore Dusenbery, “Guiding Principles for Justice Responses in Domestic Violence Cases: Survivor-Informed Recommendations for the Field” (Washington, DC: Urban Institute).
- ⁴ “Survivor Restoration Program (SRO),” San Francisco Sheriff’s Office, accessed April 2, 2024, <https://www.sfsheriff.com/whats-your-situation/im-victim-and-or-survivor-domestic-violence/survivor-restoration-program-srp>.
- ⁵ Mia Mingus, “Transformative Justice: A Brief Description,” *Leaving Evidence*, January 9, 2019, <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2019/01/09/transformative-justice-a-brief-description/>.
- ⁶ Survivors may have different safety concerns regarding virtual versus in-person interviews, may have barriers related to internet access or their physical isolation, or may prefer the extra anonymity afforded by virtual interviews or the added connection of in-person interviews.
- ⁷ The principles are survivor empowerment and agency; being survivor-centered and trauma-informed; responsiveness to survivors’ needs; providing culturally responsive and appropriate responses; an understanding of domestic violence; accountability; communication and transparency; fairness and respect; and social awareness and systemic change. Our vision is that whole communities will adopt these principles as overarching goals, recognizing that the resources and steps needed to enact them will differ for different types of systems.
- ⁸ For an example of victim-offender interventions, see Michele Braley, “A Restorative Justice Model,” *Minnesota Women’s Press*, February 24, 2021, <https://www.womenspress.com/a-restorative-justice-model/>.
- ⁹ Procedural justice asserts that how individuals regard the justice system is more closely tied to the perceived fairness of the process and how they have been treated rather than the outcome. The four pillars of procedural justice are (1) providing opportunity for voice, (2) impartiality or neutrality in decisionmaking, (3) treating people with respect and dignity, and (4) transparency and trustworthiness in actions (Tyler 1990). See also Emily Gold and Melissa Bradley, “The Case for Procedural Justice: Fairness as a Crime Prevention Tool,” *Community Policing Dispatch*, September 2013, https://cops.usdoj.gov/html/dispatch/09-2013/fairness_as_a_crime_prevention_tool.asp.

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