



TRANSFORMING
LIVES THROUGH
JUSTICE

In Their Own Words:
Domestic Violence Survivors
on Seeking Safety & Police Responses

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

For survivors of domestic violence, law enforcement is often the system that victims turn to when other coping strategies have failed. Generally, calling the police is a last resort, especially for victims of color and other marginalized victims. Victims are at greatest risk when they are leaving an abusive relationship. Calling law enforcement can lead to a path to safety but can also lead to negative consequences to survivors.

“In Their Own Words” is a qualitative study and 4-part policy brief on how police responses can influence victims’ next steps, particularly in terms of obtaining domestic violence services or restraining orders. Partners conducted this research by interviewing approximately 50 survivors, from marginalized communities in northern New Jersey, engaging in conversations with other organizations serving domestic violence survivors, and analyzing police procedures. The study’s main objectives are to elevate the experiences and voices of survivors and advocate for meaningful change to ensure that survivors are able to easily access domestic violence services and obtain access to restraining orders to prevent further victimization.

The Study is comprised of four sections:

Part 1 outlines the process for conducting survivor interviews and summarizes past research to contextualize our study.

Part 2 analyses of the duties of police in responding to domestic violence.

Part 3 describes the concerns of survivors with regard to their law enforcement experiences and identifies factors in those interactions that build or diminish trust, safety, and assistance.

Part 4 examines the implications for victims when the law enforcement response does not meet the needs of survivors and concludes with recommendations to better protect and serve survivors.

KEY FINDINGS

The findings from the survivor interviews Partners conducted are organized around five primary themes:

- **hopes and fears in contacting law enforcement;**
- **confusion about access to services and restraining orders;**
- **perceived lack of adequate protection;**
- **perceived bias from the police; and**
- **informed and helpful police responses.**

Overall, survivors contacted the police with a goal of seeking safety. For about half of the survivors this meant an arrest of the harm-doer. For the other half, safety did not necessarily translate to an arrest, but instead consisted of being escorted to a shelter, walked through the restraining order process, or simply listened to and advised. Survivors identified fears of racialized violence and brutality, as well as a fear of retaliation from the abuser, as significant considerations when deciding whether to contact the police.

Numerous themes surrounding police-victim interactions emerged from the interviews. Overall, over half of the survivors interviewed reported feeling unprotected by the police. Similarly, sixty percent did not receive referrals to domestic violence services from the police. Survivors also found information about the restraining order process and domestic violence services confusing and inadequate. Furthermore, survivors of color, male survivors, and immigrant survivors discussed feeling that the police were biased against them due to their race or ethnicity, gender identity, or limited English proficiency. Lastly, survivors reflected upon positive interactions with the police, specifically expressing appreciation for trauma-informed police responses, non-judgmental guidance and expertise, and the presence of female officers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Community Response

Recommendation #1: Provide County and/or municipal funding for social workers from the community to work in conjunction with law enforcement.

The Office of Attorney General and County Prosecutors

Recommendation #1: Address systemic barriers to service and analyze law enforcement data on unserved restraining orders.

Recommendation #2: Develop training protocols for responding to complaints of contempt.

Recommendation #3: Provide guidance to law enforcement agencies on communicating with persons with limited English proficiency.

Recommendation #4: Support timely sharing of data and analysis on domestic violence and use that data to inform policy.

Recommendation #5: Update Victim Notification Forms to provide clear information on available resources.

Police Departments and County Prosecutors

Recommendation #1: Enhance domestic violence and cultural competency training.

Recommendation #2: Create confidential space for victims within police headquarters whenever possible.

Recommendation #3: Bolster officers' resources to communicate with persons who have limited English proficiency.

Recommendation #4: Recruit women of color and provide robust and generous pregnancy and maternity policies.

Recommendation #5: Transition to mandatory call outs to DVRTs.

Recommendation #6: Update County prosecutor and municipal police policies and practices to reflect current OAG guidance.

Recommendation #7: Address barriers to accessibility of TROs with data-driven solutions.

Legislative Measures

Measure #1: Strengthening domestic violence crisis teams ([A227](#))

Measure #2: Right of access to law enforcement records for victims of domestic violence (not yet introduced)

Measure #3: Cultural diversity and implicit bias training for law enforcement ([S2072/A1720](#))

Measure #4: The Values Act ([S512/A1986](#))

Measure #5: Translations of TROs and FROs ([S1000/A1704](#))

Measure #6: Language access ([S2459/A3837](#))

CONCLUSION

As first responders, under New Jersey law, law enforcement officers are expected to serve as authoritative sources on civil restraining orders as well as social services, which may be systems they themselves do not fully understand or can explain to survivors. These findings join previous literature in re-thinking how we view the role of the police role in responding to domestic violence.

“In Their Own Words” calls for support and change — within the community, through law enforcement, and legislation.

“In Their Own Words” is available on Partners’ website (<https://partnersnj.org/>), beginning September 19, 2022. For further information, contact InTheirOwnWords@partnersnj.org.

About Partners

Partners is a non-profit public interest law firm that is dedicated to making a difference in the lives of domestic violence and sexual assault victims through free legal representation, advice, and counseling sessions. To extend our impact, we also engage in advocacy, seeking systemic changes in the legal system to advance equity and safety, especially for marginalized survivors.

Partners provide free legal assistance to low-income victims who seek domestic violence and sexual assault restraining orders and orders of protection, as well as related relief available in the family court. Partners serves clients statewide, and provides legal representation in Essex, Hudson, Passaic, Union, and Middlesex Counties. Approximately 85% of Partners’ clients are people of color, and 35% are individuals with limited English proficiency.

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