

Roadblocks to Reporting: Examining Barriers that Deter Domestic Violence Victim-Survivors from Reporting to Law Enforcement in Rural Communities of Pennsylvania

By: Emily Strohacker, Ph.D., The Pennsylvania State University at Harrisburg.

Domestic violence, including intimate partner violence (DV/IPV), is a pervasive issue in the nation; within Pennsylvania, 37% of women and 30% of men report having experienced physical violence, sexual violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner within their lifetime (PCADV, 2020). Even more alarming is the overwhelming lack of reporting that is associated with this crime. Estimates indicate that almost half of victim-survivors fail to report the crime; as a result, there may be inadequate resources dedicated to this policy area and gaps in services available.

The present report expands upon existing research efforts conducted through the Center for Rural Pennsylvania that focus on domestic violence. This report examines the barriers that prevent or dissuade victim-survivors of DV/IPV from reporting their victimization to law enforcement and the differences among rural and urban Pennsylvanians' reporting. Further, this report examines the experiences that victim-survivors have with law enforcement when they do choose to report their DV/IPV victimization and the outcomes that may result from these experiences, such as barriers to accessing victim services.

Goals and Methods

The goals of the study are to examine the characteristics of domestic victim-survivors, understand the types of domestic violence they face, identify any gaps in victim services, and identify barriers to reporting domestic violence. In addition, the research explores possible differences between rural and urban victim-survivor experiences.

Results are informed by primary data from both surveys and interviews of victim-survivors across the Commonwealth. Participants were recruited with the assistance of victim service organizations and other organizations, such as the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence. Extensive screening processes were used to ensure participant eligibility. The interviews include detailed questions about the survivors' experiences reporting (or not reporting) instances of DV/IPV to the police, disclosing their experiences to and asking for help from family, friends, and other members of their support system, and seeking and receiving services from formal institutions, and their overall experiences.

Key Findings

- Roughly 65% of interview participants and 53% of survey participants reported domestic violence/intimate partner violence victimization (DV/IPV) to law enforcement.
- Urban victim-survivors reported to police more often than rural victim-survivors and were more than twice as likely to contact 911.
- Victim-survivors who experienced physical abuse reported to law enforcement more often than those who experienced other types of abuse, such as verbal or emotional abuse. On closer examination, this is not as likely with rural victim-survivors. For instance, 73% of urban-victim survivors who experienced physical violence indicated that they reported IPV to law enforcement, compared to only 50% of rural victim-survivors who experienced violence.
- Generally, survey data show those who reported to victim service organizations (VSO) also reported to police; a smaller number reported only to a VSO.
- In terms of informal reporting, reporting to friends or family was the most common behavior

This research was sponsored by a grant from the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, a legislative agency of the Pennsylvania General Assembly. Information in this report does not necessarily reflect the views of individual board members or the Center for Rural Pennsylvania. For more information, contact the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 625 Forster St., Room 902, Harrisburg, PA 17120, (717) 787-9555, www.rural.pa.gov.

for victim-survivors, both urban and rural.

- Interviews revealed that one form of physical abuse, choking, was reported almost exclusively by rural interviewees. Stalking behaviors, including technological monitoring and harassment, were reported at higher rates (77%) by rural participants than their urban counterparts.

- Surveyed rural victim-survivors were more likely than urban victim-survivors to report that they refrained from reporting IPV to police because they were embarrassed or ashamed, and it was the most frequently mentioned barrier to formal reporting.

Furthermore, half of rural respondents who reported to police indicated that they were afraid that law enforcement would tell people in their community about their experience, compared to 29% of their urban counterparts.

- For urban survey respondents, the most common barrier to formal reporting was fear of retaliation from the abusive partner.

- Victim-survivors generally reported negative experiences when reporting to law enforcement.

- Of those who reported to police, fewer than half reported that police shared information about any kind of victim services or resources.

- More than half of the interview respondents were completely unaware of the organizations and services available to them prior to experience with DV/IPV. The majority of these victim-survivors resided in rural areas of the Commonwealth.

- Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of victim-survivors who reported to a VSO also received services from that organization. This suggests that not reporting to a VSO is a barrier in and of itself.

- Counseling and legal services were the most commonly received services for all victim-survivors. Interestingly, housing services were utilized much more fre-

quently by rural recipients than urban.

- Victim-survivors report barriers to seeking services. In urban areas, fear for personal or family safety was the most frequently reported concern, followed by fear of getting their partner in trouble, and not having enough money.

In rural areas, not having enough money was mentioned most often, along with fear of getting their partner in trouble, and not wanting anyone to know.

- The majority of victim-survivors who received services through victim service organizations reported positive experiences.

- Victim-survivors most often reported accessing services for counseling, legal aid, and emergency services, such as emergency shelter, clothing, or food assistance.

- Based on the survey, just over half of all victim-survivors surveyed reported that they contacted police about their experiences with IPV, with respondents in urban areas (65%) reporting

their experiences of IPV to police at higher rates than rural respondents (38%).

Policy Considerations

- Trauma-informed training for law enforcement across the Commonwealth.

- Additional collaboration between policy, healthcare providers, and legal aid organizations in providing victim/survivor support and services.

- Adoption of a lethality assessment program by all police departments, which leads to certain protocols for emergency safety and services based on an evaluation of the level of threat to a victim's life.

- Increasing public awareness, funding, and resources for victim service organizations and the specific support they can provide.

- Additional public education on the signs or symptoms of an abusive relationship.

- Legislation creating a distinct legal recognition of domestic violence as a unique crime, distinct from other criminal offenses.

Center for Rural Pennsylvania Board of Directors

Chairman, *Senator Gene Yaw*

Vice Chairman, *Representative Eddie Day Pashinski*

Secretary, *Dr. Nancy Falvo*, Pennsylvania Western University Clarion

Treasurer, *Stephen M. Brame*, Governor's Representative

Senator Judy Schwank

Representative Dan Moul

Richard Esch, University of Pittsburgh

Dr. Timothy Kelsey, Pennsylvania State University

Shannon M. Munro, Pennsylvania College of Technology

Dr. Charles Patterson, Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania

Susan Snelick, Northern Pennsylvania Regional College

Darrin Youker, Governor's Representative

Dr. Jeffrey Hyde, Penn State Extension



Center for Rural Pennsylvania Staff

Dr. Kyle C. Kopko, Executive Director

Dr. Laura R. Dimino, Assistant Director

Michaela Miller, Quantitative Data Analyst

Katie Park, Communications Manager

Kaitlyn Goode, Data Visualization Specialist

Linda Hinson, Office Manager