ASSESSING CHALLENGES, NEEDS, AND INNOVATIONS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE SERVICES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

RESULTS SUMMARY REPORT

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"Conflict and turmoil often result in direct action and direct results and sweeping changes for the better."

- RESPONDENT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The goal of this project was to document the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the dynamics of gender-based violence in addition to the challenges, needs, and innovations that service providers experienced.

Professionals who serve survivors of gender-based violence across the United States were recruited to complete an online survey between September 2020 and December 2020.

The 25 minute survey consisted of questions across a variety of areas, including: the impact of the pandemic on forms of gender-based violence, risks and challenges for survivors, challenges for agencies, interactions with law enforcement, innovations for agencies in going forward, and survey respondent information.

This report summarizes key findings based on N = 222 respondents.[1] The vast majority of respondents were White (non-Hispanic) and the sample was mostly women who served intimate partner violence and/or sexual assault survivors. The average respondent age was 43 years old and over half (54.4%) were working in rural areas of the United States. Although respondents represented over 40 states, about one-third were professionals from Kentucky and Ohio.

About 50% of respondents were advocates or employees with shelters, the criminal justice system, or rape crisis agencies and 61% of respondents worked at their current position for less than 5 years. Twenty-seven percent of respondents have been working with gender-based violence survivors for over 15 years. Respondents rated the following as the highest concerns for their agency that hinder service of gender-based violence survivors:

- survivors are less likely to seek help because they are isolated with their abuser
- survivors are less likely to leave their home due to health concerns
- providing safe alternative housing for survivors
- survivors are not aware of the services agencies are providing
- distrust regarding public information about the virus

Nearly 58.6% of respondents reported issues in serving survivors seeking help because the agency was closed or functioning at limited capacity at least some of the time during the pandemic.

About half of respondents viewed the following as major areas of financial strain for their agency:
- technology/infrastructure to work remotely
- personal protective equipment or other sanitation
- limited availability of grant funding

In their open-ended responses, respondents highlighted a myriad of barriers to serving survivors, such as maintaining staff and victim health/safety, statewide mandates restricting access to services, limited resources, shelter capacity, and reduced criminal justice system operations.

About **84% reported they believed the incidence of IPV increased**, while 31% reported that the help-seeking of IPV has decreased

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[1] Some information, such as respondent characteristics, are only available for N = 172 respondents. Please see methods for more details

Most respondents believed Intimate Partner Violence (IPV, 83.7%), child abuse (70.2%), and sexual assault (60.2%) have increased during the pandemic.

Nearly 40% of respondents reported that gun sales have increased in their community since the start of the pandemic and about 50% of respondents reported that abusers threatening to shoot survivors has become a bigger problem since the start of the pandemic.

About two-thirds of respondents reported that abusers have interfered with survivors' work/ employment as a control tactic during the pandemic

The law enforcement response to White survivors was perceived as more positive than that to survivors of color despite over 50% of respondents reporting that female survivors of color are at more risk than White female survivors to experience most forms of violence.

About one-quarter of respondents reported that law enforcement's response to meeting the needs of survivors got worse during the pandemic.

Respondents rated the following as the largest barriers facing their agency in the next 12 months:
- general economic strain in society
- agencies need more resources to provide services
- survivor risk for homelessness if unable to pay rent
- survivors are unable to get away from abuser or seek help

Overall, 70% of respondents felt their agency was quite or very prepared to enter another societal shutdown if needed, however that means about one-third did not feel prepared for another shutdown.

Respondents highlighted several areas of need for future training, such as diversity and inclusion, trauma-informed care, self-care for workers, effective collaborations with law enforcement, grief counseling, and technological skills training.

In conclusion, the results highlight challenges that victim service agencies face during a global pandemic and perceptions of the impact the pandemic has had on dynamics of gender-based violence. Clearly, concerns regarding available funding and resources for service agencies, homelessness and financial insecurity of survivors, health and wellness of both staff and clients, and continued isolation and safety of survivors are key challenges that face those who serve victims of gender-based violence. However, these results also underscore the resilience and dedication of agency staff to serving survivors of gender-based violence during an unprecedentedly challenging time.

The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are far-reaching and we still have much to learn about how this pandemic has impacted and will continue to impact gender-based violence. This report is an interim step in documenting the resiliency in agency responses to gender-based violence and harnessing the creativity, determination, and passion of staff to navigate this pandemic.

The results underscore the resilience and dedication of agency staff to serving survivors of gender-based violence during an unprecedentedly challenging time

INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence, including intimate partner abuse and dating violence (IPV), child abuse, elder abuse, sexual assault, stalking and human trafficking impacts millions of individuals each year (United Nations Population Fund, 2020). Although the COVID-19 pandemic presents a global public health crisis resulting in millions of deaths thus far, the full impact of the pandemic on gender-based violence is still being assessed (United Nations Development Programme, 2020). The pandemic has exacerbated risk factors for gender-based violence, such as unemployment/financial strain, substance use, isolation, depression, anxiety, and general stress (American Psychological Association, 2020; Czeisler et al., 2020), with mounting evidence that instances of familial (partner and child abuse) have particularly increased since the start of the pandemic globally (Peterman & O'Donnell, 2020; United Nations Development Programme, 2020; Usher, Bhullar, Durkin, Gyamfi, & Jackson, 2020) as well as in the United States. (Boxall, Morgan, & Brown, 2020; Gosangi et al., 2021; Leslie & Riley, 2020; Lindberg, VandeVusse, Mueller, & Kirstein, 2020; Peterman & O'Donnell, 2020; Piquero et al., 2020). There are also concerns that conditions of the pandemic are facilitating human trafficking victimization (particularly vulnerable youth; Todres & Diaz, 2020) and sexual assault (Janse van Rensburg & Smith, 2020) in light of evidence that rates of sexual violence increase during states of emergency (Klein, 2008). Procedures, such as shelter in place and school closures, which are designed to help protect the community from the spread of COVID-19, further isolate survivors and hinder victim help-seeking.

Further, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States continues to experience the massive impact of racial and structural inequalities. Persons of color not only experience disproportionately higher levels of violence (Black et al., 2011; Petrosky et al., 2017) but are also more likely to die and/or have serious complications from COVID-19 (Baptiste et al., 2020; Kawachi, 2020). Many cities across the United States experienced protests for racial equality and justice for police brutality, which can further strain the already tenuous relationship between communities of color and law enforcement (Bailey, Feldman, & Bassett, 2020; Galea & Abdalla, 2020). However, little is known if and how such circumstances impacted the law enforcement response to gender-based violence during the pandemic.

> *The awareness of power-based violence has grown because not everyone is 'safe at home.'*
>
> -RESPONDENT

Given the expansive negative consequences of gender-based violence, victim advocates and specialized agencies help survivors with a wide range of needs. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced many agencies to quickly adapt their policies and/or manage with limited resources in these unprecedented times. In addition, agencies that serve minority or under-served populations are likely to experience additional barriers given the already limited resources available, discrimination faced by survivors, and ongoing tensions in the community during protests for racial equality.

One critical step in helping victim service agencies become better equipped is to document the issues that these agencies face to prioritize needs and facilitate better service to victims of gender-based violence. This report summarizes key findings from a survey that aimed to document the perceived impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the dynamics of gender-based violence, in addition to the challenges, needs, and innovations that service providers experienced while working with survivors during the pandemic.

METHOD

SURVEY DEVELOPMENT AND DATA COLLECTION

The goal of this project was to document the challenges and needs that service providers experienced and/or are currently experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic by administering an online survey to professionals who serve survivors of gender-based violence across the United States. Specifically, this survey targeted professionals who work with intimate partner abuse and dating violence, child abuse, elder abuse, sexual assault, stalking and human trafficking survivors. The survey was developed in collaboration with National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV) over the course of late spring and summer 2020. Upon piloting the survey using a group of domestic violence professionals, the final version of the survey consisted of questions that spanned across a variety of areas, including: the impact of the pandemic on forms of gender-based violence, risks and challenges for survivors, challenges for agencies, interactions with law enforcement, innovations for agencies in going forward, and survey respondent information. The survey took about 25 minutes to complete.

Respondent recruitment efforts occurred in two primary ways. First, the survey was advertised through the NCADV by sending two recruitment emails via the NCADV email listserv in September 2020 and October 2020. Specifically, the survey recruitment email was circulated to members of the NCADV in addition to NCADV-affiliated shelters and/or programs across the United States. Additionally, the NCADV advertised the study on social media platforms, such as Twitter and LinkedIn.

"Compassion and care do not always come across through technology."

-RESPONDENT

"We won't know the true impact of the pandemic on IPV until the pandemic is over, because I'm certain that some survivors are currently not able to reach out for help and, some could, but probably have other concerns that they prioritize such as their economic struggles during these terrible times."

-RESPONDENT

Second, state and local agencies across the country were emailed individually by the authors and asked if they would disseminate the survey recruitment email within their networks. These individual state recruitment efforts also targeted agencies that worked with survivors of sexual victimization, human trafficking, and child abuse, in addition to minority/under-served survivors of domestic violence to ensure professionals who worked with a broad range of survivors of gender-based violence were reached. Data collection via the online survey occurred from September 2020 to December 2020.

SURVEY RESPONSES

A total of 464 individuals opened the survey upon reading the recruitment email and 403 completed the initial screener question asking potential respondents which population(s) of gender-based violence survivors they served. Twenty-six individuals who completed the filter question (6.5%) indicated that they did not serve survivors of gender-based violence and were therefore, ineligible to complete the survey. Another 91 individuals (22.6%) exited the survey following the filter question.

There appeared to be a significant drop-off in survey participation (i.e., those who exited the survey before full completion) following the first two sections of questions. To maximize the number of individuals

included in the analyses who provided survey responses, two sample sizes were utilized: before and after participation drop-off. However, to ensure that those included in the analyses did not contain significant issues of missing survey responses, only respondents who completed all survey questions in each section were included in the analyses.

Therefore, a total of N = 222 individuals completed all questions in the initial two sections of questions and a total of N = 172 individuals completed all questions in the remainder of the survey. Respondents represented over 40 states cross the nation.

Based on the initial filter question, the populations of gender-based violence served by survey respondents are as follows:

| Population of Survivor Served (N = 222)	%
Intimate partner Violence	86.0%
Sexual assault	83.1%
Other domestic violence (e.g., elder abuse)	64.0%
Stalking	63.4%
Child abuse	58.1%
Human trafficking	49.4%

Note: respondents selected all that apply

PART 1: RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS

Respondent characteristics are available for N = 172 respondents who completed the final section of the survey.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

GENDER IDENTITY

92.4% Female
6.4% Male
0.6% Non-binary
0.6% Other
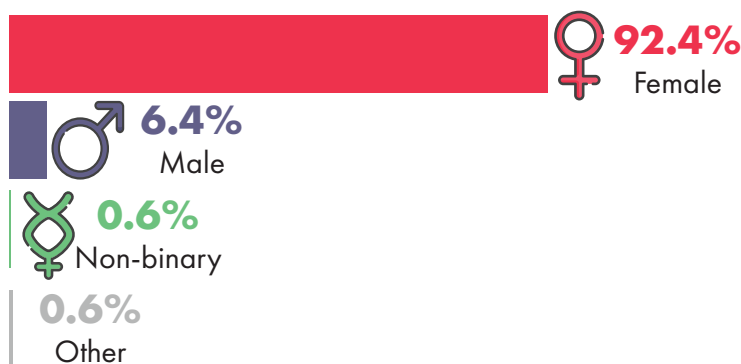
RACE/ETHNICITY	%
White (non-Hispanic)	87.8%
Hispanic	6.4%
Black (non-Hispanic)	2.9%
Asian/Pacific Islander	2.3%
Other race/ethnicity	1.7%
American Indian	1.2%

AVERAGE AGE

43 With ages ranging from 20 to 74

AREA RESPONDENT WORKS

54% Rural
28% Urban
18% Suburban
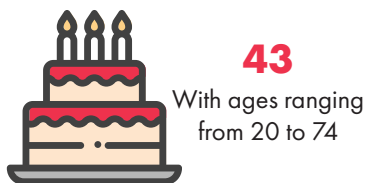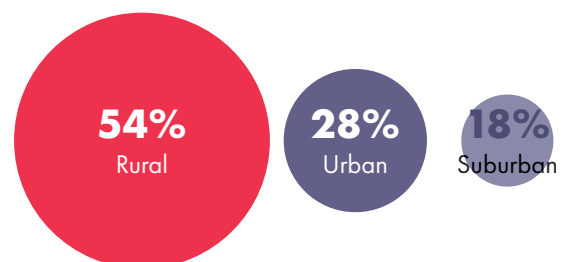
JOB CHARACTERISTICS

Current position

Shelter advocate/employee	24.0%
Criminal justice agency advocate	14.6%
Rape crisis advocate/employee	11.1%
Mental health/substance use professional	9.4%
Court advocate/employee	5.8%
Hotline advocate/employee	1.2%
Other advocate/employee serving victims not listed	33.9%

Over **80%** of respondents worked with IPV or sexual assault survivors

Length of time current position

< year	19.9%
1-2 years	22.2%
3-5 years	18.7%
6-10 years	19.3%
11-15 years	5.3%
16-20 years	5.3%
> 20 years	9.4%

61% of respondents worked at their current position for <5 years

Length of time working with gender-based violence survivors

< year	7%
1-2 years	9.9%
3-5 years	17.5%
6-10 years	24.6%
11-15 years	14.0%
16-20 years	9.9%
> 20 years	17.0%

27% of respondents have been working with gender-based violence survivors for over 15 years

50% of respondents were advocates or employees with shelters, the criminal justice system, or rape crisis agencies

13% of respondents worked for an agency whose sole purpose was to serve specific racial, ethnic, religious or underserved populations

There wasn't much the agency could do other than tell victims someone would call them back.

-RESPONDENT

PART 2: CHALLENGES FOR AGENCIES

How much of a problem are the following issues for your agency when serving survivors of gender-based violence during the pandemic (1 = less of a problem to 10 = more of a problem)?

N = 172	Average
Survivors are less likely to seek help because they are isolated with their abuser and/or their abuser can more closely monitor their behavior	8.59
Survivors are less likely to seek help or leave their home due to concerns for their health	7.49
Providing safe, alternative housing for survivors	7.48
Survivors are not aware that agencies are providing services during the pandemic	7.43
Distrust of and/or confusion regarding public information about the virus/public safety	7.30
Staff stress due to childcare limits or school age children being home	7.06
Difficulties or lack of technological infrastructure to communicate remotely for work and/or help survivors via technology/without direct face-to-face contact	7.05
Survivors do not trust or want to interact with law enforcement	7.03
Transportation to needed services (e.g., to shelters, substance use programs, court, etc.)	6.94
Money and resources to provide services	6.92
Confidentiality/privacy concerns with technological platforms and/or communicating with survivors remotely	6.78
Fewer agency staff and/or volunteers to provide services due to layoffs, reduced hours, or availability	6.58
Local or statewide coordination between agencies to provide needed services	6.42
Keeping up with adequate sanitation and/or personal protective equipment	6.37
Low morale/support for agency staff	6.29
Staff are unable to work or fear for their health to come to work	6.16
System (e.g., protective orders) are not being provided or only being provided in limited capacity	6.10
Confidentiality/privacy concerns for survivors when conducting contact tracing investigations	5.91
Agency unpreparedness for an emergency/crisis	5.66
Noncompliance or resistance to wear masks	4.99

| Higher concerns above midpoint | Medium concerns above midpoint | Lower concerns above midpoint |
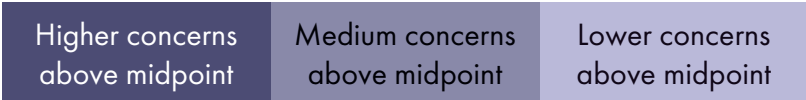
About half of respondents viewed each of the following as major areas of financial strain for their agency:
- Technology/infrastructure to work remotely
- Personal protective equipment or other sanitation
- Limited availability of grant funding

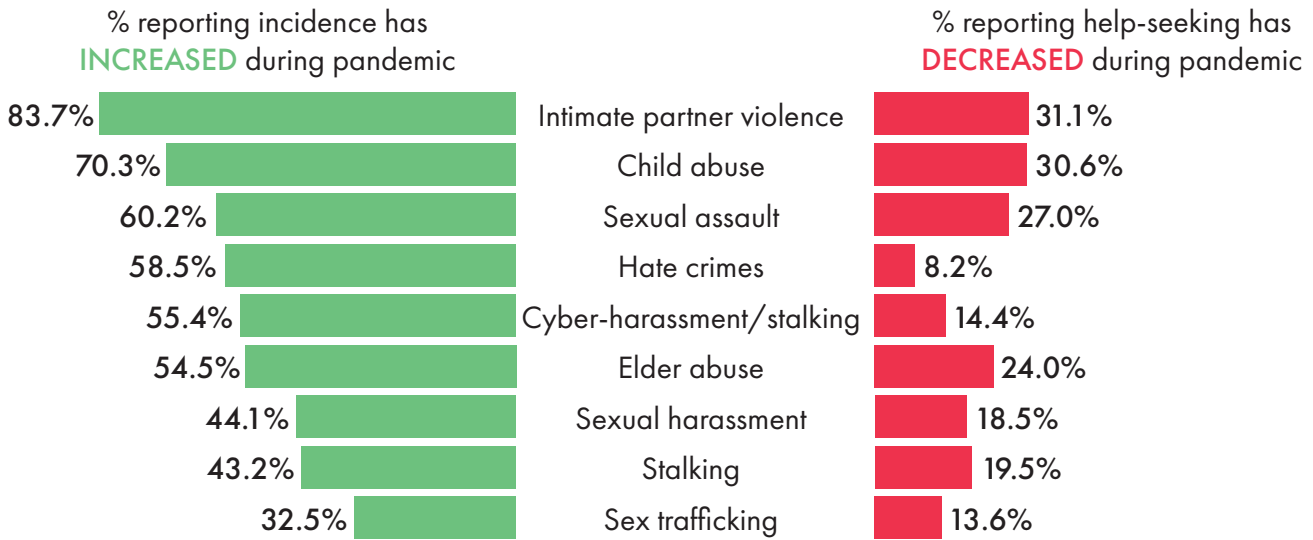## EXAMPLES OF CHALLENGES AGENCIES ARE FACING[2]

- "Keeping the shelter sanitized as clients have refused to wear masks, practice social distancing in common areas."

- "Safely contacting and providing services to survivors via phone, computer without alerting the abuser."

- "Dealing with personnel stress about the virus makes it easier for providers to fall victim to secondary/vicarious trauma."

- "Going to a shelter isn't easy during non-pandemic times much less during a pandemic. Beds were sparse, hotel rooms were temporary and not conducive to children's needs, and sometimes if a survivor called a local agency hotline, there wasn't much the agency could do other than tell victims someone would call them back."

- "Protection Orders are not being provided/enforced/or only provided in limited capacity during certain hours and with restrictions in place."

- "Maintain client confidentiality while using technology to work remotely/virtually with survivors."

- "Safe housing options for shelter and for quarantine for shelter residents."

- "Providing efficient court advocacy while not being allowed to accompany clients to court proceedings."

- "Reduced number of staff (out sick, no childcare); Low staff morale."

- "Lack of readiness for emergency such as a pandemic (especially technology needs)."

- "People of color not wanting to get the police involved in their situation for fear of the abuser being killed, they just want to get away from the abuse."

- "Staff's ability to meet with survivors face to face."

- "Racial injustices have been highlighted more during the pandemic, which has caused an additional burden on the mental health of persons of color."

- "Sexual assault survivors have had a hard time obtaining rape crisis advocacy services due to closures of offices and the removal of advocates from hospitals. Sexual assault survivors have also seen spiking barriers in obtaining rape kits due to health concerns and hospital resources related to COVID-19."

- "Inability to meet in person. Compassion and care do not always come across through technology."

- "Our legal community was shut down. Our clients also had difficulty with law enforcement going on calls."

59% of respondents encountered issues with survivors who have tried to seek help, but the agency was unable to provide services because it was closed or functioning at limited capacity

[2] Based on open-ended responses.

PART 3: EXPERIENCES OF SURVIVORS

% reporting incidence has INCREASED during pandemic

83.7%	Intimate partner violence
70.3%	Child abuse
60.2%	Sexual assault
58.5%	Hate crimes
55.4%	Cyber-harassment/stalking
54.5%	Elder abuse
44.1%	Sexual harassment
43.2%	Stalking
32.5%	Sex trafficking

% reporting help-seeking has DECREASED during pandemic

Intimate partner violence	31.1%
Child abuse	30.6%
Sexual assault	27.0%
Hate crimes	8.2%
Cyber-harassment/stalking	14.4%
Elder abuse	24.0%
Sexual harassment	18.5%
Stalking	19.5%
Sex trafficking	13.6%

38% of respondents reported that gun sales have increased in their community since the start of the pandemic

About **50%** of respondents reported abusers threatening to shoot survivors has become a bigger problem since the start of the pandemic

33% of respondents reported that intimate partner homicides have increased in their communities

"Concealed carry licenses in my county have gone up as well as gun and ammo sales. I think abusers are more stock piling weapons and are concealed carrying more than before the pandemic.
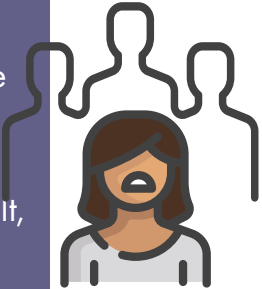
-RESPONDENT

# EXPERIENCES OF SURVIVORS OF COLOR AND INTERACTIONS WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT

Over 50% of respondents reported that the law enforcement response to White survivors was "good" compared to **only 36% who reported the law enforcement response to Black survivors was "good"**

Over 50% of respondents reported that **female survivors of color are at more risk** than White female survivors in their community to experience physical assault, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and gun violence

About 25% of respondents reported that law enforcement's response to meeting the needs of survivors **worsened during the pandemic**
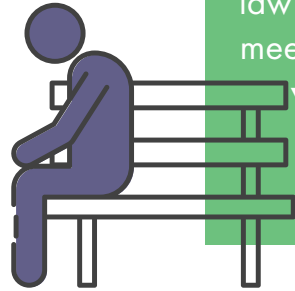
"*I know a policeman's job difficult, but until they regain the trust from the community, their job won't get any easier. And the only way to regain trust is by re-imagining the police system into a system that helps communities and works even more closely and seamlessly with all community resources.*"

-RESPONDENT

"*Racial injustices have been highlighted more during the pandemic, which has caused an additional burden on the mental health of persons of color.*"
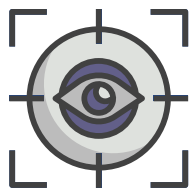
-RESPONDENT

"*Inability to have access to safe, trusted, and equitable services, because those –mostly– government systems that are still working (e.g. police, child welfare) are not always wanted or helpful to women of color.*"

-RESPONDENT

- "People who are in intimate partner violence situations because they have less ability to leave or access help or even get a break."

- "Children are at an increased risk during the pandemic as many of them live with their abusers or are continuously exposed due to having to function in all aspects from home. There is also a decrease in the access to needs/resources that were being provided from schools."

- "Marginalized communities that are likely to be in quarantine around people of the same communities. There is already a defensive mechanism to reporting when survivors feel that reporting may damage the reputation of their community or group, and now they are likely quarantined around those folks."

- "The social safety net for immigrants, particularly those with tenuous or no documentation, is unstable in a best-case scenario. The pandemic has exacerbated that."

- "Survivors with mental health issues and homelessness."

- "Young mothers with multiple children...younger mothers seem to have partners who are most impacted by job loss during the pandemic. They also have less resources."

- "Elderly in facilities where families can not physically check on them; Elderly at home with caregivers due to added stress on caregivers of the pandemic and less oversight to ensure they are caring for the victim."

- "Indigenous groups, an already under served population of people who have been hit hardest by the pandemic on reservations and in places of work outside their reservations."

- "Extremely rural survivors are at the greatest risk in our service area because they have no way to get away from the abuser."

- "The intersection of collective racial trauma and IPV has had a profound impact on the functioning of survivors of color. Additionally, there is another layer of threat by the pandemic to make communities of color at a higher risk of infection rate and death."

58%
of respondents reported that abusers monitoring of survivors' activities has increased "very much" during the pandemic
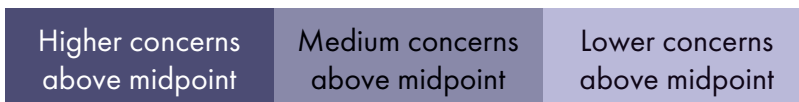
About two thirds
of respondents reported that abusers have interfered with survivors' work/employment as a control tactic during the pandemic
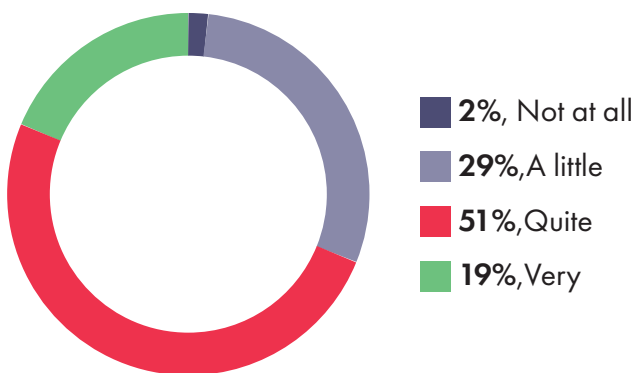
[3] Based on open-ended responses.

PART 4: LOOKING AHEAD

% of respondents who **strongly agree** that the following will be barriers to serving survivors of gender-based violence in the next year

Barrier	%
General financial/economic strain in society	72.7%
Agencies need more money and resources to provide services	60.5%
Survivor risk for homelessness if evicted/unable to pay rent	55.2%
Survivors are unable to get away from abuser in home/have privacy to seek help	54.7%
Survivors are afraid of group living at shelters	45.9%
Morale and support of staff at agency	43.0%
Reliance on technology to communicate and provide services	39.5%
Distrust of public information about the virus/public safety	39.0%
Racial inequity and/or tension with law enforcement agencies	38.4%
Survivors are afraid to leave the home in fear of getting sick and/or their children becoming sick	34.3%
Places, such as shelters, are unable to keep up with adequate sanitation and protective equipment needs	33.7%
Survivor knowledge of resources and/or where to seek help	32.0%
Employees are unable to work or fear for their health to come to work	22.7%
Inadequate staffing due to layoffs or reduced hours	23.3%
System services (e.g., protective orders) are not being provided or only being provided in limited capacity	22.7%

Higher concerns above midpoint	Medium concerns above midpoint	Lower concerns above midpoint

HOW PREPARED IS YOUR AGENCY TO DEAL WITH ANOTHER SOCIETAL SHUTDOWN?

- **2%**, Not at all
- **29%**, A little
- **51%**, Quite
- **19%**, Very

"Fear of the unknown… will we shut down again and what will that look like?"

-RESPONDENT

AREAS OF TRAINING NEEDED

- Trauma informed care & safety planning
- Effective collaboration with law enforcement
- Diversity & inclusion (race, gender, sexual orientation, class)
- Self-care, mindfulness, & avoiding burnout
- Fundraising, grant writing, & other leadership training
- Technology & virtual communication skills
- Grief and other mental health training
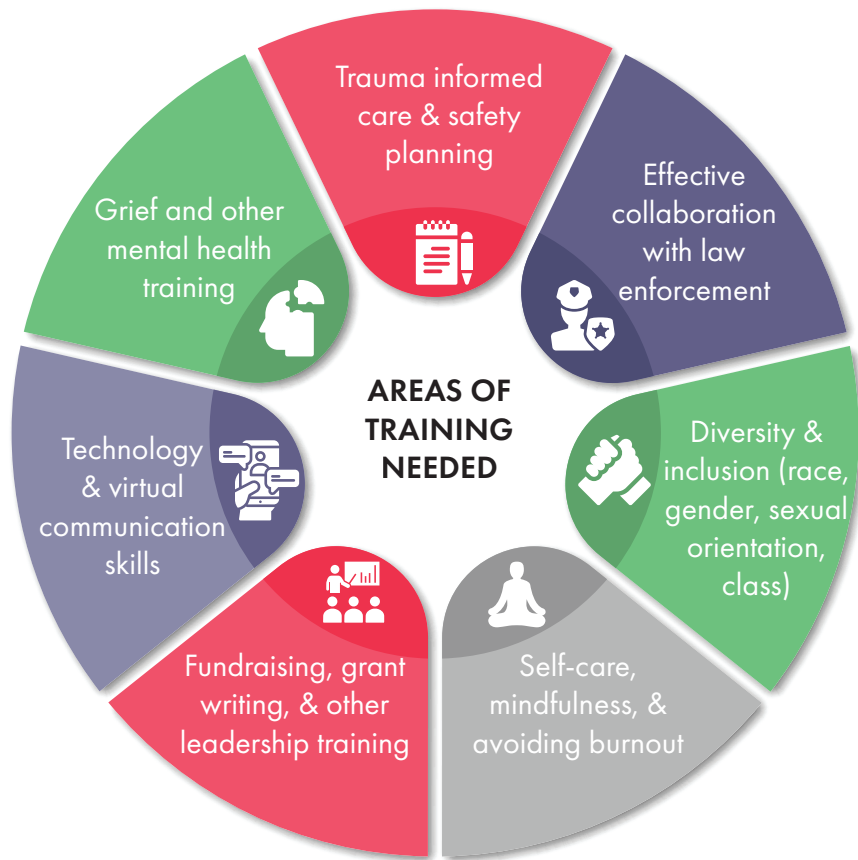
I believe there should be YEARLY trauma informed practice training for refresher.

-RESPONDENT

Increased awareness has improved the response of our advocates to the needs of this population.

-RESPONDENT

CONCLUSION

The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are far-reaching and we still have much to learn about how this pandemic has impacted and will continue to impact survivors of gender-based violence and those that serve them. Although governments and agencies across the world were initially unprepared for the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is hope that efforts to gather information will illuminate areas of high concern and innovations to improve services going forward.

This report identified challenges that victim service agencies face during a global pandemic and perceptions of the impact the pandemic has had on the dynamics of gender-based violence. Clearly, concerns regarding available funding and resources for service agencies, homelessness and financial insecurity of survivors, health and wellness of both staff and clients, limitations in services available within the community, and continued isolation and safety of survivors are key challenges that face those who serve victims of gender-based violence. However, these results also underscore the resilience and dedication of agency staff to serving survivors of gender-based violence during an unprecedentedly challenging time.

> *This is such an unprecedented time that is affecting our entire nation and has been very long lasting. I don't think that we even know what the effects will be on survivors.*
>
> -RESPONDENT

Ideally, the results of this report can be used to: (1) help agencies, local governments, and states obtain further funding to support their work and services they provide; (2) inform more coordinated plans for serving survivors during and after the pandemic; (3) identify and address structural inequities that affect survivors of gender-based violence and the services, resources and protections available to them; and (4) provide information regarding questions researchers should be asking when developing a meaningful research agenda related to helping survivors of gender-based violence during a time of global crisis.

> *Some survivors found strength in overcoming obstacles and celebrated their resilience in the face of adversity.*
>
> -RESPONDENT

More work is needed to bring the full scope of the impact of COVID-19 to light and these results should be considered in light of several methodological limitations. Although this is a national sample of respondents, it is not a random sample that is nationally representative of all victim service agencies in the United States. Relatedly, a large sample size was not employed and not all populations of survivors were represented equally in this sample, as the vast majority served IPV and sexual assault victims. Therefore, the generalizability of the results to other victim service agencies in the United States or in other countries is limited. Additionally, this report presents a snapshot of respondents' experiences and perceptions of the pandemic at one point in time and these experiences may, and perhaps are likely to, change over time. The pandemic is a longitudinal issue that will present continuous waves of challenges and consequences for society. Nevertheless, this report is an interim step in documenting the resiliency in agency responses to gender-based violence and harnessing the creativity, determination, and passion of staff to navigate this pandemic.

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