

IN THEIR OWN WORDS:
Domestic Violence Survivors' Experiences
with Memphis and Shelby County Resources



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ABSTRACT

It is generally accepted within criminology that victims who are dissatisfied with their experiences with the criminal justice system will be less likely to participate if they are victimized again. Family justice centers (FJCs) provide survivors of domestic violence and their families with social services and support related to temporary and long-term housing, protection orders, custody of minor children and assistance with other legal proceedings. If survivors are satisfied with their experiences at an FJC, revictimization may be less likely and programs may be considered successful. As a measure of program success, then, it is important to gauge survivor satisfaction with services. As part of a state-funded evaluation, focus groups were conducted with survivors of domestic violence, including survivors serviced by the local FJC. This brief provides preliminary findings from the first series of focus groups and identifies common themes of survivor satisfaction, as well as areas for improvement for law enforcement, service agencies and the court system.



INTRODUCTION

While law enforcement is often the first contact a survivor has with the criminal justice system, this part of the system tends to generate the most significant obstacles, particularly for survivors of domestic violence. Although the concept of domestic violence has been operationalized in different ways, the current project uses the blanket term “domestic violence” to refer to victimization by a spouse or romantic partner. Survivors of crimes like domestic violence often face a variety of cultural, social and systemic barriers when they attempt to report their victimization, interact with police and try to access survivor services (McCart, Smith & Sawyer, 2010). Research indicates that these survivors frequently describe their experiences with the police negatively and often feel they are not taken seriously by police and prosecutors, especially if they have multiple encounters with law enforcement (Stephens & Sinden, 2000). As a result, engaging in the criminal justice system may not provide a source of relief for these especially vulnerable victims, but function as a source of “secondary victimization” by criminal justice practitioners that can compound their suffering (Kunst, Popelier, & Varekamp, 2015).

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that if victims do not feel satisfied with their treatment by and experiences with the criminal justice system, it is unlikely that they will report any subsequent experiences of victimization (Bennett, Goodman & Dutton, 1999; Coker, Park, Goldstein, Neal & Halstead, 2015). At least one-third of all domestic violence cases are not reported to the police (Truman & Morgan, 2016). Yet, despite difficulties with experiences with law enforcement, survivors may still seek out assistance because it opens access to social services. Family justice centers (FJCs) provide survivors of domestic violence with these types of social services and support related to temporary and long-term housing, protection orders, custody of minor children and assistance with other legal proceedings. If survivors are satisfied with their experiences at an FJC, even if they do not have positive experiences with law enforcement, revictimization may be less likely and programs may be considered successful.

One issue with this form of help-seeking is that victims of crime are often less aware of the existence and the scope of services available to them through victim service programs (Sims, Yost & Abbott, 2005). Given that many service programs remain critically understaffed, it is perhaps not surprising that programs are limited in their time and ability to increase visibility to provide a full array of services to survivors when requested. The current project addresses this possibility and other potential limitations through the lens of focus group interviews with domestic violence survivors in Memphis.



CURRENT PROJECT

Shelby County, Tennessee, is comprised largely of the City of Memphis and its surrounding suburban cities. The metropolitan area includes parts of Mississippi and Arkansas. On average, Memphis and Shelby County residents are in their mid-30s (Memphis 33.5; Shelby County 35.5), with most individuals in Memphis and Shelby County between the ages of 20 to 29 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010-17; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012-16). The majority population in both areas identifies as African American, with 54% in Shelby County and 64% in the city of Memphis.

Memphis has consistently high levels of violent crime, with domestic violence being one of the most serious problems facing the community. The number of domestic violence survivors has been dropping, however. In 2018, the number of domestic violence survivors dropped from 18,493 in 2016 to 17,522 in 2018. The number as of Aug. 19 (n = 9,963) indicates the annual total for 2019 may be even lower. Despite this decline, these numbers are still alarmingly high. In addition, the severity of domestic violence victimizations is increasing. While 60.6% of survivors in 2016 were victims of simple assault, only 57.9% as of Aug. 19 have been simple assault victims. Aggravated assault is comprising an increasing proportion of victimizations, growing from only 11.2% in 2016 to 12.2% in 2018 and more than 13% as of Aug. 19 (Madden, 2019).

High numbers of victims and increasing levels of violence require a coordinated, community-wide effort to provide services to assist these victims with the myriad issues they confront (navigating the court system, obtaining assistance with children, emergency shelter, food, clothing, etc.). Unfortunately, however, while the community need is clear, the ability of the community to respond effectively is much less clear. Key components to coordinating a community response are victim-oriented agencies that either provide direct services or refer survivors to direct services. In 2013, partially to address the overwhelming need of domestic violence survivors for connection to service providers, the Family Safety Center (FSC) was created to serve as the local FJC.

The Family Safety Center provides access and referrals to many domestic violence resources, including custody requests, protection orders, emergency and long-term housing and other resources. However, the full scope of victim service provision and referral process has not yet been fully evaluated. It is important, then, to develop a comprehensive understanding of service provision for domestic violence survivors in Memphis and Shelby County.

Under an agreement between the University of Memphis and the Memphis Shelby Crime Commission, the Public Safety Institute at the University is to evaluate and recommend ways to expand the success of the FSC in reducing re-victimization. The current research, building off a partnership between the Public Safety Institute (PSI) and the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, was funded by the State of Tennessee Office of Criminal Justice Programs to address any gaps and examine available resources, the location of resources and how resources can potentially better serve those within the community by conducting focus groups with survivors, and by highlighting any common issues that survivors have faced when resolving their cases.

METHODS

The original intention of the study was to conduct focus groups with survivors served by the FSC. However, part of the evaluation focused on existing partnerships between the FSC and related agencies within the Memphis and Shelby County community. In communicating with these agencies about the nature of their relationship with the FSC, several agencies presented opportunities to conduct focus groups with survivors serviced by their own organizations. Five focus groups were held between December 2018 and June 2019, with individuals referred by the following agencies:

- 1) Shelby County Crime Victims and Rape Crisis Center, a comprehensive victim service center providing crisis intervention, advocacy, counseling and forensic nursing services to victims of crime in Memphis and Shelby County;
- 2) The YWCA of Greater Memphis, which provides short-term housing for survivors of domestic violence;
- 3) The FSC, the main service and referral agency for survivors of domestic violence, and of specific interest to the evaluation;
- 4) Agape Child & Family Services, which provides long-term housing for survivors of domestic violence; and
- 5) Casa Luz, the only Hispanic-serving agency for survivors of domestic violence in Memphis/Shelby County.

Flyers were developed for these service providers to recruit focus group participants. These flyers indicated the purpose of the interview, as well as the date, time and location, and asked interested survivors to provide their contact information to staff at that agency. Volunteers were recruited through provider-client relationships at each of the respective agencies.

Focus groups were held on-site at each of the participating agencies and were conducted by the primary researcher(s), while staff members were on-site (but not necessarily in the room) during each focus group to answer any questions and assist clients. No personally identifying information was collected from any of the participants, though all were female, and the majority were African-American. Participants signed consent forms and were instructed that they could leave the session at any time. Participants were also advised that the discussion would be audio-recorded and were asked to not reveal any identifying information.¹ Participants who consented to participate in a focus group were provided a meal or financial incentive, and child care was provided for participants when requested. Each focus group lasted roughly one hour; taped interviews provided the data for this study. Transcripts from each of the focus group interviews were subsequently reviewed by two separate members of the research team to identify codes and themes from the interviews (Stretsky, Shelley, Hogan & Unnithan, 2010).

¹The focus group with Casa Luz was conducted entirely in Spanish, with the organization's legal advocate serving as translator. The primary researcher served as facilitator for the focus group and took notes from the legal advocate's translated responses; these responses were used in place of a formal transcript to code themes. This focus group was also not audio-recorded.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Three main themes were identified in survivors' experiences reporting domestic violence and with the criminal justice process, centered around contact with the criminal justice system, interactions with social service agencies, and expectations for outcomes.

Contact with the Criminal Justice System

Figure 1 (below) summarizes the main issues survivors reported in their experiences with the criminal justice system. Survivors raised several issues in this area, centered around police response, police interaction, court experiences and systemic dissatisfaction.

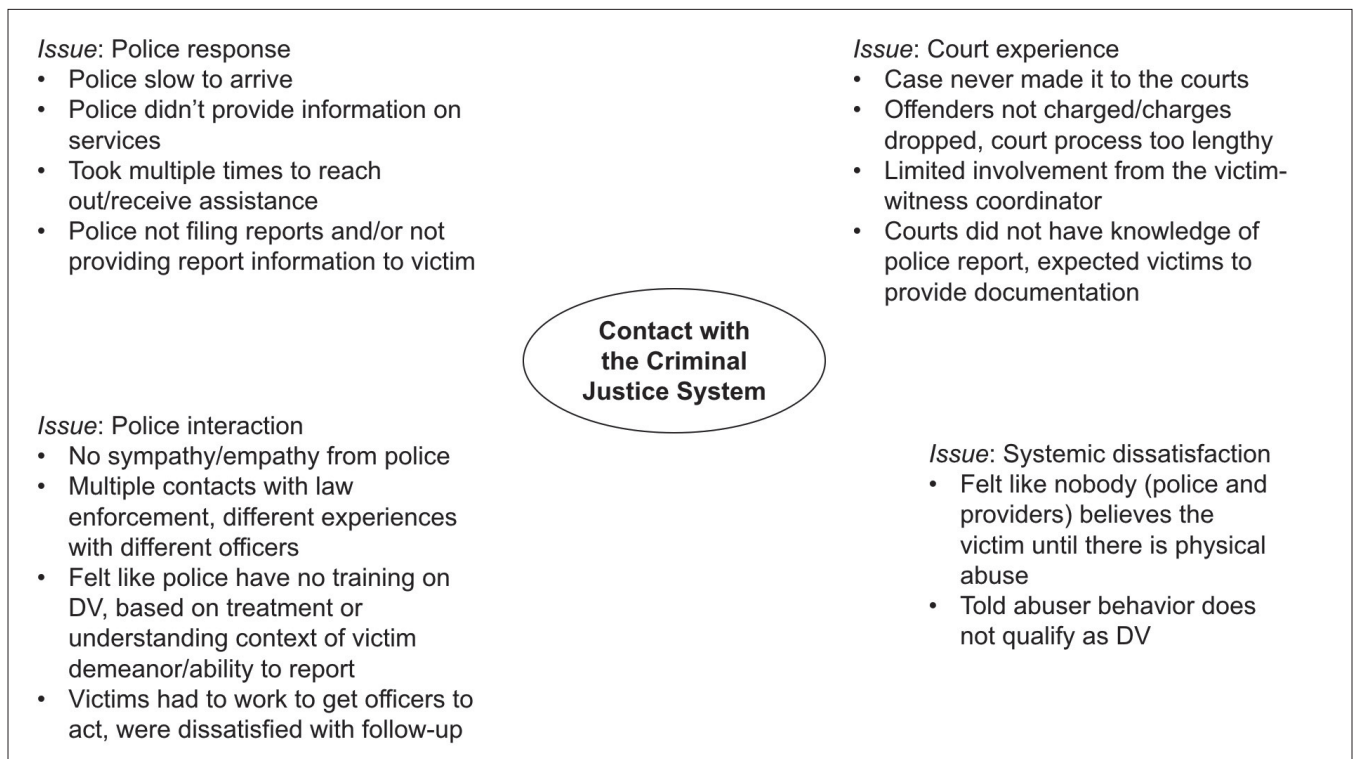


Figure 1: Theme 1: Contact with the Criminal Justice System



As the gatekeepers of the criminal justice system, police behavior may encourage victims to continue participation or lead them to abandon the system. Victims reported several criticisms with the police response to cases of domestic violence, reporting that police were often slow to arrive, did not provide information on victim services and failed to file reports or provide information on their reports to survivors requesting documentation. Survivors also reported that it took several incidents of abuse before they even reached out for help, and that it was often difficult to receive assistance once they did so, based on 911 responses to calls for service.

The actual interaction with law enforcement was reported as a largely negative experience. Survivors across all groups repeatedly stated that they did not feel that police offered them sympathy or empathy, and that officers were not listening to them while they were reporting their victimization. One survivor reported that she felt shamed, with another stating that an officer asked her what she did to provoke the abuser. Survivors also reported their frustration with police follow-up and that they had to work to get officers to act on their behalf, with one survivor terming the process “investigating for the investigators.” Although some survivors reported more positive experiences, suggesting that experiences could be positive or negative based on different officers, survivors across all groups almost unanimously reported feeling like police had no training or were not well-equipped to handle domestic violence, based on their treatment or understanding the context of survivors’ demeanors when reporting, or their ability to report the nature and extent of their victimization. As one survivor stated:

“I kind of feel like they felt thought like it was a waste of time [...] because if they come and he’s not there, of course he knows the police are coming, he is going to be gone... and [...] it’s like a wasted call to them, you know. And if there is something that happens, when they get there it’s like, why are we here? Why did you take him back? [...] You kind of see what I’m saying? Like you can’t win or lose with DV calls with cops.”

Survivors indicated a similar level of dissatisfaction with their court experiences. Many cases never made it to the courts, offenders were not charged, and more frequently, charges were dropped. When cases did go through the system, survivors often felt that the court process was too lengthy and often confusing, with limited involvement from the victim-witness coordinator. Survivors also felt that the process was not streamlined, reporting that they would show up to court and there would be no record of the police report, with the survivor expected to provide documentation.

Perhaps not surprisingly, survivors reported an overall dissatisfaction with the criminal justice process. Survivors felt that they did not think anything would come of reporting, particularly in cases where other forms of abuse were involved. Multiple survivors reported that both law enforcement and the entire system did not treat domestic violence seriously, unless when physical violence was present.



Victims suffering from other types of abuse, including emotional abuse and controlling behavior, particularly of children, felt like their cases were not treated as urgently as other cases. One survivor was told her abuser's behavior did not qualify as domestic violence. While several countries have criminalized emotional abuse and controlling behavior as forms of domestic violence, most U.S. states, including Tennessee, have not. Law enforcement and other service providers should pay attention to victims who report such behavior, however, because these are warning signs of situations in which physical domestic assault is more likely (Gondolf, Heckert & Kimmel, 2002; Schumacher & Leonard, 2005). In general, the issues around victims' contact with the criminal justice system represented the bulk of victim complaints, with less attention and time spent specifically on interactions with social service agencies and expectations for outcomes.

Interactions with Social Service Agencies

Figure 2 (on page 9) summarizes the main issues survivors reported from their interactions with social service agencies. Survivors reported concerns around negative staff interactions, lack of information, ease of contact with staff, and overall provider experiences. Survivors mainly reported issues with front-office staff rather than providers themselves. Several survivors stated that the front desk staff at the FSC were desensitized and did not offer sympathy for their circumstances, with others stating that they felt staff were looking down on them. However, some survivors suggested that inexperienced and younger providers made it difficult and uncomfortable to share information about the full extent of their victimization.

The main source of discontent for survivors in their interactions with social service agencies was the lack of information available to them. In several focus groups, survivors were often telling each other of various resources to pursue. Many survivors had not heard of the FSC, YWCA or victim advocates generally. Staff members present during the session often expressed surprise or lack of awareness about these resources, supporting prior research that service providers may not be aware of current services or the full extent of services available for survivors (Fugate, Landis, Riordan, Naureckas & Engel, 2005).

Part of this disconnect likely stemmed from an inconsistent referral process. Survivors reported that they were referred to one of the agencies from law enforcement, other agencies, or friends or religious institutions within the city. When referrals occurred, survivors complained that the information was outdated and the agency was defunct, or that the referrals were for resources survivors were not able to qualify for, due to a variety of factors.

Survivors were generally positive about their contact with advocates and agency staff; some survivors stated that advocates often reached out to them and consistently contacted them with updates and information. Overall, survivors reported that the agencies generally worked to make sure survivors were connected to services, and many survivors reported that this was true working with multiple agencies. They felt that programs and shelters made them feel safe and were helpful in resolving their issues.

Expectation for Outcomes

Survivors either sought out or were referred to participating agencies for various reasons (orders of protection, custody of minor children, temporary or long-term housing). (See Figure 3.) Focus group interviews revealed a dissatisfaction with this process, stemming from issues with no assistance follow-through; a lack of resources or miscommunication of program provisions; reliance on others, not providers; treatment by the system and providers; lack of resolution; and suggestions for improvement.

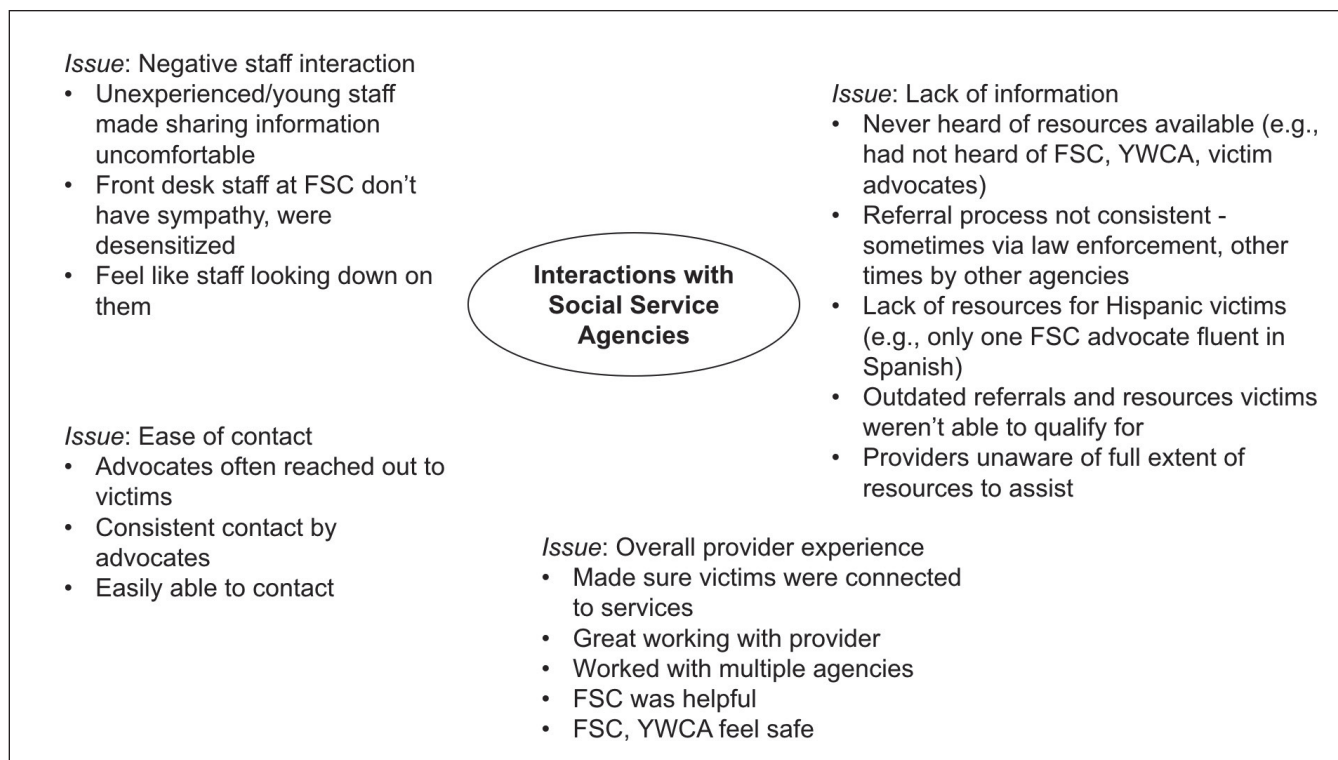


Figure 2: Theme 2: Interactions with Social Service Agencies

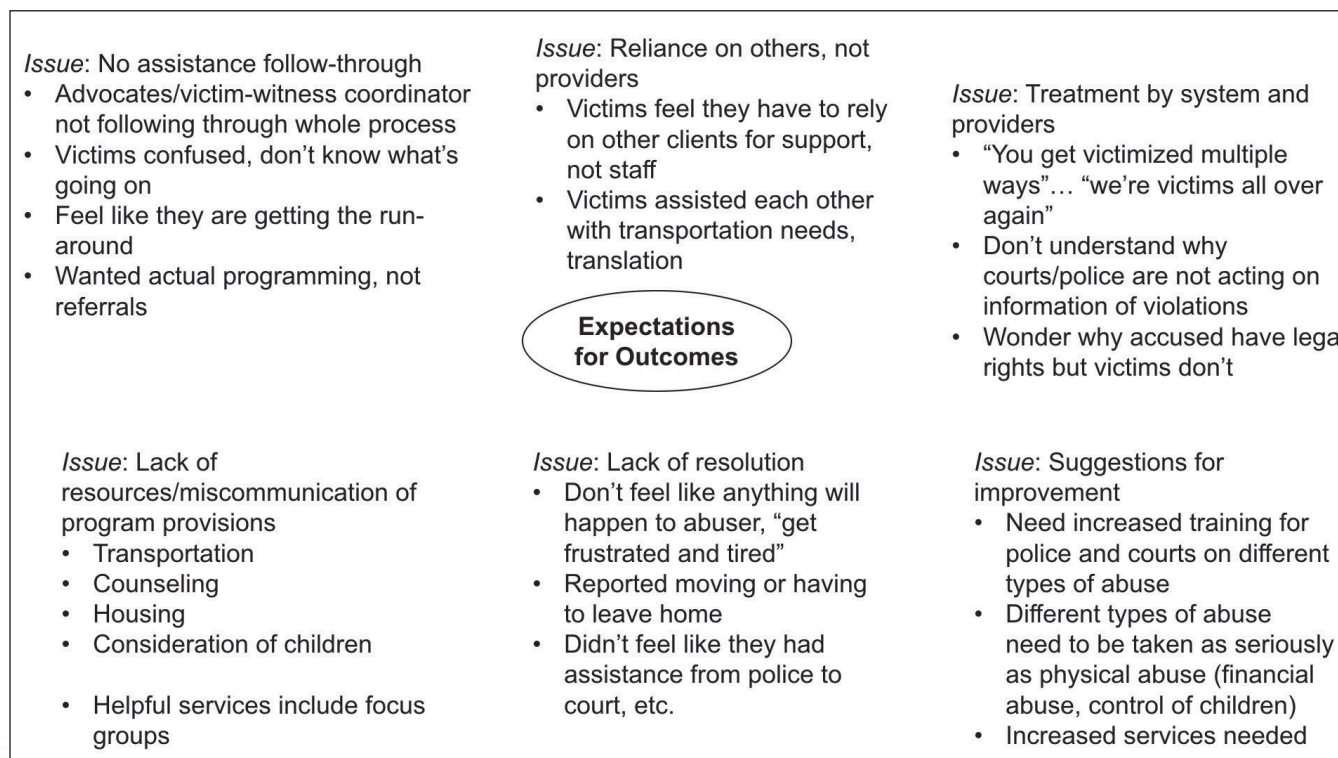


Figure 3: Theme 3: Expectations for Outcomes

A significant concern with victim responses was the assertion that there was no assistance following them through the process of reporting and moving through the system. Survivors reported feeling confused, not knowing what was going on and feeling like they were getting the run-around from staff from various agencies. As one survivor stated:

“I know there's other crimes that need to be addressed, [...] or have higher priority than mine, but at the same time I feel like I've been literally punched every day, and there's no one that actually advocates. I've been trying to get [...] legal representation [...] and I haven't had it. I had to become my own attorney, and that's scary.”

Survivors also reported wanting actual programming from agencies, not just referrals to make additional contacts. This concern ties into a related issue regarding victim expectations: survivors frequently complained about a lack of resources, but miscommunication of program provisions also appeared to play a role in conflict between survivors and program staff. Across multiple focus groups, survivors often agreed that focus groups and group therapy were helpful, but they wanted more access to transportation, extensive and continued counseling, housing and a recognition of the effect of the experience on their children. Instead, survivors reported often relying on others, and not providers, when agencies did not provide services they expected. In one example, survivors indicated that they assisted each other with transportation needs, while in another, a survivor stated that she had been asked to translate for a non-English speaking survivor who had come into an agency for assistance.

Survivors often felt that their treatment by the system and providers made them feel like the offenders rather than their abusers. They did not understand why their abusers had legal rights, such as access to an attorney, and they did not, and why the courts and police would not act on information about violations of protection orders and other issues. Consequently, they lacked confidence that anything would get done, and that their experiences with the system felt like they got “victimized multiple ways” and that they were “victims all over again.” Survivors reported that they “got frustrated and tired” waiting for their abusers to be punished and reported moving or having to leave their homes, rather than the abusers. Several survivors even reported leaving the city or state just to avoid their abusers.

Survivors offered many suggestions for improvement throughout the system. Overwhelmingly, they called for



increased training for police and courts on different types of abuse and an increase in social services available for survivors. While their main source of discontent was with law enforcement, many survivors indicated that the entire system needed improvement in responding to domestic violence cases. Survivors additionally complained about a lack of resources for Hispanic survivors within the city; one survivor stated that only one FSC advocate was fluent in Spanish. Additionally, survivors suggested discrimination due to Hispanic background and language barriers, aligning with prior research that a lack of culturally-sensitive and appropriate services often fails to recognize diversity in help-seeking and the practicalities of intervention (Sumter, 2006). One survivor stated that even with the services offered, there was work still to be done:

“That’s not help telling me that all is going to be okay, [...] “we’re going to help you with the house.” Okay, that’s my everyday needs. Thank you for that. But what about my mental needs? How am I supposed to move on from this? Help me.”

CONCLUSION

The focus group interviews summarize the three main concerns facing victims of domestic violence when reporting victimization in Memphis and Shelby County: contacts with the criminal justice system, interactions with social service agencies and their expectations for outcomes. The women speaking in these focus groups represent a visible reminder for why the evaluation of the community’s response to serving domestic violence survivors, including the FSC and its coordinated response with the criminal justice system and service agencies (or lack thereof), is ultimately important, by providing guidelines on what works and what does not work, for those ultimately affected.



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