There’s no one I can trust

The impact of mandatory reporting on the help-seeking and wellbeing of domestic violence survivors

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Overview

Given the reluctance of many domestic violence survivors to use the criminal justice system\(^1\), it is important to increase survivors’ access to competent support from other sources. This includes support from friends, family, coworkers, teachers, religious communities, and medical professionals. However, mandatory reporting laws require some of these supports to report information that survivors share to the police or child protective services (CPS). This could impact survivors’ willingness to reach out for help and what happens to them when they do.

During May and June of 2015, the National LGBTQ Domestic Violence Capacity Building Center (the Learning Center) partnered with the National Domestic Violence Hotline (The Hotline) to explore the impact of mandatory reporting on help-seeking for domestic violence. We conducted an online survey with individuals seeking support through The Hotline’s online chat services. The survey included quantitative and qualitative questions.

A total of 3,616 domestic violence survivors and help-seekers completed the survey. Table 1 shows participant demographics.

For each yes/no question, we looked at the sample responses overall and tested whether the responses differed significantly by gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, or age.\(^2\)

To test for gender differences, we created a category for trans* and gender variant people to explore the unique experiences and vulnerabilities they face. We collapsed the two categories to increase the statistical power for analyses.

We acknowledge that the categories “woman” and “man” are not complete without including trans women and men, so we use a minus sign to signal their incompleteness.

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\(^2\) We used univariate and multivariate logistic regressions to explore their significance unconditionally and controlling for other demographic characteristics. In all cases where we performed both univariate and multivariate regressions, the results of both were consistent.

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### Table 1. Description of who participated in the survey (n= 3616)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender (n = 3510)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women-</td>
<td>2,984</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men-</td>
<td>421</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trans*</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender variant</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sexual Orientation (n = 3537)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>2,878</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay/Lesbian</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexually fluid</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/Ethnicity (n = 3436)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
<td>1,959</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino/a/ Hispanic</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/ African American</td>
<td>447</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-racial/ Mixed race</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/ Asian American</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/ Native Alaskan</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age (n = 3511)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;18 years old</td>
<td>482</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-24 years old</td>
<td>1064</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-40 years old</td>
<td>1388</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;40 years old</td>
<td>577</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Seeking help for self or other (n = 3526)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking for help for self</td>
<td>3,072</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking for help for other</td>
<td>454</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Asking for Help and Being Reported

Nearly **1 in 10** (9%) participants said that someone they turned to for help reported what they shared to an official or an authority figure.

Significantly more trans*/gender variant people and women- were reported compared to men-. Over one-quarter of trans*/gender variant people were reported by someone when they reached out to them for help.

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3 $p < .001$ and $p < .05$, respectively
 Asking for Help and Being Reported

Of those who were reported:

Only **3 out of 10** (31%) participants received any preparation before the report was made.⁴

**The majority of participants said the report made the situation worse or had no impact.**
Half (50%) of participants who have been reported said it made the situation much worse.⁵

50% Much Worse

12% A Little Worse

20% No different

15% A Little Better

3% Much Better

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⁴ Finding was consistent and did not differ significantly by demographic group
⁵ Finding did not differ significantly by demographic group or by where people were reported to.
Asking for Help and Being Reported

Impact of the report

**Made things better**

He got more counseling and better meds.

[The report] got us away from our abuser.

[I] was given a [temporary] order of protection for myself and child protective services started monitoring my abuser’s actions.

**Made no difference**

CPS came to investigate/interview but nothing was done after that.

He was arrested and the case was dismissed for lack of evidence but no police officer or DA contacted me.

Nothing changed after the report. My husband acts like we are happy in front of people, but behind closed doors, he is emotionally abusive…and destructive….

**Made things worse**

Police and CPS did nothing and abuser went on a rampage against us.

The formal report was made without my being on board. I felt helpless, and as though my situation had been labeled FOR me before I could come to any conclusion myself.

Every time cops got involved they never arrested him, so now he keeps coming after me knowing he gets away with it.

He is more abusive but he just makes sure no one is listening to us, so they will not go and report us again.

[The report] made the stalking more active and gave more information to the perpetrator which helped him to violate the restraining order.

I had a telephone hotline operator escalate an anxiety attack into armed police presence and mandatory confinement, during which time I was abused by a county official. I was held, totally lucid, for four days. Took years before I could use a phone again.
1 in 7 (15%) participants were warned when reaching out for help that the person would legally have to report what they shared to an official or an authority figure.

Significantly more trans*/gender variant people and women- were warned than men-.

Significantly more bisexual and sexually-fluid people were warned than heterosexuals.

Most participants were warned they would be reported to the police (44%) or to CPS (24%).

More than 1 in 10 people (12%) said they were not even told to whom they would be reported.

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6 p < .001 and p < .05, respectively
7 p = .05 and p < .05, respectively
8 Participants could select more than one answer choice.
Asking for Help and Being Warned

6 in 10 (60%) participants said the warning they received changed what they decided to share.⁹

Common reactions to being warned

**People minimized their experiences**

I lied to them and said things were fine.

I didn’t tell full truth. [I] made it seem not as bad.

**People held back important details**

It made me hold things back that I thought they would tell the school.

Left out any physical parts of abuse towards children.

**People stopped talking**

I didn’t want my kids taken away so I didn’t talk.

Never said another word.

I did not want to share any information because I was afraid if the police or anyone else came to the house to ask about the abuse I would be killed afterwards.

**People stopped reaching out for help**

I talk to no one, there’s no one I can trust, no one I can turn to and nowhere I can go.

I stopped going to my doctor’s office.

I now just keep everything to myself.

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⁹ Finding was consistent and did not differ significantly by demographic group.
Over 1 in 3 (34%) participants said they have not asked someone for help for fear the person would be legally required to report what they shared.

**Too Afraid to Reach Out for Help**

Significantly more people under 18 years old were afraid to reach out for help. Nearly half (48%) of people under 18 years old said they did not seek help from someone for fear of being reported. This was significantly more compared to participants from all other age groups.\(^\text{10}\)

\[^{10}\ p<.001, p<.001 \text{ and } p<.001 \text{ respectively}\]
Too Afraid to Reach Out for Help

Significantly more trans*/gender variant people and women- were afraid to reach out for help compared to men-.\(^{11}\)

Over half of trans*/gender variant people said they were afraid to ask someone for help for fear of being reported.

The majority of participants (74%) were afraid they would be reported to the police.

A little less than half (40%) were afraid they would be reported to CPS and/or their family.\(^{12}\)

\(^{11}\) \(p<.001\) and \(p<.001\), respectively

\(^{12}\) Participants could select more than one answer choice.
Conclusions

This study shows that mandated reporting directly and indirectly impacts many domestic violence survivors and help-seekers, and most often the impact is detrimental.

For those with direct experience of mandated reports, 50% said the report made things much worse. In contrast, only 3% said it made things much better. This strongly suggests that mandated reports are not helping most people. The qualitative responses shed some light on why this might be, highlighting many unintended consequences and hardships experienced by the very people that mandated reports aim to help.

Warnings of potential reports changed what most survivors were willing to share. Some said the warning kept them from seeking future help from support providers. Although the warnings may help to avoid triggering a mandated report, these data suggest that they make it harder for most survivors and help-seekers to receive the support they seek.

Finally, one-third of respondents (and roughly half of youth under 18 and trans* and gender variant people) said that they turned to fewer people for support for fear that they would be reported. This suggests that negative perceptions or experiences of mandatory reporting laws reduce opportunities to receive support for domestic violence, especially among youth.

Areas for Discussion

With this report, we hope to spark interest within and across fields to discuss:

• What are the unintended harms of current mandatory reporting practices on children, youth and their families?

• In what ways has mandatory reporting evolved outside of its original intent?

• Who needs to be at the table to understand and respond to the harms of mandated reporting?

• How do we keep the full-frame of well-being for children and families at the center of these conversations?
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For more information about the report or the work of the National LGBTQ DV Capacity Building Learning Center, please contact Margaret Hobart at Margaret@nwnetwork.org or by phone at 206-568-7777.

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