



Law Enforcement Experience Report

Domestic violence survivors'
survey regarding interaction
with law enforcement

Report led by Leigh Goodmark, JD

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[thehotline.org](https://www.thehotline.org)

**NATIONAL
DOMESTIC
VIOLENCE
HOTLINE**

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EXECUTIVE

Summary

Between March and May 2021, The National Domestic Violence Hotline (The Hotline) conducted a survey on the experiences survivors impacted by intimate partner violence* or sexual assault have had with members of law enforcement. The survey, conducted on The Hotline’s chat line and website, collected both qualitative and quantitative data.

The two groups were categorized by those who had chosen not to call the police and those who had called the police. Of the roughly 1,500 who responded, approximately 82% had contacted the police, while 12% had not.

Of those who did call the police, more than twice the number (39%) actually felt **less safe** after calling, compared to 20% who felt safer.

Both groups demonstrated fear of calling the police. Seventy-seven percent of those who called the police were afraid to call them again; 92% of those who had not called

were afraid to do so.

Yet 62% of those who called say that they would call police again. Most of the reasons given centered around the fact that they felt law enforcement was their only option. When asked if other resources had been available, would they have chosen them over calling the police, 71% answered “yes” and provided examples of resources needed.

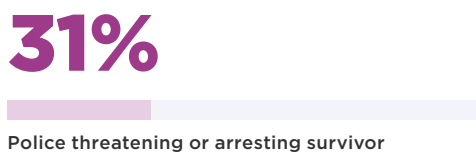
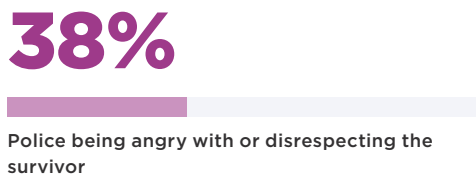
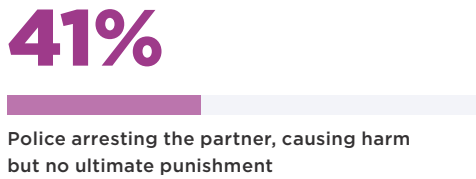
This report contains powerful information from survivors who voluntarily gave insight into their experiences through answers to our questions and in their own words. They did so with the hope that the criminal justice system will hear them, believe them and effect change. Until then, it’s a powerful reminder of the importance of looking beyond the criminal legal system for interventions that meet the needs for justice, safety and the survival of people subjected to abuse.

**Intimate partner violence is defined as physical, sexual or psychological violence or stalking perpetrated by a current or former romantic partner or spouse.*

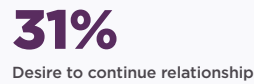
OF THOSE WHO HAD NEVER CALLED THE POLICE

92% Were very or somewhat afraid or concerned about how the police would react.

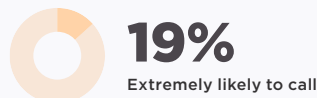
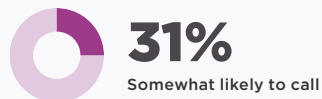
TOP CONCERNS



OTHER REASONS FOR AVOIDING CONTACTING THE POLICE

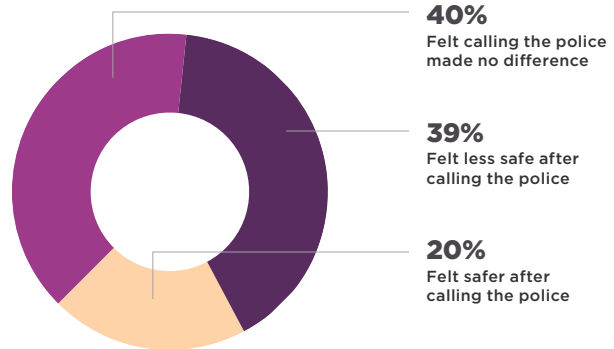


WOULD YOU CALL THE POLICE IN THE FUTURE?



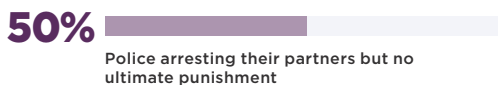
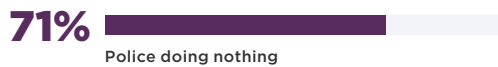
OF THOSE WHO HAD CALLED THE POLICE

55% believed they were discriminated against in some way.



More than three-quarters of people who called the police expressed fear or concern about calling in the future.

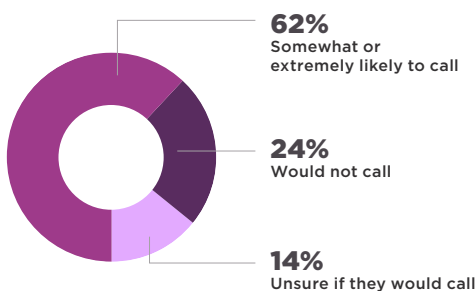
TOP CONCERNS



OTHER FEARS WHEN CALLING THE POLICE

- 24%** Police arrest them
- 21%** Arrest makes things harder for them
- 21%** Police threaten to report them to Child Protective Services

WOULD YOU CALL THE POLICE IN THE FUTURE?



Overall, 75% of respondents who had called the police wanted police involvement at the time they called. **But 71% said if other resources had been available, they would have preferred to use them instead.**



FULL

Report

From March 29 to May 10, 2021, The National Domestic Violence Hotline conducted a survey on the experiences survivors have had with members of law enforcement. The survey, conducted on The Hotline’s chat line and website, collected both qualitative and quantitative data.

Of those who responded, 219 people did not call the police after the abuse, while 1,225 did. As was clear from a similar survey conducted by The Hotline in 2015, both those who called the police and those who did not shared concerns about turning to police for help and were also skeptical of calling them in the future. Respondents feared that police would do nothing, would not believe them, and/or would harm them or their partners in some way.

Respondents were particularly concerned about police targeting, mistreating, or

arresting them or their partners based on their race, sexual orientation, gender identity, or past criminal history.

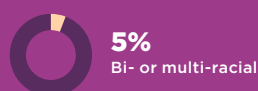
Respondents expressed a desire for a different kind of intervention—one that did not rely on police. The criminal legal system is the primary response to intimate partner violence and sexual assault in the United States. But recent research argues that the criminal legal system does not deter or reduce intimate partner violence or sexual assault, contributes to the conditions that are associated with violence, and has serious unintended consequences for many it was meant to protect.²

The responses in this survey align with those findings—whether survivors initially wanted police intervention or not, that intervention often failed to meet their needs, and actually caused harm for some.

1,502 People responded to the survey

Gender **93%** Female **4%** Male **3%** Non-binary, transgender, two-spirit or other

Ethnicities



¹ Because the majority of respondents to the survey identify as white, the survey is not representative of the general population. Moreover, research suggests that people of color are disproportionately and differently affected by gender-based violence in ways that could have skewed the data collected. It is also possible that the COVID pandemic had some effect on the responses received.

² Leigh Goodmark, *Decriminalizing Domestic Violence: A Balanced Policy Approach to Intimate Partner Violence* (2018).

Those who had never called the police

Fear of police reaction

Ninety-two percent of respondents who had never called the police were very or somewhat afraid or concerned about how the police would react. Their fears included:

75%



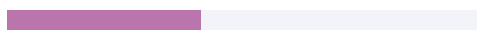
Police blaming or not believing survivor

71%



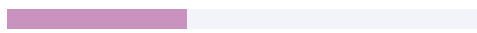
Police doing nothing

41%



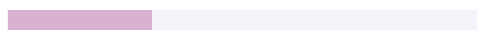
Police arresting partner but no ultimate punishment

38%



Police being angry with or disrespecting survivor

31%



Police threatening or arresting survivor

Respondents also feared negative consequences for their partners (36%), police violence against them or a partner (29%), and police sexually abusing or threatening to sexually abuse them (13%). Those fears of violence were particularly acute for people of color.

Reasons for not contacting the police

People shared additional reasons why they avoided contacting the police.

52%

Keeping the violence private

49%

Fear of their partners

40%

Unsure whether what happened to them constituted a crime

31%

A desire to continue their relationships

15%

Protecting children

“My partner was a lesbian woman and I am a queer woman. We both have (a fair) distrust of the criminal justice system. Additionally, our state has mandatory DV arrest laws, so one of us or both of us would have been arrested. I’m worried we both would have been as they attempted to identify a ‘primary abuser’ in an IPV situation between two women, even though I was the only one abused. **An arrest would have ended my career.**”

Likelihood of calling police in the future



36%

Would not call police in the future

Another 31% said they were somewhat likely to call in the future and 19% were extremely likely to call in the future.

People who had called the police

39%

of people who called police reported feeling less safe after making the call

40%

said calling the police made no difference in their safety

20%

felt safer after calling the police

Eighty-two percent of respondents had called the police in response to sexual or intimate partner violence or sexual abuse.

Research conducted by the United States Department of Justice regularly finds a much lower percentage of people who call police in response to rape, sexual assault, and intimate partner violence. In 2019 (the most recent year for which data is available), the percentage of survivors calling police in response to being raped or sexually assaulted increased from 25% in 2018 to 34%. The percentage of survivors reporting intimate partner violence to law enforcement increased from 24% in 2018 to 58%.³

Discrimination by police

More than half (55%) of those who called the police believed the police discriminated against them in one or more ways.

Of that group, 63% believed discrimination was based on gender or gender identity; 41% based on negative perceptions of them (their family, criminal history, or substance abuse, for example); 23% based on income; 19% based on race; 8% based on disability;

and 7% based on sexual identity. Several respondents mentioned having partners in law enforcement and believed they were discriminated against because of their partners' employment.

Twenty-five percent of people were threatened with arrest and 12% were arrested, despite identifying as the victims of violence.

“My abuser was my husband. He was well liked and a police officer at the time. He had/has several legal connections that have devastated me and my five children. The police stalked me. **Also, the Police Union attorneys defended my husband/abuser.**”



³ Morgan, Rachel E. & Truman, Jennifer L.. (2020). Criminal Victimization, 2019, <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/cv19.pdf>.

Fear of calling police in the future

More than 3/4 of people who called the police expressed fear or concern about how police would react if they needed to call again in the future.

71%



Feared police would do nothing if called

68%



Concerned police would not believe them or would actually blame them

50%



Believed police might arrest their partners but their partners would not ultimately be punished

38%



Feared police would be angry with or disrespect them in some way

24%



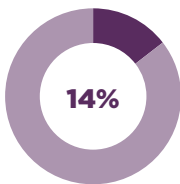
Feared police would arrest them, and that arrest would make things harder for them (21%) despite identifying as the victim of violence

21%

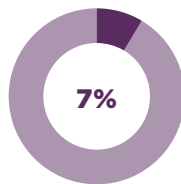


Feared police would threaten them or report them to Child Protective Services

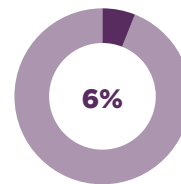
Respondents were also concerned about the impact calling the police could have on their partners' lives:



Feared calling the police would have negative consequences for their partners



Feared police would be violent toward their partners



Did not want their partners to be arrested

“Police have never helped—not when I was being stalked, harassed, or abused. **Incarceration isn’t the solution I want and that’s the best police have to offer.** That kind of violence—police and incarceration—only escalates a situation and makes it less safe for me and my family.”



Calling police can have serious repercussions for survivors. Parents, for example, may be reluctant to call police because doing so could trigger a report to Child Protective Services (CPS), even in cases where there was no harm done to the child or where the parent was actively taking steps to protect the child.⁴



Police called CPS in 15% of cases of those who responded. In 19% of the cases where police called CPS, the child was removed from the survivor parent's care.



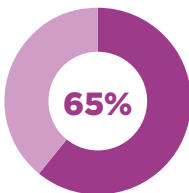
Police also reported just over 1% of respondents or their partners to Immigration and Customs Enforcement.



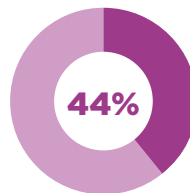
“They do nothing, or call CPS which is worse than nothing.”

Prosecution

Calling the police is usually the first step toward criminal prosecution.



65% of respondents wanted their partners criminally prosecuted. However, of the cases that were prosecuted, 4% were done against the person's wishes.



44% of the cases that went to prosecution, respondents reported that police did not cooperate with prosecution.

What did police do to help?

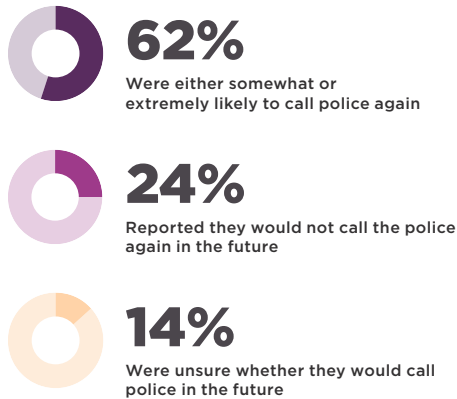
- **33% responded the police were not helpful**
- 13% appreciated that police arrested their partners
- 11% were grateful police believed them or told them what happened to them was a crime
- 8% cited police help with obtaining protective orders
- 7% said police helped them by filing charges against their partners



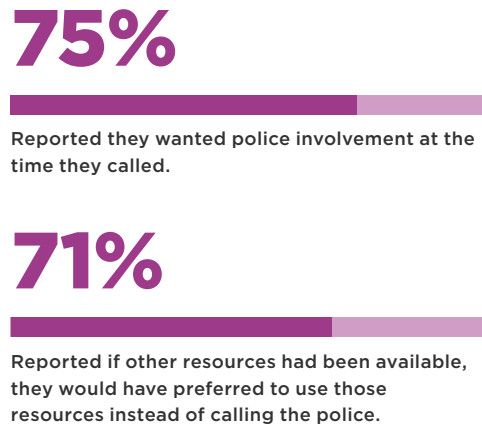
“I was scared to go to court. No one reached out to me. The police had the reports, pictures and forensic RN examination with pictures, and nothing was looked at or seen by the District Attorney. The DA or police never reached out to me. I needed help; I was scared. Instead of reaching out to me, they dismissed the case! **The time he was arrested before that, the DA took over and put him on a pre-trial intervention diversion program. Which did nothing, because less than six months later he almost killed me. He's a free man, using the legal system to punish me for reporting him.”**

⁴ Colleen Henry, Bryan G. Victor, Joseph P. Ryan, & Brian E. Perron (2020). Substantiated allegations of failure to protect in the child welfare system: Against whom, in what context, and with what justification?, Children and Youth Services Review 116, doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105091.

Likelihood of calling the police in the future



What kinds of intervention do survivors want?




Respondents said they needed anything that would have helped get them and their children to a safe place. **And they wanted that assistance to come from “literally anyone not involved with the criminal justice system.”**

Respondents listed the following resources they would have preferred accessing instead of law enforcement.

- ✓ Social services
- ✓ Social workers
- ✓ Mediators
- ✓ Drug and alcohol services
- ✓ Mental health services
- ✓ Culturally specific resources
- ✓ Legal services
- ✓ Crisis prevention
- ✓ Helpful Child Protective Services
- ✓ Community intervention or de-escalation
- ✓ Faith community
- ✓ Housing
- ✓ Domestic violence specialists/shelters
- ✓ Peers
- ✓ Financial assistance

Respondents expressed frustration at the lack of options and the dearth of information available to them about the options that did exist.



“I know there’s counseling, but I need someone to almost be able to walk me through things/set appointments/help me get an official diagnosis. I’m so buried and in survival mode in my head all of the time I don’t have the strength or mental capacity to do all that myself. So things just get worse and worse.”

Reimagining responses

Since the early 1980s, improving the police response to gender-based violence, including intimate partner violence and rape, has been a priority for the anti-violence movement. The police response is, by all accounts, more robust than it was 40 years ago, particularly in areas where police are mandated or strongly encouraged to make arrests. But this study makes it clear that more than forty years of training and legal reform have failed to fundamentally transform the police response into one that materially improves the lives of those who call them when they are subjected to gender-based harm.

Since The Hotline's 2015 survey, mistrust and fear of police have only increased. Against a daily backdrop of stories about police misuse of force in marginalized communities, people subjected to abuse, particularly people of color, are thinking twice about whether to call police at all.⁵ Calling the police means confronting the real possibility police may do nothing, as well as the real possibility that police will mistreat survivors and their partners or, through their action or inaction, further endanger those who call. Respondents to the survey feared intervention not just by police, but also by quasi-carceral systems like Child Protective Services (CPS) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Those fears are borne out for some survivors. In 19% of the cases in this survey in which police called CPS, the child was removed from the survivor parent's care.

People who call police should not have to fear for the safety and wellbeing of themselves or their partners. Victims of violence should not face arrest. People who seek help should not lose their children or be deported.

How to improve that police response is a much more difficult question. Millions of dollars have been dedicated to police training through the Violence Against Women Act since 1994.⁶ But neither reporting rates nor rates of satisfaction with the police response indicate that the training has been transformational. And the many media stories about law enforcement officers committing acts of gender-based violence raise real questions about how police can be expected to protect survivors when they engage in the same abuses.⁷ Fundamentally altering the police response would likely require change at a much deeper level, implicating how police are recruited, the credentials required for policing, the educational process for police officers, and the need for broader and unequivocal societal condemnation of gender-based violence.

Part of the reason that people call the police is because police are the primary formal first response that we, as a society, currently offer.

But even those (and maybe especially those) respondents who did choose to call police would prefer some other alternative. In answering our question about what other resources they would want, many

respondents asked, in essence, “what else is there?” That question can be interpreted in two ways. Some respondents were likely asserting their belief that only police could be first responders, a belief shaped in part by what is now available to them. Some, though, might have been saying, “help me see what the other possibilities are.”

We need to imagine a world that offers alternatives to police intervention for survivors of gender-based violence. First responders trained in deescalating violence who can answer when survivors call.⁸ Easier facilitated access to a robust, well-funded service system that helps survivors get what they need to be safe, either within their relationships or if they choose to end those relationships. Support to enable the real first responders—the family, friends, and community members to whom most people turn before they ever call police—to intervene effectively and safely on behalf of survivors and to establish accountability for those who do harm.⁹ Networks of communities engaged in community accountability, mutual aid, and transformative justice work.¹⁰

On a structural level, we need to make strategic investments in community responses and non carceral solutions.

We should use funding to alleviate the economic distress that is highly correlated with the perpetration of intimate partner violence and that can entrap survivors in their relationships.¹¹ We need to address the gender and racial pay gaps, which perpetuate structural economic inequality in ways that imperil all survivors, but especially survivors of color.¹² And funding could be used to prevent violence in the first instance, by keeping children from having adverse childhood experiences like



witnessing family and community violence and being subjected to abuse or neglect, by implementing evidence-based interventions with adolescents, and through programs shown to change the behavior of those who do harm.¹³ We need to see that anti-poverty work is anti-violence work, that anti-racism work is anti-violence work, that mental health work is anti-violence work.

It would be easy to simply call for improvements to policing—more training, more funding, better quality police work. But to do that would ignore the growing recognition that police do not prevent violence, that police are often violent, and that police intervention can spur violence.¹⁴

And while many people report that they will continue to turn to police for prevention, the percentage of respondents looking for another way suggests that people call police not because it is the intervention they want, but because it is the only intervention available. Survivors are searching for other ways to feel safe, to feel protected, to feel supported. Providing survivors with viable alternatives means investing in the people and places so many survivors regularly turn to: friends, families, communities. We owe the respondents to this survey, and the millions of survivors of gender-based violence that they represent, nothing less. ■

⁵ Desmond, Matthew, Papachristos, Andrew V. & Kirk, D. (2016). Police Violence and Citizen Crime Reporting in the Black Community, *American Sociological Review* 81(5): 857-76.

⁶ Sacco, Lisa N. (2019). The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA): Historical Overview, Funding, and Reauthorization. Congressional Research Service. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R45410.pdf>

⁷ Ritchie, Andrea. (2017). *Invisible No More: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Color*. Boston: Beacon Press.

⁸ Webster, Daniel W., Whitehill, Jennifer M., Vernick, Jon S., & Parker, Elizabeth M. Evaluations of Baltimore's Safe Streets Program (2012), https://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/center-for-prevention-of-youth-violence/field_reports/2012_01_11.Executive%20SummaryofSafeStreetsEval.pdf.

⁹ Sylaska, Kateryna M. & Edwards, Katie M. (2014). Disclosure of Intimate Partner Violence to Informal Social Support Network Members: A Review of the Literature, *Trauma, Violence, and Abuse* 15(1), 3-21.

¹⁰ Dixon, Ejeris and Piepza-Samarasinha, Leah L. (2020). *Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement*. Chico, California: AK Press; Creative Interventions (2012). *Creative Interventions Toolkit: A Practical Guide to Stop Interpersonal Violence*, <https://www.creative-interventions.org/toolkit/>; Spade, Dean. (2020) *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)*. New York : Verso Books.

¹¹ Campbell, Jacquelyn C., et al. (2003). Risk Factors for Femicide in Abusive Relationships: Results from a Multisite Case Control Study. *American Journal of Public Health* 93(7), 1089-97; Goodman, Lisa A., Smyth, Katya F., Borges, Angela, & Singer, Rachel. When Crises Collide: How Intimate Partner Violence and Poverty Intersect to Shape Women's Mental Health and Coping, *Trauma, Violence, and Abuse* 10(4), 306-29.

¹² Miller, S. (2020). Black Workers Still Earn Less Than Their White Counterparts, SHRM, <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/compensation/pages/racial-wage-gaps-persistence-poses-challenge.aspx>;

¹³ Goodmark, supra note 1.

¹⁴ Leigh Goodmark (2015). *Hands Up At Home: Militarized Masculinity and Police Officers Who Commit Intimate Partner Abuse*, 2015(5) *BYU Law Review* 1183-1246; Andrea Ritchie (2017). *Invisible No More: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Color*.



ABOUT

The Hotline

The Hotline is the only national 24-hour domestic violence hotline providing compassionate support, life-saving resources, and personalized safety planning via phone, online chat, and text.

To date we have answered more than 6 million calls, chats, and texts from people impacted by relationship abuse in the United States. The Hotline is a frontline resource for survivors, often the first source to validate that abuse is being experienced, and a trusted provider of resources, referrals, and safety planning. Central to The Hotline is our highly trained advocate staff, who provide high-quality, trauma-informed education, validation, and connection to services that empower survivors to make life-changing decisions with dignity and respect. Our services are free and confidential.

To respond to the unique needs of teens and young adults, The Hotline launched **love is respect**, a national resource to disrupt and prevent unhealthy relationships and dating abuse by empowering young people through inclusive and equitable education, support, and resources. love is respect is focused on providing 24/7 information, support, and advocacy to young people between the ages of 13 and 26.



6+ million calls, chats, and texts from people impacted by relationship abuse



Free and confidential services 24/7

As the nation's largest direct-service provider to those impacted by domestic violence, The Hotline is one of the leading collectors of real-life survivor experiences, data and trends. We advocate for survivor-centered policies and legislation using knowledge and data informed by speaking with hundreds of thousands of survivors each year. In coalition with other leaders in the field, we ensure that survivors are represented when policymakers discuss matters that affect their safety and support.

To learn more about our organization and services, visit **thehotline.org**



Leigh Goodmark

SUPPORTING THE HOTLINE on the Survey Analysis

“When I started representing people subjected to abuse in 1995, I firmly believed we should arrest, prosecute, convict, and incarcerate everyone who used violence against an intimate partner. I thought nothing less than full criminalization would be sufficient to stop the violence or to express society’s condemnation of those who abused their partners.”

“What a difference 25 years makes. Over that time, I have represented well over a thousand people seeking various forms of legal relief in response to intimate partner violence. I have watched my clients be ignored, mistreated, and criminalized when they turned to the criminal legal system for help. I have told the stories of women who fought back against their abusive partners, transgender people subjected to abuse, and the abused partners of police officers, and documented how the criminal legal system fails all of these groups.”

“I have studied the literature on the criminalization of intimate partner violence and concluded that criminalization does not reduce or deter intimate partner violence, that it exacerbates many of the correlates of intimate partner violence, including economic stress and trauma, and that it harms many of the people it was intended to help— people like my clients.”

“I ask people to think hard about what we believe the criminal legal system is doing for people subjected to abuse, and to consider whether we can do those same things without involving the carceral system.”

Leigh Goodmark is the Marjorie Cook Professor of Law at the University of Maryland Frances King Carey School of Law. Professor Goodmark directs the Clinical Law Program, teaches Family Law, Gender and the Law, and Gender Violence and the Law, and directs the Gender Violence Clinic—providing direct representation in matters involving intimate partner abuse, sexual assault, trafficking, and other forms of gender violence.

She is the author of *Decriminalizing Domestic Violence: A Balanced Policy Approach to Intimate Partner Violence* (University of California Press 2018) and *A Troubled Marriage: Domestic Violence and the Legal System* (New York University 2012), which was named a CHOICE Outstanding Academic Title of 2012. She is the co-editor of *Comparative Perspectives on Gender Violence: Lessons from Efforts Worldwide* (Oxford 2015). Professor Goodmark’s work on intimate partner violence has also appeared in numerous journals, law reviews, and publications, including *Violence Against Women*, the *New York Times*, the *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review*, the *Harvard Journal on Gender and the Law*, the *Yale Journal on Law and Feminism*, and *Fusion.net*.

Professor Goodmark has served as Director of Clinical Education and Co-director of the Center on Applied Feminism at the University of Baltimore School of Law. Before that, she was the Director of the Children and Domestic Violence Project at the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law. Prior to her tenure there, Professor Goodmark represented clients in the District of Columbia in custody, visitation, child support, restraining order, and other civil matters. She is a graduate of Yale University and Stanford Law School.