

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SURVIVING AND NOT SURVIVING

Public Benefits Programs and Domestic and Sexual Violence Victims' Economic Security

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**Family Violence Prevention
& Services Program**

www.acf.hhs.gov/fvpsa

ABOUT THE SURVEY

This online survey was originally developed in 2009 by the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence (NRCDV) and Legal Momentum, with input from domestic violence experts and researchers. The survey instrument was updated and expanded in 2017 by NRCDV staff, in consultation with representatives from national and state domestic violence and sexual assault organizations and the Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality. The survey was distributed through a wide range of channels beginning on August 8, 2017 and remained open through September 10, 2017. The survey includes 38 fixed-choice questions and 28 open-ended questions.

This report discusses the findings from the **1,126 responses** to that survey (although the exact number of responses to each question varies); both quantitative and qualitative responses (quotes from respondents) are reflected throughout. A majority of respondents (**86.8%**) are advocates at domestic violence, sexual assault, or dual DV/SA programs, but respondents also include those working at legal services/legal aid, social services, anti-poverty, or housing/homelessness agencies. **Nine in ten** survey respondents work at the local level, **25.9 %** at the state or territory level, **6.1%** at the national level, and **4.5%** at the tribal level. Respondents represent individuals from every state, the District of Columbia, and American Samoa (although there were no responses from Puerto Rico, Guam, Northern Marianas Islands, or the US Virgin Islands). Data analysis was conducted primarily through SurveyMonkey.

Training and technical assistance on victims' access to public benefits - as well as more information on survey design and data analysis - can be requested at nrcdvTA@nrcdv.org or 800-537-2238. Additional resources, information, and tools are also available at www.vawnet.org.

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INTRODUCTION

For domestic violence and sexual assault victims,¹ the public benefits programs that support basic economic security are of critical importance. While we know that domestic violence and sexual assault occur across the socio-economic spectrum, there are unique challenges and barriers at the intersection of these forms of violence and economic disadvantage. Significant numbers of low-income women² are abused or assaulted, and the violence perpetrated against them can make it nearly impossible to climb out of poverty.³ Abuse can also result in victims who were not previously considered low-income falling into poverty: violence often undermines victims' ability to work, have a place to live, and do what is necessary to pursue a more stable life for themselves and their children. Poverty and economic instability can also make it more difficult to cope with the physical, psychological, and financial impacts of domestic violence and sexual assault.⁴

Research shows that domestic violence and sexual assault occur across all racial, ethnic and economic groups. Beyond issues of prevalence, it is important to recognize that survivors from communities of color, Native American survivors, and those from other underserved communities, including immigrants, individuals with disabilities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) survivors often face intersecting issues that disproportionately impact marginalized communities. These issues can exacerbate and compound their vulnerability to poverty and economic instability:

- People of color experience disproportionate rates of poverty, and there are racial disparities in economic stability due to the accumulated effects of historical and ongoing structural inequalities and oppression.⁵
- Approximately 1 in 4 Native Americans live in poverty, nearly twice the overall national poverty rate.⁶
- LGBTQ communities experience higher rates of poverty, food insecurity, unemployment, housing instability, and economic vulnerability.⁷
- Immigrants, particularly immigrants without documentation, face significantly higher rates of poverty, hunger, and unstable and low-paying employment.⁸
- Disability is both a cause and consequence of poverty. Disability can lead to job loss and reduced earnings, barriers to education and skills development, and significant medical and other expenses. Additionally, poverty limits access to health care and other needed services, and increases the likelihood that people live and work in environments that adversely affect their health.⁹

Access to economic security programs like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) which provides direct financial assistance to families living in poverty, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP - formerly known as food stamps), unemployment insurance (UI), and other programs are critical in providing increased economic stability for survivors. These essential benefits help survivors afford the basics (like food, housing, and healthcare) and rebuild their lives after violence. Furthermore, the Centers for Disease Control has concluded that improving financial security for individuals and families can help reduce and prevent intimate partner violence.¹⁰

Far too often, though, survivors face considerable challenges when trying to access these programs, including barriers stemming from both policies and their implementation. While advocates, attorneys, and other service providers play a valuable role in facilitating access to these programs, it is often not enough to overcome the significant barriers that victims encounter.

Strengthening the safety net is necessary to help survivors and their families attain economic stability, safety, and well-being.

Voices from the Field

“Benefits programs such as TANF, SNAP, and Unemployment Insurance constitute a vital safety net for victim-survivors who, trauma notwithstanding, already struggle to meet their basic needs and/or support their dependents and families.”

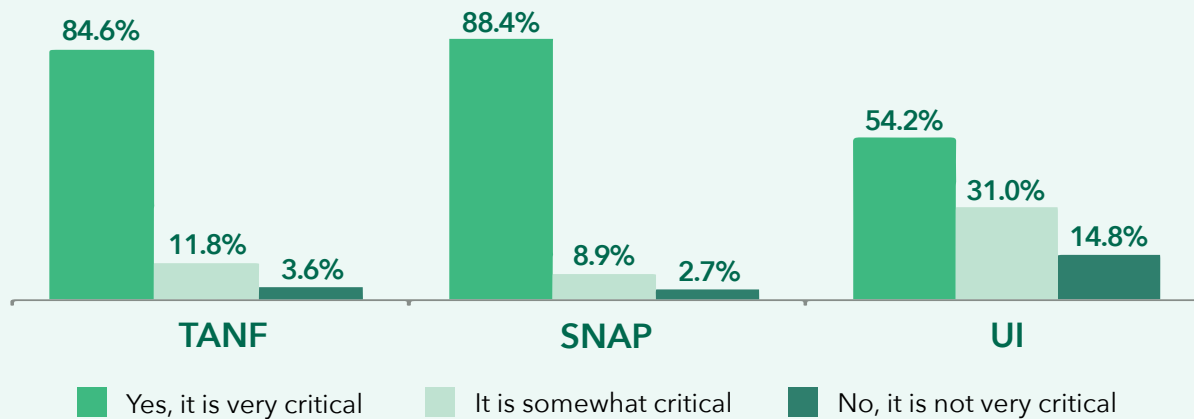
“Making it difficult to obtain benefits makes the decision to give up and go back to an abuser an easier choice.”

“For those that need these programs, it is the difference between surviving and not surviving.”

KEY FINDINGS

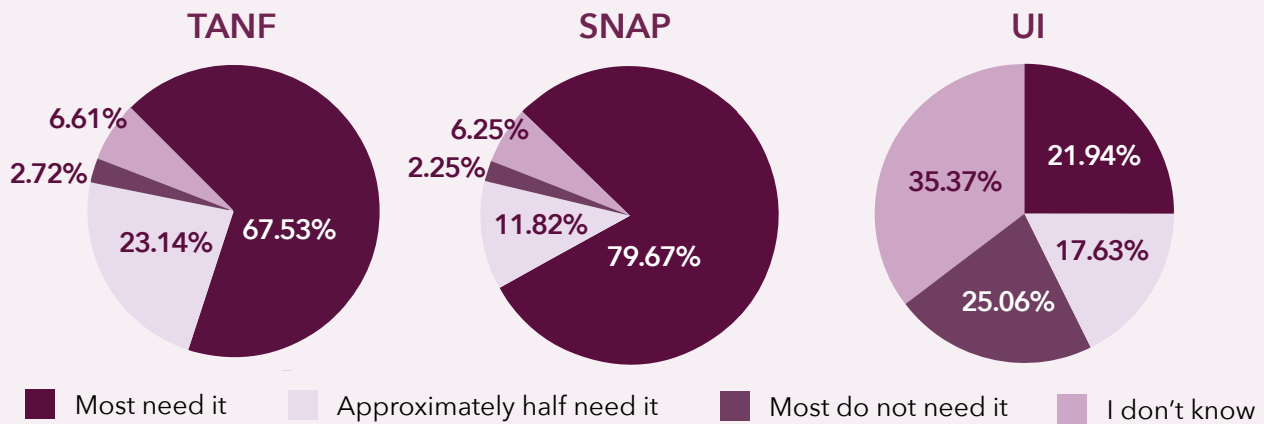
Overall, a majority of respondents said that TANF, SNAP, and UI are very critical resources for a significant number of domestic violence and sexual assault victims.¹¹ Furthermore, respondents shared that most victims rely on public benefits programs to help address their basic needs and to establish safety and stability:

In your experience, is access to the following benefits programs a critical resource for a significant number of DV and/or SA victims?

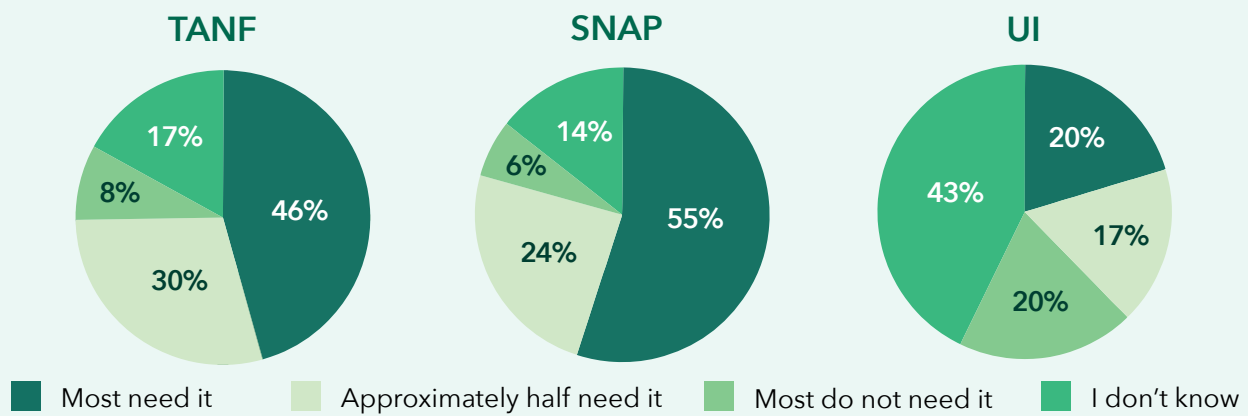


- **More than 2/3** of respondents say that **most domestic violence victims rely on TANF** to help address their basic needs and to establish safety and stability.
- **45%** of respondents report that **most sexual assault victims need TANF** to establish safety and stability.
- **Nearly 80%** of respondents report that **most domestic violence victims rely on SNAP** to help address their basic needs and to establish safety and stability.
- **55%** of respondents report that **most sexual assault victims need SNAP** to establish safety and stability.

Estimate the number of DV victims served by your agency who need the following benefits programs to help address basic needs and establish safety and stability.



Estimate the number of SA victims served by your agency who need the following benefits programs to help address basic needs and establish safety and stability.



While far fewer respondents indicated knowledge of or experience with the UI system,¹² of those that answered these survey questions:

- **Nearly 43%** of these respondents report that **at least half of domestic violence victims rely on UI** to help address their basic needs or to establish safety and stability.
- **Almost 38%** of these respondents report that at least half of **sexual assault victims need UI** to establish safety and stability.

“Access to benefits programs contributes substantially to victim-survivor empowerment and post-trauma healing because it enables victim-survivors to take steps toward addressing or remediating the trauma they have experienced while their basic needs are (at least partially) met by benefits programs.”

“The DV/SA victims we assist tell us that access to these programs has been a factor in planning how to afford to leave, and how to keep themselves and their children healthy, well, and housed.”

In general, a higher percentage of those respondents working with victims from historically marginalized populations¹³ reported that their clients need TANF, SNAP, and/or UI in order to establish safety and stability. *[Note that these respondents may or may not be working at culturally-specific organizations; the survey asked only about the demographics of the populations they serve.]* This is consistent with the higher rates of poverty, food insecurity, unstable and/or low-wage work, and other forms of economic disadvantage experienced by

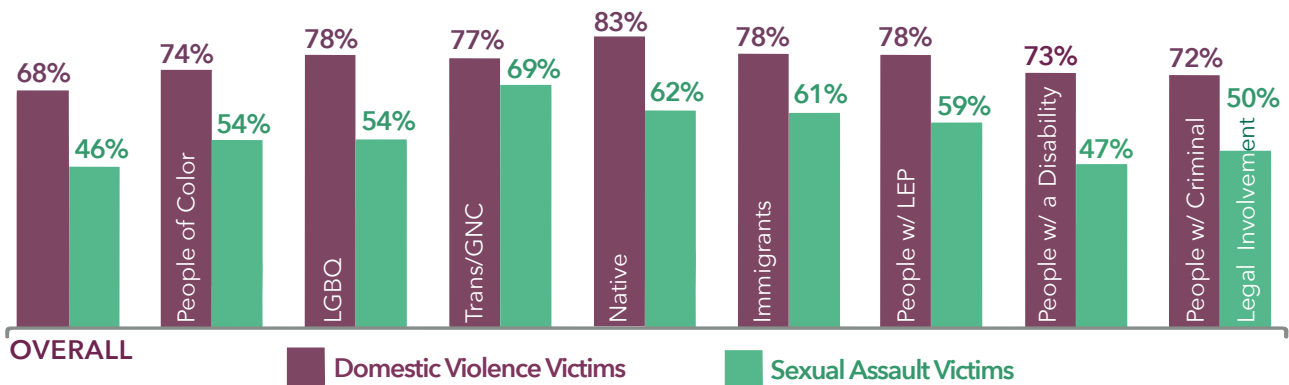
these populations.

In particular, for those whose clients are primarily (defined as at least 50%) people of color; lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer (LGBQ); transgender; Native American; immigrants; people with limited English proficiency; people with a disability; and people with a history of criminal legal system involvement, more respondents said that the victims they work with rely on TANF to help meet their basic needs.

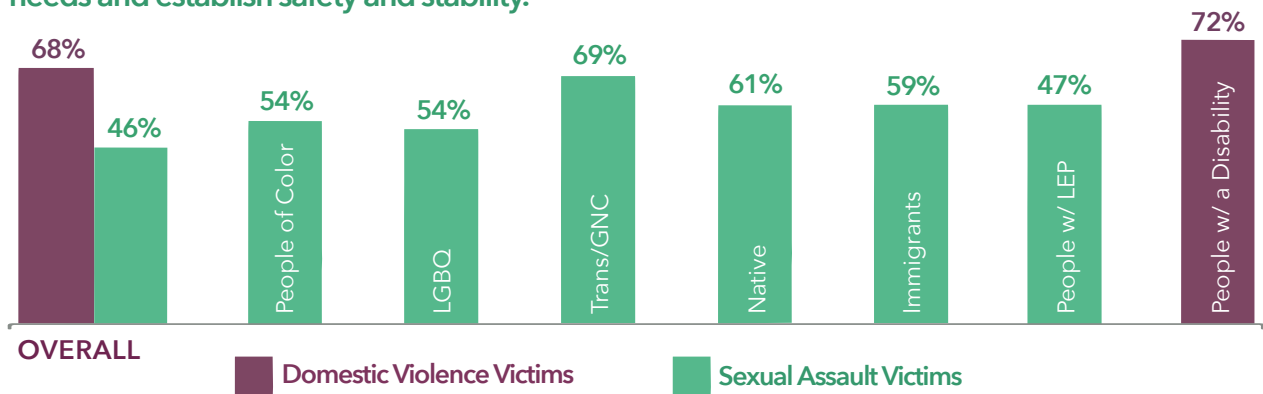
Respondents who work primarily with domestic violence victims with disabilities indicated that more of their clients rely on SNAP. Respondents working primarily with sexual assault victims who are people of color, LGBQ, transgender, Native, immigrants, and people with limited English proficiency also shared that more of their clients rely on SNAP.

With respect to unemployment insurance, a greater share of respondents whose clients are primarily LGBQ, transgender, Native, immigrants, people with limited English proficiency, people with a disability, and/or people with criminal legal system involvement reported that the victims they work with rely on UI.

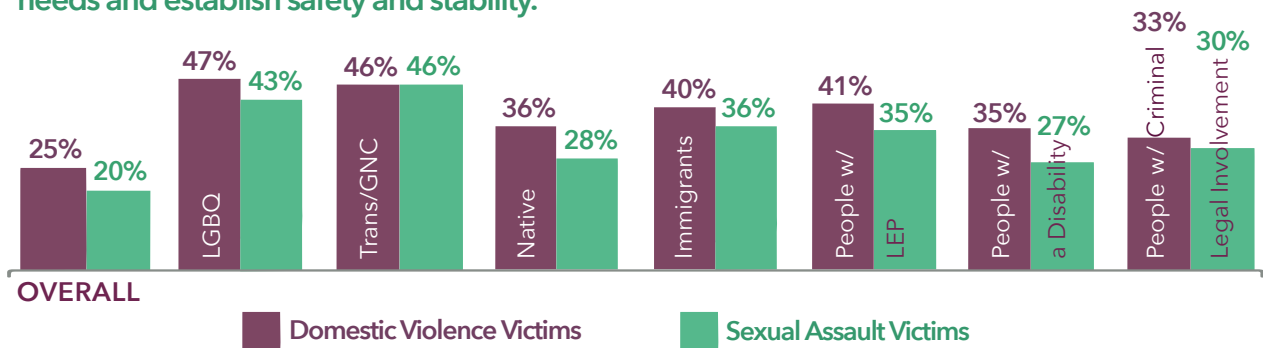
Estimate the number of victims served by your agency who need TANF to help address basic needs and establish safety and stability.



Estimate the number of victims served by your agency who need SNAP to help address basic needs and establish safety and stability.



Estimate the number of victims served by your agency who need UI to help address basic needs and establish safety and stability.



In sharing why these public benefits programs are so critical for survivors and in describing the particular role that access to benefits plays in survivors’ lives, respondents highlighted the interconnected nature of poverty and domestic and sexual violence. For example, many abusive partners, in order to exercise and maintain control over their partner and their children, will actively seek to prevent and sabotage their partner from attaining economic independence or stability by limiting their access to financial resources, interfering with employment, ruining credit, and more.¹⁴ Victims may struggle to meet basic needs and are left trapped – and economically

vulnerable – in an abusive relationship or otherwise unsafe situation. Ending an abusive relationship may mean losing not only access to a partner’s income, but also housing, employment, health care, or child care. Sexual assault can undermine a person’s economic stability over time by, for example, jeopardizing a young person’s educational attainment and an adult’s access to competitive wages and work productivity.¹⁵ Sexual assault survivors may be forced to leave their housing and/or employment as a result of the violence, and become even more at risk for sexual violence as a result.¹⁶ Furthermore, victims often incur substantial out-of-pocket costs while

navigating medical, mental health, relocation, and other systems. Survivors may also pursue legal remedies, which can be expensive, to attain safety and justice. While financial instability often means limited options to escape or reduce violence, victims who make efforts to find safety often find themselves thrust into poverty as a result.¹⁷

As one respondent noted, “Financial independence and stability is perhaps the single most important factor in helping an individual maximize safety and conversely, lack of financial stability and independence is the single biggest reason an individual may be fearful of leaving a violent relationship.”

Despite public benefits programs being so clearly identified as vital resources for victims, respondents describe varying levels of access to these programs.

Less than half of respondents report that most domestic violence survivors they work with are able to access TANF when they need it, and even fewer say that sexual assault survivors can access TANF. More positively, a majority of respondents say that most domestic violence and sexual assault victims they work with are able to access SNAP when they need it. While approximately half of respondents were not sure whether the victims they work with are able to access UI when they need it, **about 20%** reported that victims were not able to access UI.

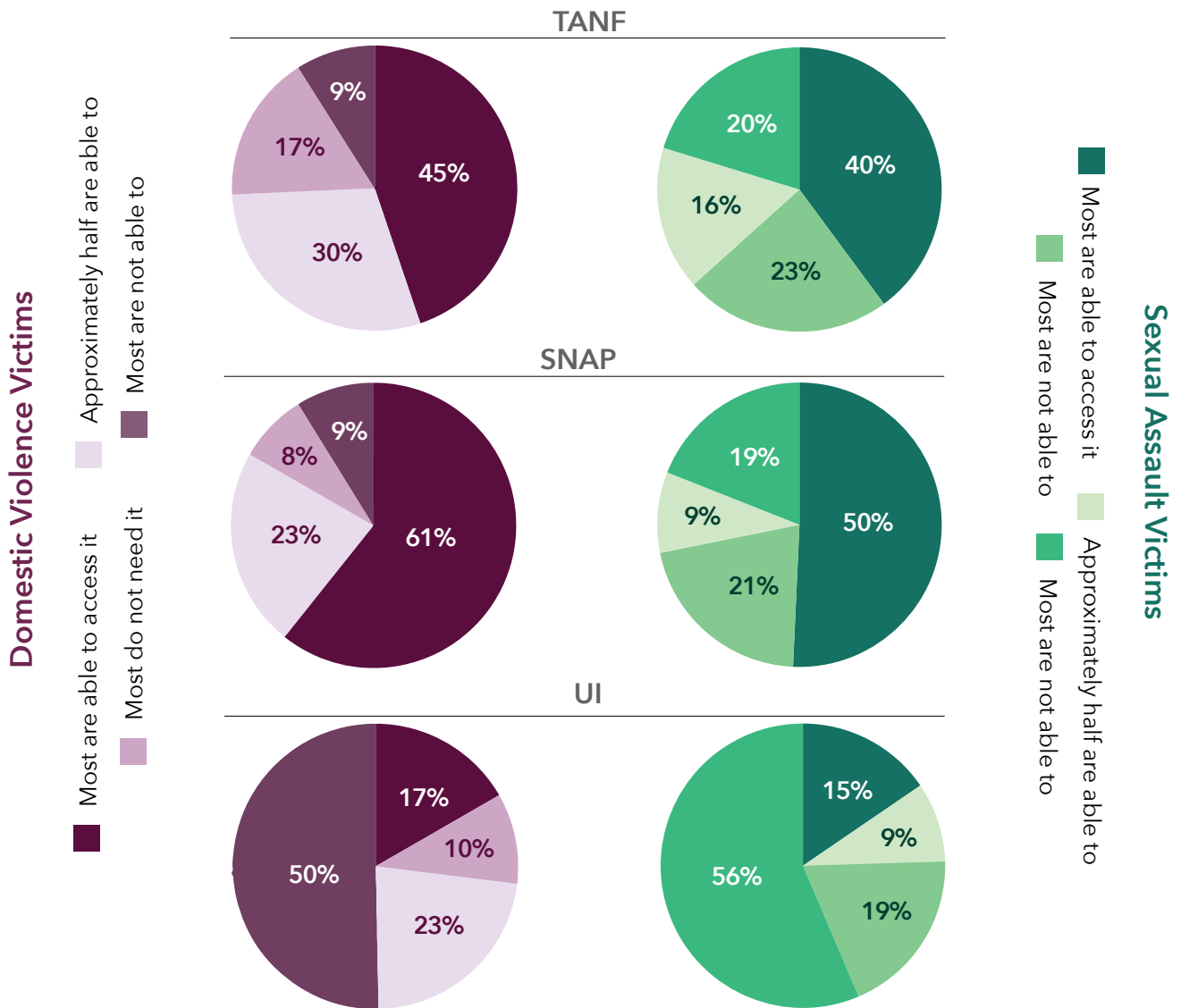
“Often abusers use financial means to control their victims; many who flee abusive relationships do not have access to money of their own. This is a MAJOR reason why people, especially people with children, do not leave. Having access to receipt of benefits allows people who flee to pick up their lives faster, and feel safer faster.”

“Sexual assault often impacts an individual’s ability to work for a variety of reasons. Many survivors end up relocating as a result of their victimization. When they cannot support themselves and/or their families, these financial benefits are often their only recourse.”

“For many survivors, jobs, housing, and financial stability can be affected by abusive situations and relationships. Many survivors have the skills and ability to secure jobs, and secure housing, but TANF and SNAP can be invaluable in the interim between leaving an abuser and feeling stable and safe.”

A higher percentage of respondents¹⁸ who primarily work with LGBTQ people, transgender people, immigrants, and people with Limited English Proficiency report that their clients struggle to access TANF and SNAP benefits when they need them. Respondents who work primarily with people with disabilities also report that more of the people they serve struggle to access TANF.¹⁹ Interestingly, UI seems to be slightly easier to access for victims who are LGBTQ or transgender, although somewhat more difficult to access for victims with a disability or a history of criminal legal system involvement.

Estimate the number of DV and/or SA victims served by your agency who are able to access the following benefits when they need them.



Voices from the Field

“SNAP [helps my clients] because it is accessible. TANF could be a vital support but the barriers to accessing it are a real problem.”

“Most victims may not think they are eligible for unemployment due to DV/SA.”

Moreover, a majority of respondents say that at least half of the victims they work with need assistance from an advocate in order to access benefits, explaining that these programs can be difficult to navigate, especially for those who are recovering from the crisis and trauma of abuse or assault. They reported that this resulted from numerous factors, including difficulty understanding the application process, documentation and other requirements

that are burdensome for victims, shifting rules for program compliance, and/or other reasons.

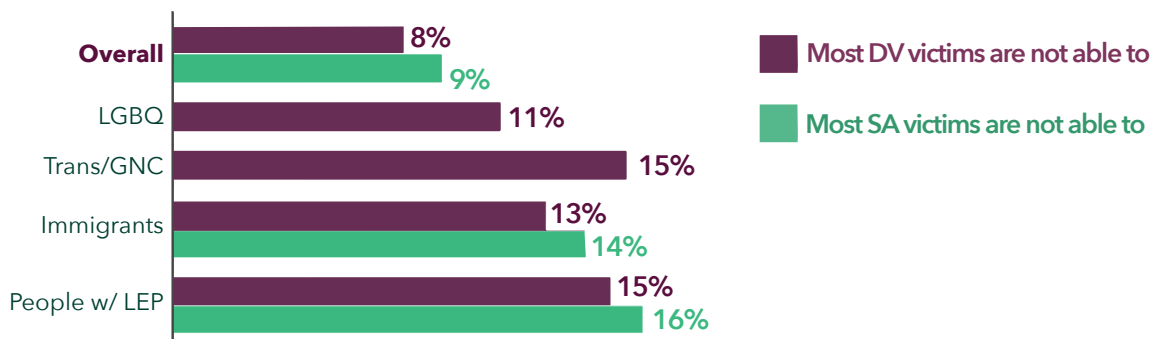
Also, while this report focuses on TANF, SNAP, and UI, it is worth noting that respondents indicated that housing assistance, Medicaid and Medicare, and Social Security and Social Security Disability Insurance also rank highly among those programs that consistently help victims the most (in some cases, more consistently than TANF, SNAP, or UI). In addition, a substantial majority of respondents (65.2%) said that at

“Victims have experienced extensive trauma and therefore accessing these services can be an overwhelming and time-consuming ordeal for them in addition to the other circumstances they are navigating (finding safe shelter, obtaining medical care, obtaining temporary protective orders, attending therapy, ensuring the needs of their children are being met). We should strive to make these programs more user-friendly and streamlined.”

Estimate the number of victims served by your agency who are not able to access TANF benefits when they need them



Estimate the number of victims served by your agency who are not able to access SNAP benefits when they need them

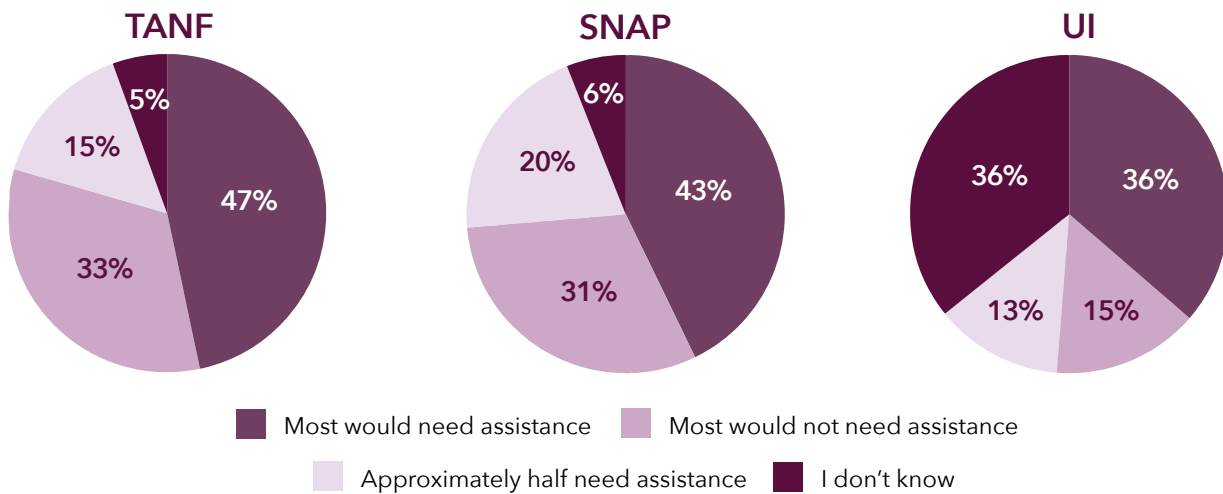


least half of the individuals they serve receive more than one type of benefit, suggesting both how difficult it is for survivors to attain financial stability and how vital each of these programs is to the economic security of individuals and families.

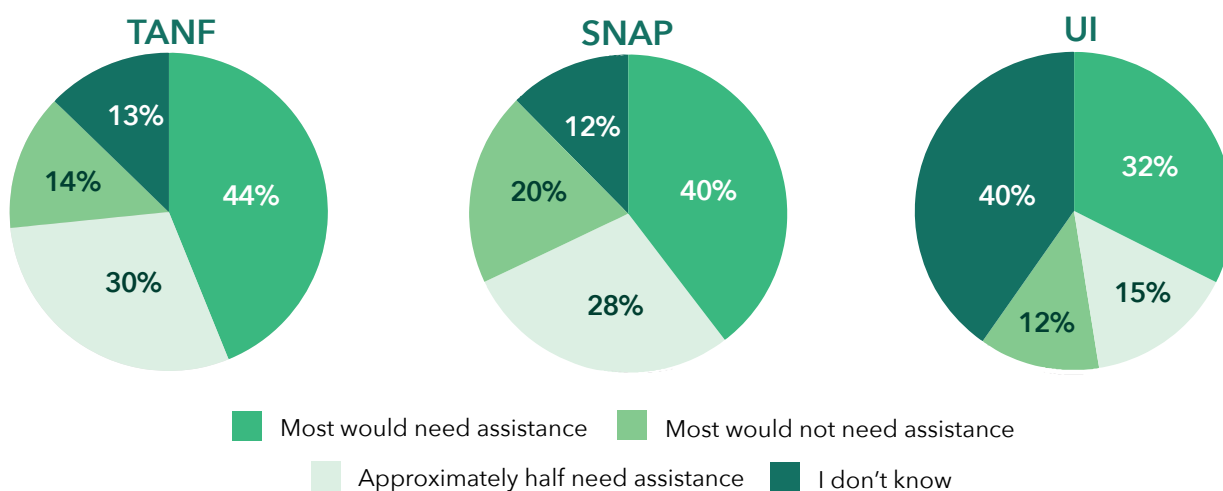
“TANF fails most women with children because it is difficult to access and has too many hoops to jump through for a small amount of funding. This process is frustrating and intrusive for most and doesn't allow for real assistance with the reality faced by the cycle of poverty.”

Estimate the number of DV and/or SA victims served by your agency who would need assistance from you or another advocate to access the following benefit programs.

Domestic Violence Victims



Sexual Assault Victims



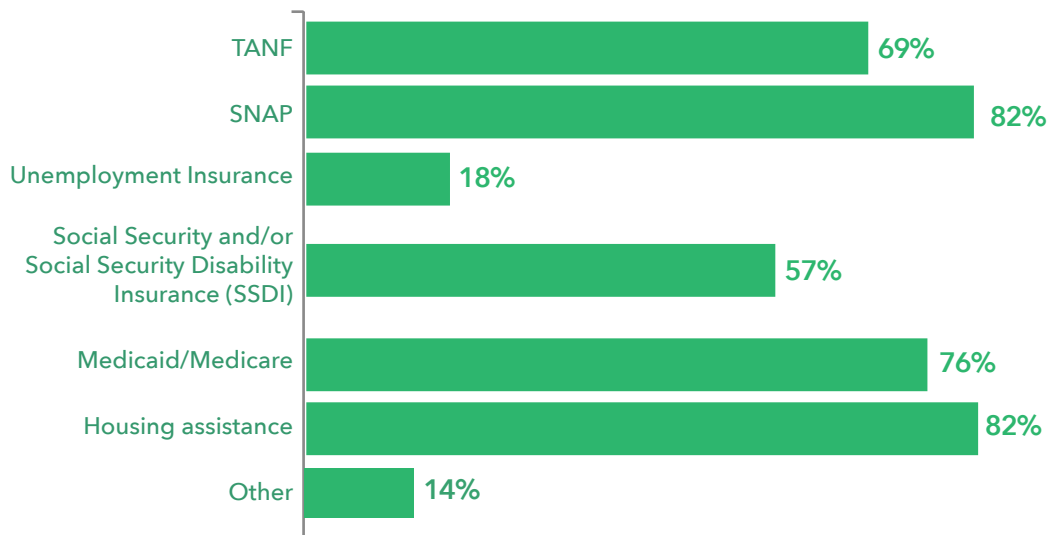
Voices from the Field

“Access to housing assistance is critical for DV survivors. Without it, they often struggle to both afford a place to live and with finding landlords willing to rent to them. Access to Medicaid is equally valuable, as health care is another benefit many survivors cannot afford as they leave abusive relationships and may be facing multiple physical and mental health challenges stemming from exposure to long-term abuse. TANF and SNAP can also be vital to helping survivors become financially independent, as many were prevented from working and have spotty employment histories. Childcare assistance also helps survivors find work, as many have multiple young children and limited or no support in finding care for them.”

“The combination of housing, health care (physical and mental), food, and transportation is crucial to giving someone time to acclimate to a new (and healthy) normal. Once they adapt to the change, they are able to build confidence and pride and independent financial stability. This only works with consistent, well-rounded support.”

“Housing assistance, TANF, SNAP and Medicaid – all of these services are especially helpful to victims who are often displaced and in need of immediate general welfare services to stabilize their own and their children’s lives. Many victims do not have a good support system in family and/or friends, and could not meet their most basic needs without these programs.”

Which set of benefits consistently helps your clients the most? (Please check all that apply.)



In the sections that follow, the report explores specific aspects of TANF, SNAP, and UI in relationship to survivors' safety and economic stability. Included are discussions of those parts of each system that are working well and addressing survivors' needs and those parts that are not functioning well, specific barriers victims encounter when trying to access public benefits, collaboration between domestic violence and sexual assault advocates and public benefits systems and staff, policy priorities identified by survey respondents, and practice and policy recommendations to further strengthen survivors' access to these vital public benefits programs.

Voices from the Field

“The trauma of domestic violence and sexual assault exacts a complex, multifaceted, and ongoing toll on the lives of victims and survivors. Benefits programs such as TANF, SNAP, and unemployment insurance constitute a vital safety net for victims who are struggling to meet their basic needs and/or support their dependents and families. The experience of trauma can derail a victim's stability (financial, familial, and otherwise) and, if not adequately addressed, consume nearly all facets of a victim's life, with often-catastrophic consequences. Access to benefits programs contributes substantially to survivor empowerment and post-trauma healing because it enables victims to take steps toward addressing or remediating the trauma they have experienced while their basic needs are (at least partially) met by benefits programs.”

TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE FOR NEEDY FAMILIES (TANF)

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) is the federal welfare program for families with children. Under TANF, the federal government provides a fixed level of grant funding to the states, and each state then develops and administers its own TANF program (and this program may be called different things at the state level). States must spend their own resources as well, though more than half of TANF spending comes from the federal government. About one fourth of total TANF spending is on cash assistance. Although states must comply with some federal TANF requirements such as time limits on benefits, work requirements, and the pursuit of child support, each state determines the rules and scope of its program. For example, each state defines which families are eligible and determines the amount of benefits provided to eligible families. The 1996 law establishing TANF placed a number of requirements and responsibilities on recipients. At the same time, the law included a provision called the Family Violence Option (FVO) that acknowledged the unique challenges facing victims of family violence who live in poverty. States may voluntarily adopt the FVO as part of the TANF plan. By adopting the FVO, a state certifies that it will screen to identify domestic violence victims while maintaining their confidentiality, will refer victims to supportive services, and will waive program requirements such as time limits on receipt of benefits, work requirements, or cooperation with child support enforcement if those requirements make it more difficult to escape the violence or would unfairly penalize the victim. All states have either formally certified adoption of the FVO or reported to the federal government adoption of a comparable policy. More information on TANF is available from the [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#).²⁰

Nearly **85% of survey respondents** indicated that TANF is a very critical resource for a significant number of domestic violence and sexual assault victims. More specifically:

- **More than 2/3** of respondents say that **most domestic violence victims rely on TANF** to help address their basic needs and to establish safety and stability.
- **45%** of respondents report that **most sexual assault victims need TANF** to establish safety and stability.

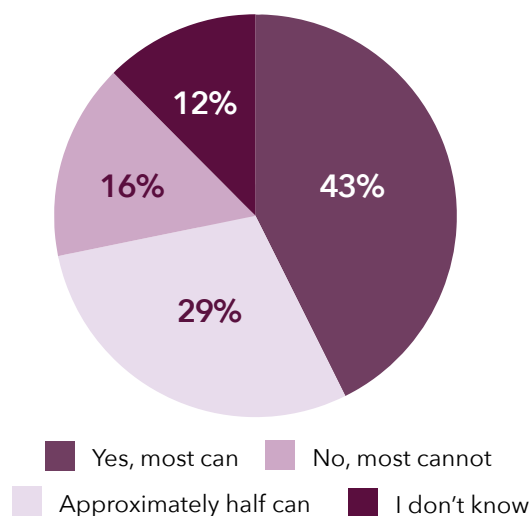
And while **42.6% of respondents** said that, generally speaking, most domestic violence victims can safely and effectively access TANF, over **15% of respondents** said that most cannot. Similarly, **16.5% of respondents** said that most sexual assault victims cannot safely access TANF, while approximately one-third said that most can.

Voices from the Field

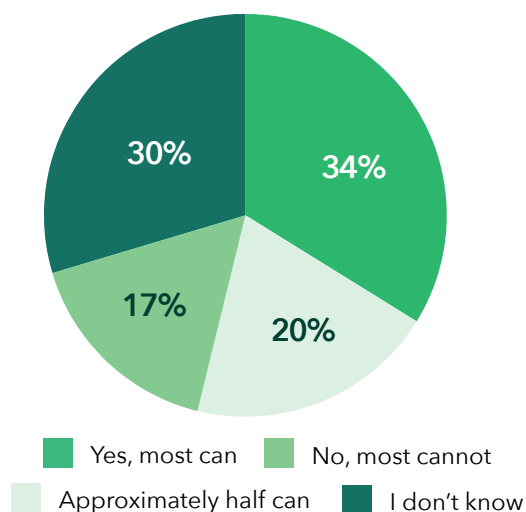
“I know most of our clients depend heavily on TANF services to get by. It’s crucial for them to have this support when leaving a domestic violence situation.”

In your experience, can DV and/or SA victims safely and effectively access TANF?

Domestic Violence Victims



Sexual Assault Victims

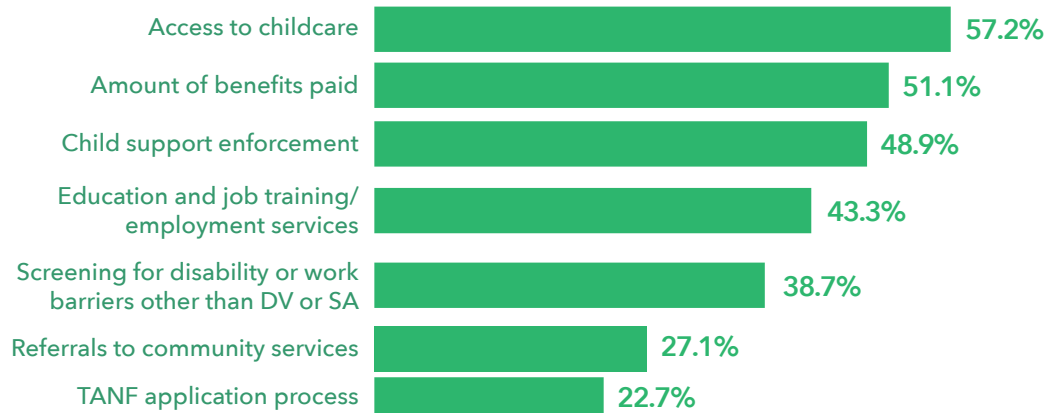


Despite TANF being essential for survivors’ financial security and safety, very few respondents report that any part of the TANF process works well for victims. The most highly rated component of TANF was referrals to community services, but only **15% of respondents** said that works well. Respondents indicated that the TANF system seems to work best when there are domestic violence or sexual assault advocates located on-site, since they “... help clients navigate the system, which is often hard for some clients to navigate on

their own. The partnership that the DV/SA agency has with the DSHS [Department of State Health Services] is positive and strong and it helps so that we engage well with the clients in helping them get their needs met.”

However, a significant number shared that many components of the TANF system do not work well for victims, including the amount of benefits paid, access to child care, child support enforcement requirements, and education and job training or employment services.

Percentage of advocates responding that the following parts of the TANF system do not work well for victims.



Voices from the Field

“The dollar amount of benefits and the immediate reduction upon a victim entering the workforce makes the transition from TANF to self-sufficiency difficult for many to accomplish. It would be helpful for benefits to continue for a longer period of time. Housing costs are out of reach for many in our area, including those that are employed full-time and not receiving TANF assistance; for those working to reach self-sufficiency, the system makes it quite difficult.”

“The amount of benefits is not adequate for what someone needs to survive and certainly not enough to reestablish a new home while searching for child care and a job. Unreasonable expectations leave victims feeling hopeless and defeated, and some return to the abuser as it is impossible to get by without them.”

“The TANF system assumes that people who are victims of domestic violence will not

have struggles when it comes to obtaining child care when applying for TANF and completing orientation. Orientation with TANF is a lengthy process. TANF makes it very clear that children are not allowed at the orientation. TANF does not realize that some domestic violence victims have left their home and are currently living in an area with no support system. This means they are forced to leave their children with complete strangers. This alone can be traumatizing for a person who already does not feel safe. This is also assuming that this person can find a stranger to watch their children.”

In addition, very few respondents reported that any part of the TANF Family Violence Option (FVO) or the other domestic violence and sexual assault specific parts of the TANF system work well. More respondents indicated that the components of the system, specifically developed in response to the unique needs of victims, are working just “ok” (although not well) – particularly screening for domestic violence (**33.0%**),

referrals to local DV/SA programs (**32.4%**), extension of time limits due to domestic violence (**27.3%**), and domestic violence-specific services or safety planning within the TANF system (**27.2%**).

Voices from the Field

“We have a decent referral process in our community with many community partners helping each other out.”

“We are fortunate to have a good relationship with the DV specialist at the TANF office, which provides us and the clients with support and guidance. However, at times, due to established policies, certain options are still unavailable to a client depending on their circumstances. It's on a case-by-case basis.”

A significant number of respondents, however, indicated that core components of the FVO do not work well for victims, noting problems with notification about the FVO, screening for sexual assault specifically, exemptions from work or other requirements due to domestic violence or sexual assault, and exemptions from the child support enforcement cooperation requirements. For example, one advocate stated, “The screening for DV/SA is not done with any sensitivity to privacy concerns and there is no explanation of what options are available for survivors.” As another shared, “Sometimes forcing victims to pursue child support is dangerous. Sometimes not having the offending parent involved is the safest thing for everyone.”

“As far as I know, our county's TANF system does not inform victims that they are exempt from the work requirement due to domestic violence. In our rural area, there is no public transportation either which is a huge barrier for victims to gain and keep employment. Furthermore, many victims have not been in the work force for years because their abusers will not allow them to work. Some are stalked at work by their abusers. Therefore, it is not always feasible or safe for victims of domestic violence to get a job.”

“One particular issue that we have run into is clients' difficulty in receiving an exemption from the child support requirement, due to sexual assault. I have had clients sanctioned for not cooperating with child support, due to their perpetrator being the father of the child. Given that our local prosecution rate for sexual assault and rape is only 3%, it is rare that victims of sexual assault have legal proof that the pregnancy was caused by rape, which makes it very difficult for them to fight against the father's parenting rights.”

“Caseworkers do not provide information about the Family Violence Option. There is strong resistance to granting exemptions from the work requirement or the time requirement. Our child support agency almost never advises people that they do not have to seek child support if doing so would place the person in danger. Our caseworkers also seem to believe that [the DV/SA] must be physical, recent, with witnesses and a police report, while our law says that they must accept the victim's assertion of domestic or sexual violence with good faith.”

Percentage of respondents indicating that the following parts of the TANF Family Violence Option (FVO) and other DV and/or SA responses do not work well for victims.



Respondents also described as problematic the documentation that many TANF offices require of victims in order to utilize the FVO or other DV/SA-specific extensions or exemptions available, and the difficulty that many victims have in providing such documentation. Victims “must regularly prove they are still in need of the exemption

by providing police reports, protective orders, and/or letters from domestic violence advocates that they still providing supportive services (although in some cases, that letter is not sufficient). This pressures victims to pursue legal options which may actually put a victim more at risk.”

“Our state and county TANF system does not appear to have good information about the things they can and cannot do. They often ask victims to prove they are being abused by forcing people experiencing DV to prove they have left their abuser by producing legal proof that they are no longer with that partner. This legal proof comes in the form of a protection order or a legal document proving they are “separated.” As a domestic violence advocate, I can tell you that a protection from abuse order is not always the best solution to the problem of domestic violence. For some abusers, this can raise the danger to a lethal level.”

“DV victims seem to be more judged and penalized than given provisions towards assistance.”

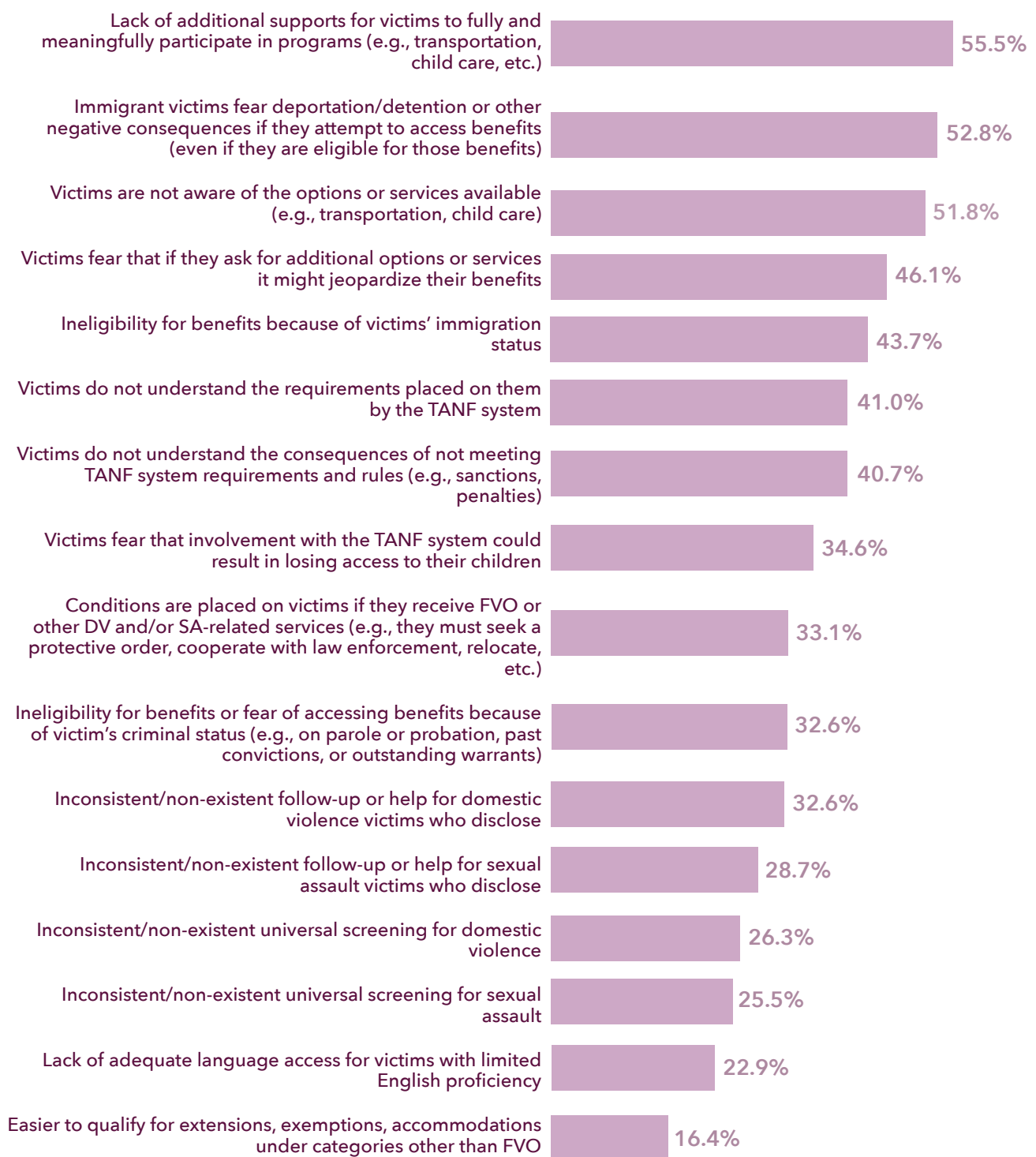
In addition, respondents identified a number of other significant barriers to TANF access for victims including lack of transportation or child care, which makes it difficult for victims to meet with caseworkers, obtain or keep a job, or otherwise meet the requirements of TANF; fear of deportation or detention if immigrant victims try to access TANF (even for those entitled to the benefit); and victims’ fear that if they ask for FVO or other options or supports it might jeopardize their benefits.

“The in-person meeting requirements and orientations can be very difficult for people without reliable transportation or stable housing.”

“The online work training is also an obstacle for victims with children. These victims do not have access to internet at home/ shelter. They are limited to going to a library (when available) while their children are with them, with the expectation that they can remain focused. They are given the option to use the computer at the TANF office, however, again, children are not allowed to go, creating a struggle for childcare. TANF only provides reimbursement for child care AFTER they have completed the application process and orientation. This becomes difficult for the beginning of the process and to pay child care up front. The process of getting assistance becomes extremely difficult for those requesting it.”

As a reflection of the difficulties victims encounter in the TANF system, approximately **75% of respondents** said that a majority of the victims with whom they work need assistance from an advocate or other service provider in trying to obtain benefits. While this assistance plays a valuable role, for some victims it may not be enough to overcome the significant barriers described above. Far too often, then, survivors struggle to get the TANF benefits that they need to find safety and to begin to build the long-term financial stability necessary to care for themselves and their families.

Percentage of respondents indicating that the following is frequently a reason why victims do not access TANF, lose TANF, or do not get the full range of services that TANF might offer.



“[TANF] is pivotal to clients in crisis. If it was easier to obtain, and clients knew about the [Family Violence Option], it could really change lives.”

“The exemption of some required information on the TANF application and from some of the TANF requirements allows victims proper time to address the effects of trauma caused by domestic violence and sexual assault. These exemptions also aid in the safety of victims who are fleeing from their abuser.”

“People that are in need aren’t trying to run a scam on the government. They need TANF in order to better themselves and children. It takes a lot of courage for most people to access benefits...a lot of people are proud and don’t want to need it, but do.”

SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP)

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly food stamps, provides nutritional support to low-wage working families, low-income seniors, and people with disabilities living on fixed incomes. The federal government pays the full cost of SNAP benefits and splits the cost of administering the program with the states, which operate the program (and SNAP may be called different things at the state level). SNAP eligibility rules and benefit levels are almost entirely set at the federal level, although states have some flexibility to adjust some aspects of the program (such as the value of a vehicle a household may own and still qualify for benefits). States may also seek temporary waivers from the time limits on benefits that apply to able-bodied adults without dependents, for example in areas where there is high unemployment. Eligibility is generally determined within 30 days, though in some cases it may be determined within one week. The monthly SNAP benefit is provided through EBT (Electronic Benefit Transfer) cards and can be provided to people without a permanent address, including people living in shelter. SNAP benefits generally must be used for grocery purchases, although a small number of states have chosen to allow SNAP use at restaurants by recipients who are elderly, disabled, or homeless in some cases. More information on SNAP is available from the [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#).

Over **88% of respondents** say that SNAP is a very critical resource for a significant number of domestic violence and sexual assault victims. More specifically:

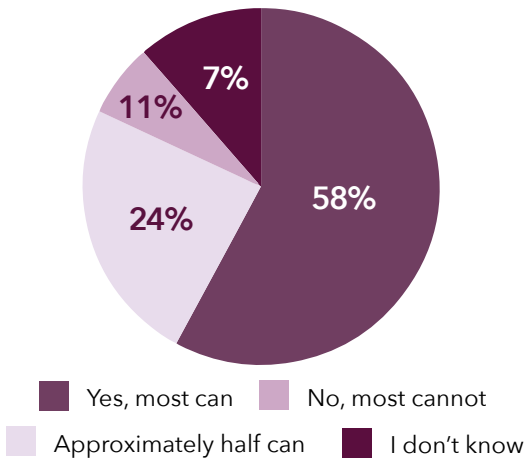
- **Nearly 80% of respondents** report that **most domestic violence victims rely on SNAP** to help address their basic needs and to establish safety and stability.
- **55% of respondents** report that **most sexual assault victims need SNAP** to

establish safety and stability.

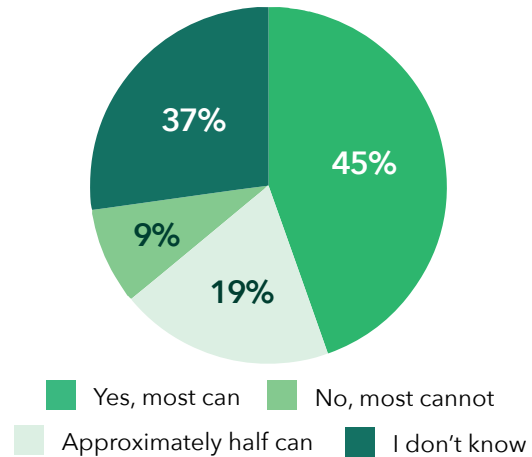
In addition, a majority of respondents (**57.9%**) said that, generally speaking, **most domestic violence victims** can safely and effectively access SNAP, although **6.7% of respondents** said that most *cannot*. Similarly, **44.6% of respondents** said that **most sexual assault victims** could safely access SNAP, while **8.8%** said that most cannot.

In your experience, can DV and/or SA victims safely and effectively access SNAP?

Domestic Violence Victims



Sexual Assault Victims



Voices from the Field

“SNAP is a life-line for domestic violence victims. Most DV clients I have worked with leave only with the clothes on their backs or whatever they can carry, [and] SNAP provides one of life’s necessities [without which they would] return to a very bad situation. It is an essential program that victims could not do without.”

A majority of respondents say that most domestic violence and sexual assault victims are able to access SNAP when they need it, with many reporting that the ease of the application process and the ability to use benefits at a variety of accessible stores and vendors make SNAP particularly useful for survivors. Respondents also identified other components of the SNAP system as working moderately well, at a minimum, including the timing and process of recertification and referrals to other available benefits programs.

“The victim never has to be present in the office, all paperwork can be faxed in and the original application can be turned in online. These factors make it very safe and convenient for victims to apply and meet the requirements of the program.”

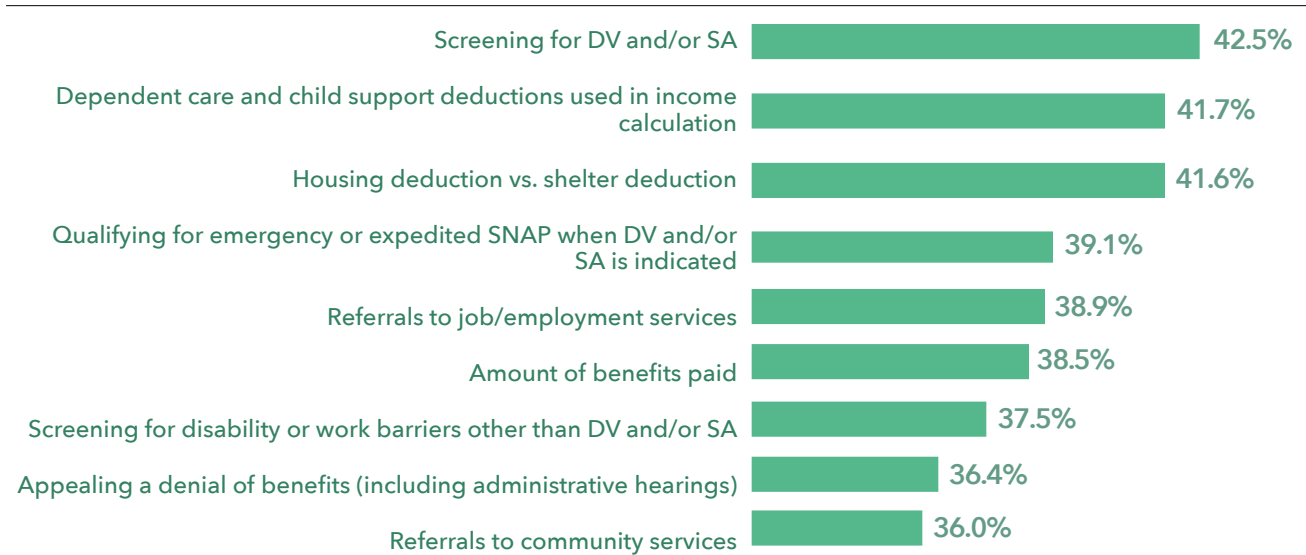
“We do have many stores that take SNAP that are located all around town, so finding a place to use benefits is easy.”

However, respondents also identified that many critical components of the SNAP process fall short for victims, including screening for domestic violence and sexual assault, the dependent care and child support deductions used in income calculation, the ability to qualify for emergency or expedited SNAP when DV/SA is indicated, referrals to job or employment services, and screening for disability or work barriers other than DV/SA. In addition, while many respondents shared that in general, the amount of SNAP benefits is “sufficient” (particularly when compared to TANF), a significant number noted that the amount is

inadequate for people with children, as well as for those who live in rural areas, food deserts, or temporary housing situations. As one respondent expressed, "The amount is only sufficient for families who have access

to a kitchen to prepare their food and are able to find transportation to stores. If a family has to eat on the go or is unable to store perishables (for example in a hotel), it is not enough money."

Percentage of respondents indicating that the following parts of the SNAP system do not work well for victims.



Voices from the Field

"Unfortunately, sometimes it can take up to 4 weeks for a client to receive SNAP benefits, and that is a long time to try to scrounge for food for a family with children involved. Most of the time, the victims (who are usually women) go without food because there isn't enough for all family members and they want their children fed."

"Victims are sometimes required to go to the DHS office in person if they lose their SNAP card and cannot navigate the phone system. This is a problem for rural victims due to lack of transportation and a small DHS office where the abuser can find or access the victim easily."

"The lack of resources in rural counties makes it difficult to access supportive

services with this program and the dollar amount of benefit is inadequate as food is quite expensive in rural and isolated areas."

"The lack of referrals and screening for domestic or sexual violence when victims apply for SNAP benefits [is a problem], and DHSS's unwillingness to account for violent and abusive behaviors surrounding the SNAP benefits (like taking someone's EBT card, forcing a victim to share the PIN) leave survivors without resources when they leave an abuser."

"When victims have to forfeit present benefits because of snags in paperwork, this does not work... Giving victims time to prepare for that 'payback' may be a way to alleviate the stress on a family's budget."

Additionally, respondents identified a variety of barriers that keep domestic violence and sexual assault victims from safely accessing SNAP benefits, or that serve as reasons why victims may lose benefits or not get the full range of services SNAP provides. The most frequently reported barriers include lack of supports like transportation or childcare; ineligibility for benefits because of immigration status or fear of deportation, detention, or other negative consequences when trying to access SNAP; application documentation requirements; and the work and training requirements, particularly for victims without children. As respondents explained, victims often “must follow [a] safety plan, must connect with [a] support agency, must follow work requirements,” and “are often required to provide documentation (protection order, police report, court docs, or letter from a DV/SA program),” without regard for how difficult this may be for survivors or the valid reasons why survivors may not be able to meet those expectations or requirements.²¹

Another significant barrier arises when victims attempt to leave an abuser where they both had been recipients of SNAP benefits in the same household. In particular, respondents noted challenges related to separating the cases in a timely way, replacing benefits lost when a victim flees, and the sharing of confidential information (such as address or location) when a victim leaves. As one respondent explained, “It is almost always very, very difficult to separate the cases and provide documentation that the SNAP office needs to obtain an EBT card.”

“In my experience, victims need to reapply and ensure that SNAP is aware that they are no longer considered one household, otherwise abusers receive all the assistance and spend it without victims’ consent. If abusers spend that money, my clients have not received replacements for the food benefits. The process to separate cases or replace benefits is too lengthy and often cuts access for at least a month, if not two, for victims.”

“With relocation to different counties [for safety reasons], applications and transfers are not always done in a fast manner, causing victims to risk safety in order to get their application and benefits transferred. It can take a while to separate the household and most never get the benefits that were lost. I personally have witnessed an intake worker tell a victim to ask her abuser for food. EBT cards take so long to get and I have seen several cases where an EBT card has taken weeks to arrive, [or] where a victim has had to cancel and get a card re-issued because they never received a card.”

Respondents also identified particular challenges and complications that arise for victims trying to access SNAP while living in a domestic violence shelter program, specifically around the misapplication of the shelter deduction and resulting inaccurate benefit calculations.²² Respondents described situations where victims “get sanctioned if they are in shelter even when there are policies that say that they should not be sanctioned because they are in

shelter,” as well as “delays in benefits as they change to shelter deductions vs. housing deductions and then another delay in benefits when the situation changes back.

This regularly leaves people without food for up to two weeks on both sides of their benefits changing.”

Percentage of respondents indicating that the following is frequently a reason why victims do not access SNAP, lose SNAP, or do not get the full range of services that SNAP might offer.



“Victims often receive less of the SNAP benefit while living in shelter, but I have had more issues with victims losing benefits due to saving them while staying in shelter. They have to use a certain amount each month or else their case is closed and they lose all of their saved benefits. Many women would save food stamp benefits to use when starting out after leaving shelter.”

“Most victims that we see get \$16 a month in benefits when they are in the shelter. A mom with children would get more but it is still a substantial reduction. There is no attempt made to find out whether or not the shelter serves meals. There is no attempt to find out or adjust if someone has a medical condition requiring a special diet.”

Similar to TANF, and as a reflection of the difficulties victims encounter in the SNAP system, approximately **70% of respondents** said that a majority of the victims with whom they work need assistance from an advocate or other service provider in trying to obtain benefits. While this assistance is critical, for some victims it may not be enough to overcome the considerable barriers described above. Far too often, then, survivors struggle to get the SNAP benefits that they need to find safety and to begin to build the long-term financial stability necessary to care for themselves and their families.

“SNAP is extremely helpful and needed for survivors on their way to becoming self-sustaining after fleeing, and in planning to flee DV and SA situations. This is sometimes hindered because of [SNAP] policies.”

“Food insecurity is a huge issue with the majority of individuals and their children fleeing DV situations.”

“It could be disastrous to victims if we removed the guarantee of benefits to everyone eligible - without SNAP benefits many victims and their families may not be able to eat, let alone consider the economic challenge of leaving a bread-winning abusive partner.”

“Everyone deserves to be able to eat healthy meals daily...Most DV and SA victims just need a little assistance, and they want to be treated with respect and dignity until they can do it on their own again.”

UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE (UI)

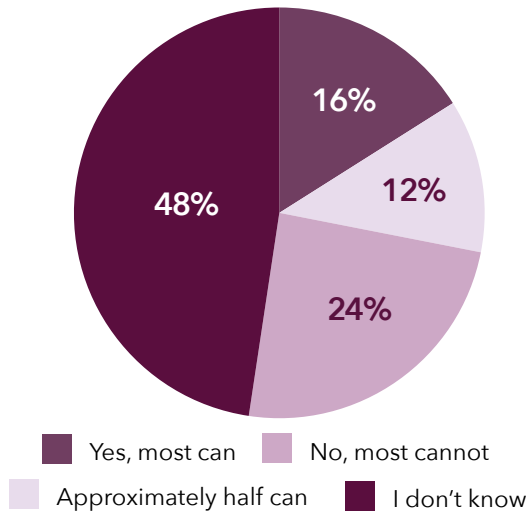
Created in 1935, the federal-state unemployment insurance system (UI) helps people who have lost their jobs through no fault of their own and are eligible for benefits by temporarily replacing part of their wages. UI operates as a form of social insurance, with contributions being paid into the system on behalf of working people. UI is run and implemented by the states; states provide most of the funding for UI and pay for the actual benefits provided. While the federal government provides oversight to the program and imposes a few federal requirements, states generally set their own eligibility criteria and benefit levels. UI benefit levels are generally intended to replace about half of a worker's prior earnings, and are paid weekly, not monthly. UI eligibility for domestic violence and sexual assault victims [varies from state to state](#), and in some states may be available only through policy or practice and not by statute. More information on unemployment insurance is available from the [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#).

While **54% of respondents** say that unemployment insurance (UI) is a very critical resource for a significant number of domestic violence and sexual assault victims, the survey data overall indicate that respondents have limited experiences working with the UI system and are unclear about what role it does or could play in victims' lives. This seems to mirror survivors' own lack of familiarity with UI and how it could be beneficial, as one advocate stated, "If clients are aware and can access the system, the [UI] benefits are very helpful, [but] most are not aware they can access the system."

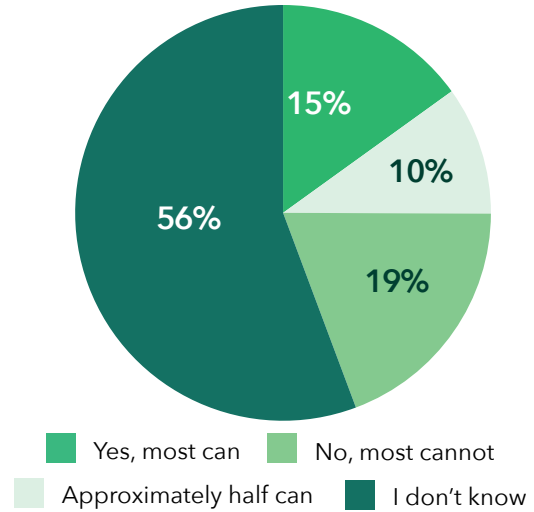
For example, approximately half of respondents indicated that they did not know whether or not domestic violence or sexual assault victims are able to safely and effectively access UI. However, of the remaining respondents, about one-quarter said that most domestic violence victims do not have safe access to UI, and nearly 1 in 5 respondents said the same is true for most sexual assault victims.

In your experience, can DV and/or SA victims safely and effectively access UI?

Domestic Violence Victims



Sexual Assault Victims



At the same time, nearly **43% of respondents** report that at least half of domestic violence victims rely on UI to help address their basic needs or to establish safety and stability, and almost **38%** report that at least half of sexual assault victims need UI to establish safety and stability.

For those respondents who had engaged with the UI process and system on behalf of survivors, the components most frequently identified as working well or moderately well include the application process (**41.2%**); referrals to job, training, or re-employment services (**39.5%**); the amount of benefits paid (**36.0%**); and the duration of benefits (**35.6%**). Respondents shared, for example, that “the application process is quite simple,” and “the administrative part works well - filing appeals, getting hearings, etc.”

Voices from the Field

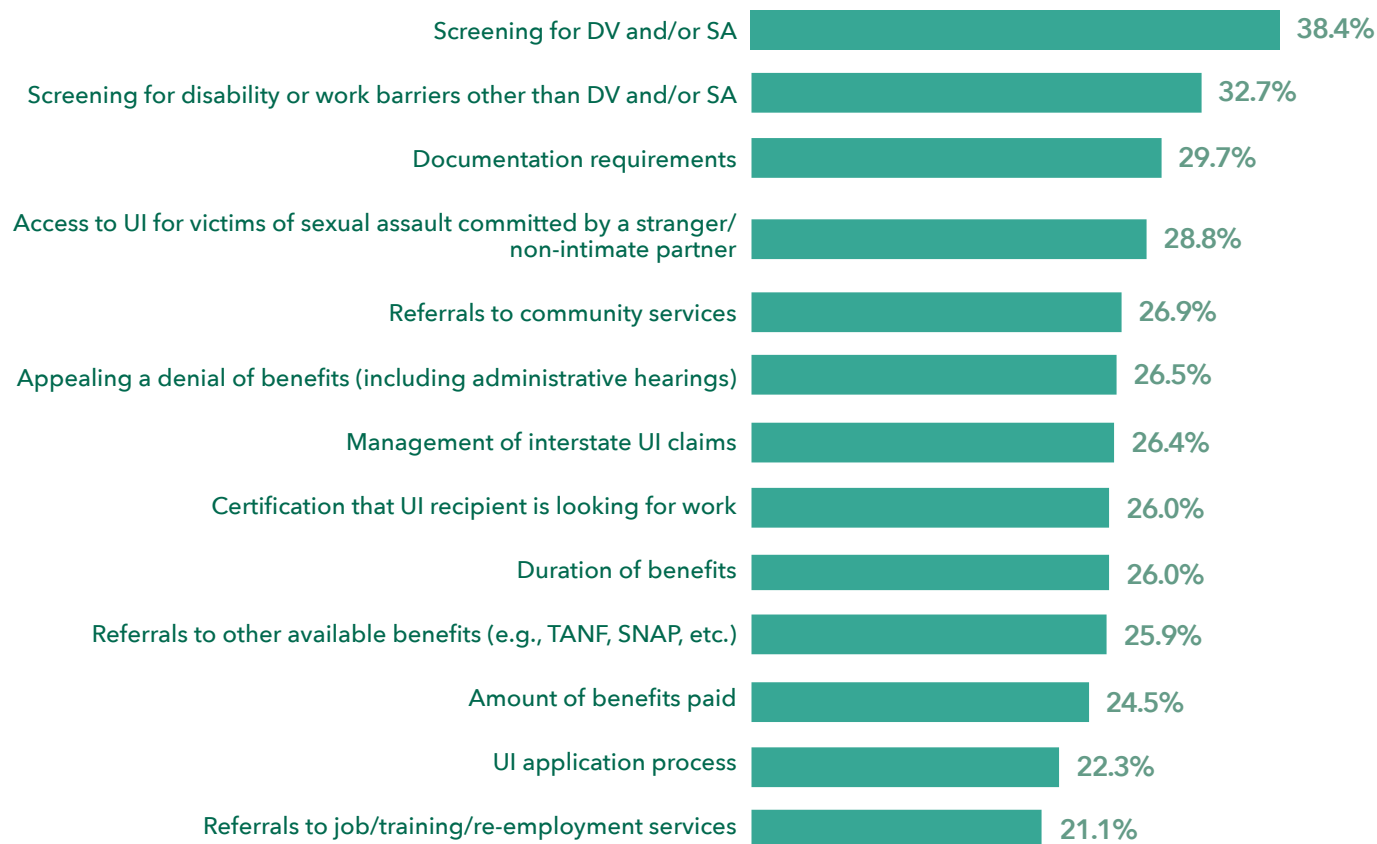
“They have a job corp office where clients can use their services to find a job, make a resume, and get prepared for interviews.”

However, many respondents reported that important components of the UI system *do not work* well for survivors, including screening for domestic violence or sexual assault (**38.4%**), as well as screening for disabilities or other work barriers (**32.7%**).²³

“Screening for DV [does not work well]. Survivors have dealt with complete lack of understanding and even disbelief.”

Additionally, respondents identified a variety of barriers that keep domestic violence and sexual assault victims from safely accessing financial assistance and

Percentage of respondents indicating that the following parts of the UI system do not work well for victims.



supports from the UI system, or that cause victims to not get or to lose UI benefits to which they might otherwise be entitled. The most significant of these barriers include: requirements about how domestic violence or sexual assault is connected to the separation from work are too narrow or require difficult-to-attain documentation; fear of deportation, detention, or other negative consequences on the part of immigrant victims; ineligibility for benefits due to immigration status; and rigid or narrow requirements regarding being “ready and able” to work that do not account for the dynamics of domestic violence and sexual assault or the particular needs of victims.

Voices from the Field

“Many leave with nothing and it takes some leg work and time to obtain the documents the unemployment office requires.”

With respect to the documentation required to access UI when domestic violence or sexual assault is involved, respondents shared that victims must provide a protection order or proof of other legal action, or in some cases a letter demonstrating that the victim is receiving services from a counselor, doctor, or advocate.²⁴

Percentage of respondents indicating that the following is frequently a reason why victims do not access UI, lose UI, or do not get the full range of services that UI might offer.



“Victims are usually required to provide extensive documentation of their victimization. This can be problematic, as an estimated **80%** of sexual violence and domestic violence incidents go unreported, for many reasons. Therefore, victims that choose not to report the violence to the legal system are at risk of not receiving benefits.”

As is the case with access to other public benefits programs, respondents also noted that “most survivors don’t have access to a computer, child care, or transportation to the nearest job center to complete the online application [for UI] or do job searches. This is a significant barrier and causes a great deal of anxiety for a person who is already feeling overwhelmed and hopeless.” Additionally, respondents shared that many survivors encounter a lack of understanding about how domestic violence and sexual assault can result in someone being fired or needing to leave work; as one advocate expressed, “it can be extremely re-traumatizing for survivors to be in a hearing with a hostile employer arguing the employee is ‘making it all up.’ We know false reporting is rare, and workplace violence is common.”

As a reflection of the difficulties victims encounter in the UI system, approximately **50% of respondents** said that a majority of the victims with whom they work need assistance from an advocate or other service provider in trying to obtain benefits. While this assistance undoubtedly facilitates greater access, for some victims it may not be enough to overcome the significant barriers described above.

As the policy section below will detail, UI remains inaccessible to many domestic violence and sexual assault survivors. Nonetheless, respondents highlighted that it can serve as a critical economic support for survivors.

“Often my clients leave a job because they are scared because the abuser comes and harasses and stalks them at their job and tries to get them fired. Often the abuser succeeds in getting the victim fired, and so the victim has no income with which to support themselves or their children and often ends up going back to the abuser because of financial need. Unemployment insurance that is available to victims would help so much.”

TRAINING AND PARTNERSHIPS TO MEET SURVIVORS' NEEDS

Developing collaborative, ongoing working relationships between domestic violence and sexual assault advocates and public benefits program staff is critical to addressing the barriers identified above and in strengthening the public benefits processes and systems so that they better meet survivors' needs.

As one advocate described, "We work collaboratively with our local TANF system to provide safe, effective services to victims of domestic violence who are residing in our shelter, as well as for those in our non-residential program and those who chose not to obtain DV services but do require the exemptions. We attend bi-monthly meetings at the local DSS [Department of Social Services] center which brings together DSS workers and community organizations in order to improve our response to those in need." In addition, some advocates shared that benefits program staff regularly come to their agencies; for

example, in one community, the "SNAP employee comes to our outreach office and shelter to provide on-site screening," and in another, an "employment office representative will do in-service groups for residents of our program, and will also recruit residents for assessments and/or on-the-job training." An advocate from a sexual assault program shared, "We have had the DV/SA specialist from the TANF office come to our staff meeting to present on eligibility and services TANF can offer to victims, and we have had the opportunity to explain to her how our agency functions and what services we provide."

“We [the state DV coalition] have had a partnership with our state’s Economic Services Administration (who administers TANF, other cash benefits, and child support programs) since 1998. We work with their policy headquarters and regional leadership to make sure that policies make sense for survivors and that local offices are following policy. We offer regular training to welfare office staff on domestic violence and their FVO policies and procedures. We connect with leadership regionally and office-to-office to hear their thoughts on the issue of DV and offer support and solutions to problems. We also work closely with local DV programs who have advocates contracted with local welfare offices and provide technical assistance and support to them, as well as garner feedback for how things are going for survivors in the field.”

“A group of our supervisors meets quarterly with a group of the supervisors from our local Board of Social Services. We discuss problematic situations, themes, and ways to improve the working relationship between programs in order to benefit all clients. We also have regular phone contact whenever either program has a question or concern about a specific case.”

However, only about one-fifth of advocates working in domestic violence and/or sexual assault programs report that they regularly work with the offices in their area that administer TANF or SNAP, and only **5%** regularly work with the UI office.

Instead, approximately half of domestic violence and sexual assault advocates report that they work with the TANF, SNAP, or UI offices on a case-specific basis only. This advocacy is essential - DV/SA program staff can provide requested documents, help survivors with paperwork, and explain requirements and next steps to survivors. Depending on the program, anywhere from **50-80% of respondents** indicated that a majority of the victims they work with need assistance from an advocate to navigate and access TANF, SNAP, and UI. However, case-specific advocacy only may not be sufficient to create the systems change needed (such as improved screening mechanisms, consistent application of work requirement exemptions, or increased access to child care services).

“Going with a client for support helps the client feel empowered and if they need help they know an advocate can help out.”

For those advocates who reported that they never work with the local TANF, SNAP, or UI offices, many shared stories of encountering substantial barriers or challenges when trying to engage with public benefits program staff. As expressed by one advocate, “We do not currently collaborate with any of those agencies...The workers do not want us there.” Another shared that the public benefits programs “are not willing to be a community partner of ours.”

Voices from the Field

“There is very little collaboration between my agency and the local TANF, SNAP, or UI systems. This is concerning, because we are the only rape crisis center serving our region, and we receive virtually no referrals for sexual assault victims in need of services, even though we are aware that many victims will disclose their victimization to their benefits case managers.”

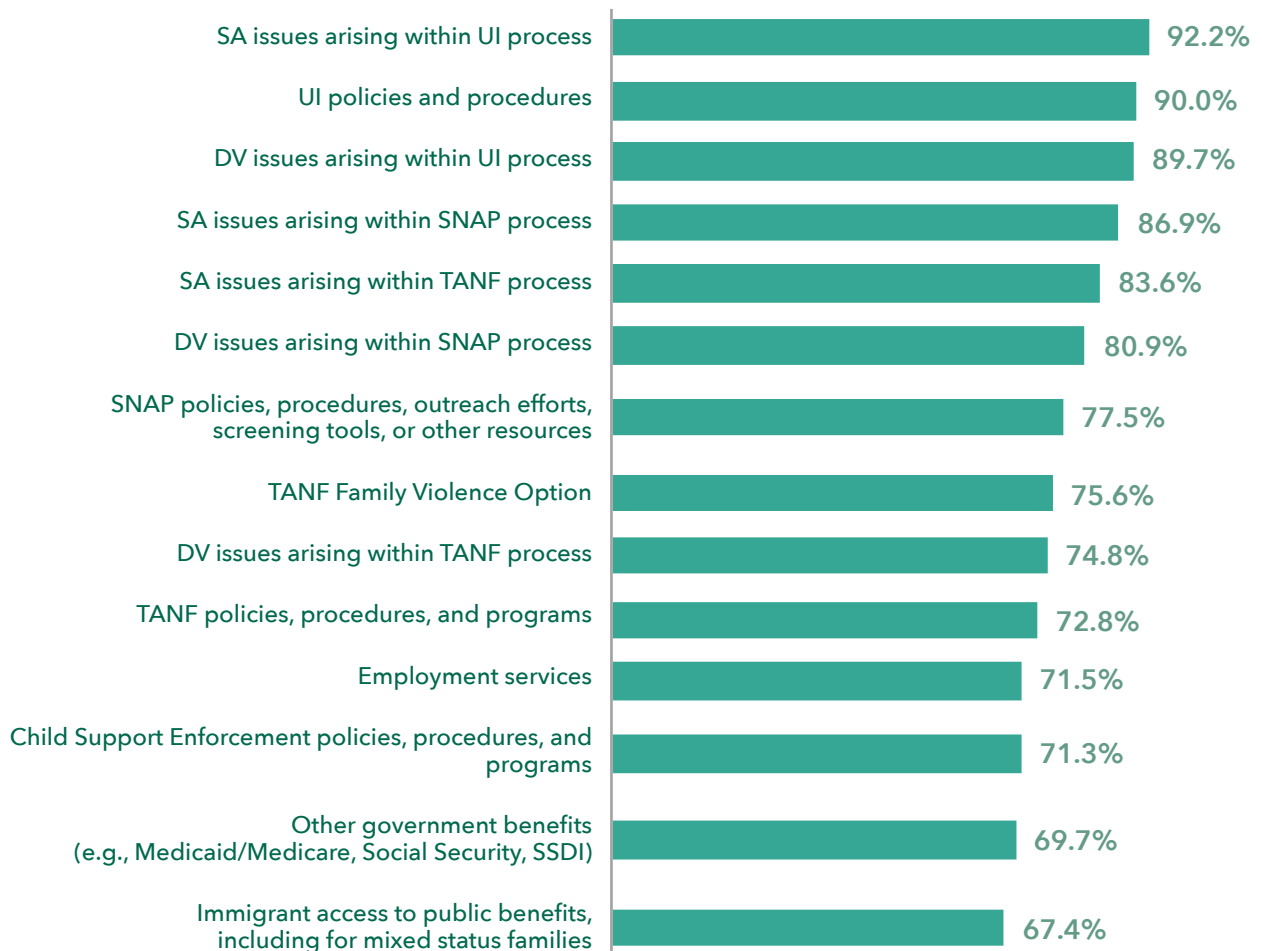
One consequence of this lack of sustained collaborations between domestic violence and sexual assault programs and public

benefits programs has been very limited cross-training or sharing of knowledge and information between providers working in both systems.

A significant majority of respondents reported that they did not receive, in the previous two years, training on any of the topics identified in the survey. For those that did get training, it was most often provided by staff from a domestic violence and/or sexual assault program (as compared to staff from a public benefits program office).

Many domestic violence and sexual assault advocates indicated a strong desire for increased and ongoing training, noting that

Percentage of respondents who did not receive training on specified topic.



“we can’t effectively advocate for our clients when we ourselves are not familiar with the process.”

Voices from the Field

“It seems as though policies around these benefits change so frequently. Having regular training done by DHHS [Department of Health and Human Services] staff would benefit DV/SA advocates.”

“All the above-mentioned areas are very important to advocates, and all should be trained in each of these areas. This would help clients receive the best services from the advocate and make sure they are utilizing the services of the agencies to the fullest.”

The most frequently identified areas where more training for advocates is needed include:

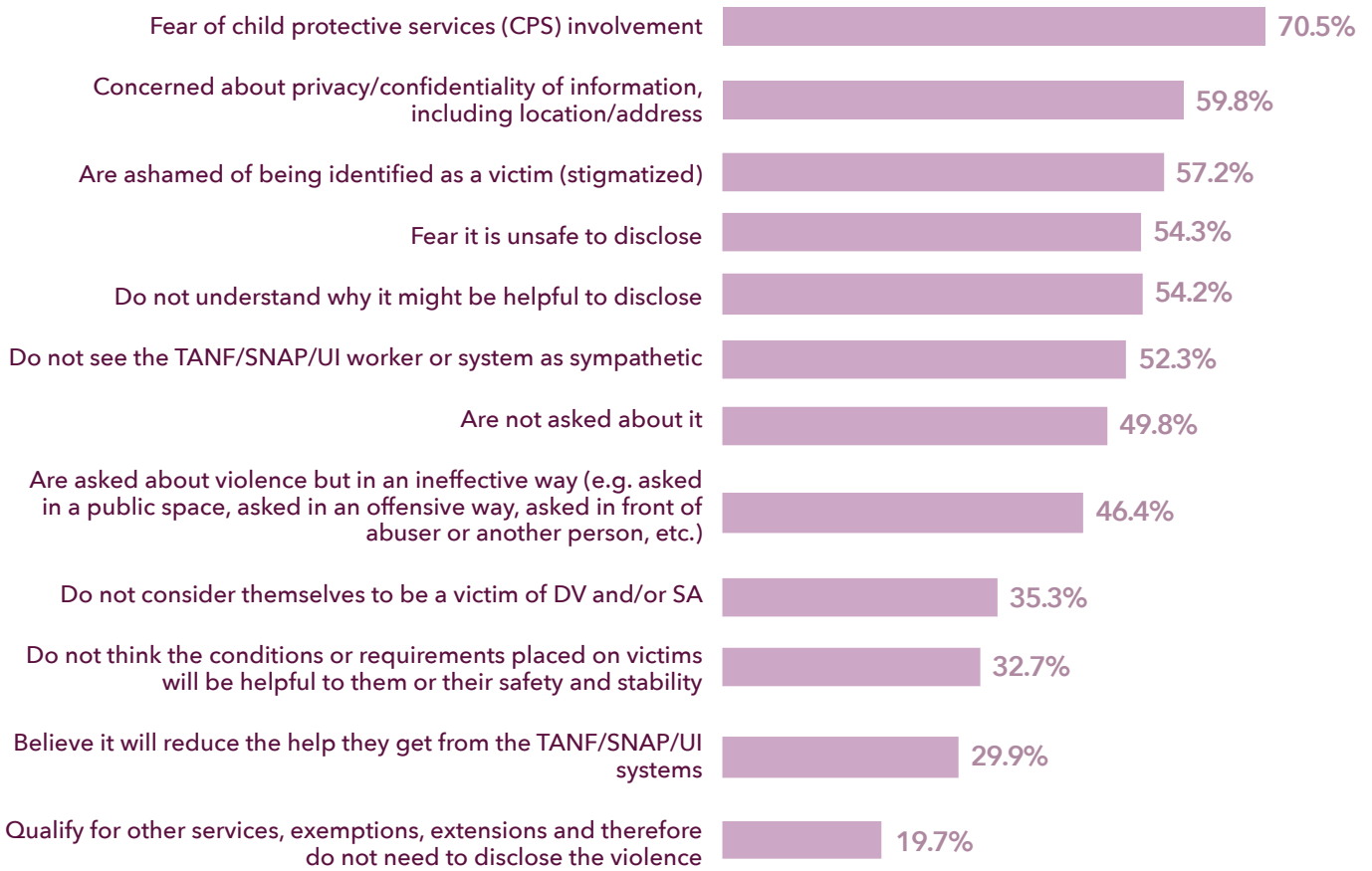
- Eligibility for benefits (including how employment may impact benefits)
- Application process (including availability of online or other means to apply)
- Availability of benefits to immigrant victims and families with mixed immigration status
- Safety concerns that may arise (including the process implications for separating victims and abusers when they are on the same case)
- Child support enforcement process
- Unemployment Insurance

- Particular needs of rape/sexual assault victims (who are not also experiencing DV)
- How to build effective partnerships with public benefits programs

Survey respondents also identified a considerable need for training on the part of public benefits staff, particularly on the dynamics of domestic violence and sexual assault, the impact of trauma on victims, and the barriers victims face when attempting to access services. They noted that such training should include, for example, how to respond to someone in crisis, and what a history of abuse or trauma might mean for someone’s ability to process information and understand requirements or expectations communicated to them.

The importance of this kind of training is highlighted by survey responses about victims’ disclosure of domestic violence and sexual assault victimization to public benefits program staff. Nearly half of respondents said that they don’t know whether or not domestic violence or sexual assault information disclosed by victims is handled by caseworkers in an appropriate way. Furthermore, respondents shared that victims frequently do not disclose violence to caseworkers because they fear Child Protective Services (CPS) involvement; are concerned about the privacy or confidentiality of that information, including location or address information; are ashamed of being identified as a victim or stigmatized; are not sure why it might be helpful to disclose that information; or fear it is unsafe to disclose.

Percentage of respondents indicating that the following is frequently a reason why victims may not disclose DV and/or SA to TANF, SNAP and/or UI workers.



Voices from the Field

“Survivors will not disclose their abusive experiences to a person who does not take a trauma informed approach when asking about abuse. It is very difficult for a survivor to disclose to anyone, much less a person who asks these questions in the same fashion that they would about an oil change. Additionally, should someone disclose, the survivor should be provided with information on how to receive supportive services to help them process, heal, and (if they chose) participate in the judicial process.”

As referenced above, many respondents expressed a desire for public benefits staff to receive training on providing services and case management in a trauma-informed way.²⁵ Unfortunately, many respondents shared that “individuals facing domestic violence or sexual assault are often revictimized and are often victim-blamed when accessing public services.” As one respondent put it, “Many are embarrassed about the situation [they’re in] so being treated with respect is very important. They need to be treated as a person who is a victim of a crime rather than being treated as if they are to blame for someone else’s criminal actions. Office

personnel need to listen to the situation without judging the victim.”

Voices from the Field

“Survivors already are full of shame and often are shamed again by the system.”

“They are just looking for assistance with getting back on their feet and don’t want to be judged or treated as if they are less than worthy of benefits by caseworkers handling their cases. Caseworkers need to be trained more on how to exhibit empathy for clients in any situation.”

“The re-traumatizing and disempowering impact of stringent regulations/rules, power differentials, and diminished autonomy and dignity inherent to public benefits provision must be addressed. True trauma-informed systems-change throughout the public benefits realm would offset much of the retraumatization, hopelessness, and sense of [being] overwhelmed that prevents victim-survivors of all types of trauma from accessing, utilizing, and maximizing the supports they need.”

Respondents did recognize and express sympathy for the fact that public benefits caseworkers experience their own challenges and pressures in doing their work, acknowledging that often “they are overworked with caseloads and become burnt out due to lack of self-care and awareness of the effects of vicarious trauma.” Respondents noted that addressing this is also critical to improving survivors’ experiences in these systems.

“Given the work we do, I think that TANF, SNAP and/or UI staff can always benefit from continuous trainings around DV/SA and how to appropriately and respectfully inquire about DV/SA in an empathetic, compassionate, non-judgmental manner.”

Other key areas of training for TANF, SNAP, and UI program staff include:

- Screening for domestic violence and sexual assault (including what questions to ask and how to ask them, as well as safety considerations in the screening process)
- Understanding how abusers may sabotage a victim’s participation in a public benefits program
- Cultural competency
- Available community resources for victims, making referrals, and collaborating with local domestic violence and sexual assault service providers

Again, cross-training is essential for staff and advocates in both systems to be equipped with the knowledge and information they need to best serve victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. Training - and more importantly, ongoing and meaningful partnerships - is also valuable as a foundation for strengthening public benefits systems and policies to better provide for survivors’ safety and economic security.

POLICY AND SYSTEMS CHANGE

Respondents identified a number of key areas where changes could be made to state and/or federal legislation and policies related to public benefits in order to increase access for victims and improve their economic security.

The TANF policy changes that were ranked as most important include:

- Providing emergency relocation and other related assistance to victims fleeing domestic violence or sexual assault
- Increased access to child care and transportation services
- Employment services and subsidized jobs that lead to a living wage
- Increasing TANF benefit levels
- Reducing the time it takes to process applications

Respondents who work primarily with historically marginalized populations – including people of color, immigrants, LGBTQ people, and transgender people – also highlighted the particular importance of reducing documentation

requirements during the application process; reducing the work requirement and/or making it more flexible; and removing eligibility barriers for immigrant survivors.

Voices from the Field

“Increasing the current TANF amount would enable families recovering from or experiencing trauma, to address their safety and mental health, [and] emotional needs before being jettisoned into the work force because they desperately need the money.”

“The TANF funds our clients receive are never enough for them and their children to begin to settle down and thrive; only enough for them to (sometimes) survive.”

Percentage of respondents who rated the following issues as very important in possible legislative changes to TANF at the state and/or federal level.



“Remove barriers for immigrants. Immigrants who have been through SA or DV go through so much emotionally and benefits would be a blessing for them and their children. That benefit would help them to start a healthy and suitable life for their children.”

“Increasing access to child care and transportation are the most important because they are barriers that cause our victims to lose their jobs or limits the types of jobs they can apply for. They are often lower paying jobs that do not allow victims to become self-sufficient.”

“Increased employment services and subsidized jobs that lead to a living wage would give DV/SA survivors a real opportunity to change the lives of their families. Many of our clients who go through the current employment services secure jobs that do not pay well or do not offer medical benefits or paid leave. The family then falls back into instability and relies again on TANF benefits. Finding living wage job placements through employment services would decrease the number of families who need to return to receiving TANF benefits. The stability would benefit each family, the local TANF offices, and the community as a whole.”

With respect to SNAP,²⁶ respondents similarly expressed that the benefit levels should be increased in order to meet the needs of individuals and families. As one respondent explained, “the most important change [that could be made is that] the amount of the benefit should be raised.

As food prices go up, SNAP seems to go down. Also, it is difficult to purchase healthy food since it is more expensive.” Another respondent shared that “[for victims with disabilities in particular] the amount of benefits provided is not acceptable and income restrictions contribute to keeping them at poverty level.”

Some respondents also indicated that two areas of policy change would have a particularly *detrimental* impact on victims and should not be included in any legislative revisions to SNAP: requiring retailers to pay a fee for accepting SNAP, and drug-testing SNAP recipients.

“Requiring retailers to pay a fee for accepting SNAP would cause many retailers in our area to cease accepting SNAP, which would be devastating to many of our clients who currently receive these benefits. Many victims do not have adequate access to transportation, and in our region in particular, the public transportation system is very limited and quite costly. Therefore, it is imperative that victims have access to retailers that accept SNAP benefits in their own neighborhoods, wherever that might be.”

“A requirement for drug-testing SNAP recipients would be devastating to our community, which is currently suffering greatly from the opioid epidemic. Children from low-income families would be most affected by this legislation, as many children who benefit from SNAP have parents and/or guardians with drug addiction issues. This would also impact sexual assault and domestic violence victims greatly, as many victims turn to drugs and/or alcohol to cope with the trauma. If their benefits are taken from them as punishment for a drug addiction, the victims will have less incentive to seek services and develop healthier coping mechanisms.”

“Requiring drug testing and removing the guarantee of benefits would be the most harmful changes that could be made to SNAP. Currently, SNAP has relatively high accessibility in our state, and any reduction to SNAP accessibility would harm the ability of victims to nourish themselves, would increase financial dependence on abusers, and would decrease the amount of productive time victims spend moving forward in their life.”

As with TANF, respondents indicated that policy changes that increase access to child care and transportation services and remove barriers for immigrant survivors are important in the SNAP context as well:

“A lot of immigrant survivors of DV/SA are not able to obtain SNAP benefit even after having legal status due to the ‘5 years bar’. Five years is too long of a time for someone to wait to become eligible for benefit. There has to be a policy change regarding this.”

“A lack of transportation to buy food is a huge problem. Victims may receive an adequate amount of money to purchase food for the whole month for themselves and their children, but if they do not have transportation then their choices are limited. We see plenty of victims that walk to local convenience stores and/or gas stations to purchase food for their families because they do not have transportation to grocery stores. This leads to unhealthy food choices and a rapid depletion in the victim’s monthly SNAP budget due to the overpricing of food items at those locations.”

As for policies related to unemployment insurance, many respondents indicated that they did not know whether or not their state currently explicitly provides UI to people who leave work or are fired because of domestic violence or sexual assault. At the same time, a significant majority of respondents said that it is very important to expand UI laws at the state level to provide access to this program to domestic violence and sexual assault victims. In addition, nearly **70% of respondents** expressed support for federal legislation that would provide UI for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking. **Two-thirds of respondents** also said it is very important to expand UI eligibility to include more women and low-paid and intermittent workers.

Percentage of respondents who rated the following issues as very important in possible legislative changes to UI at the state and/or federal level.



Voices from the Field

"UI benefits should be available to any victim of sexual assault and/or stalking who leaves or is fired from their job due to their victimization. Many times, UI caseworkers will recognize domestic violence as an adequate reason for one to leave their job, but they do not recognize the impact that a sexual assault or stalking situation can have on an employee's ability to remain employed or complete their job."

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations emerged clearly from the survey results. These recommendations will reduce barriers for victims and their families and will strengthen practices, programs, and policies to foster victims' safety and economic security.

Strengthen public benefits policies at the state and federal levels by increasing the level of benefits provided; reducing barriers and increasing access for victims of domestic violence and sexual assault; and providing additional resources and supports (such as transportation, childcare, and living wage work) that promote economic security for individuals, families, and communities.²⁷

The current federal poverty guidelines do not sufficiently account for increased costs of living, changes in housing affordability, and other economic shifts - and benefit eligibility and amounts should be increased in order to ensure better access for individuals and families in need. Additional recommended policy changes include:

- Streamline and expedite the application process for benefits so that individuals and families in crisis do not have to choose between physical safety and economic security
- Relax the requirements imposed by benefits programs - especially work and training requirements and child support enforcement cooperation requirements - in order to account for the particular needs of low-income families generally and domestic violence and sexual assault victims specifically
- Expand access to benefits to individuals without children
- Expand access to benefits for immigrants who have legal permanent residency by removing the federal 5-year waiting period; and expand access to benefits for immigrant survivors, including those who are eligible for a U visa for victims of crime
- Provide increased access to transportation, affordable childcare, and living wage work to help people not only meet public benefits program requirements but also, more importantly, establish economic security for themselves and their families

Policy changes must reflect the particular and acute needs of communities of color, Native Americans, LGBTQ communities,

immigrants, and people with disabilities. These historically marginalized communities disproportionately experience poverty, food and housing insecurity, unstable and low-wage employment, and other forms of economic disadvantage. Centering these

communities in the development and implementation of policies will promote more equitable distribution in economic growth and foster increased economic security for the individuals and families most in need.²⁸

Clarify, at the federal and state level, the processes for screening for domestic violence and sexual assault, the exemptions or extensions that are available to victims, and the documentation required of victims.

Public benefits caseworkers should be consistently screening for domestic violence and sexual assault in a way that is trauma-informed and that is designed to screen people “in” to benefits and programs, rather than screen them out.

Caseworkers must have a clear understanding of the TANF Family Violence Option and the other exemptions and

extensions available to victims, and they must consistently provide those options to all eligible victims.

Documents required to “prove” victimization should be limited to self-certification or attestation by the victim her/himself (but at a minimum, must not require a restraining order, police report, or proof of another legal action against the abuser).

Provide ongoing training for domestic violence and sexual assault advocates on public benefits programs.

These trainings should include information about program eligibility and requirements, the application process, and the TANF Family Violence Option, as well as other domestic violence and/or sexual assault specific exemptions or resources.

While advocates need training on all of the programs and benefits that help strengthen

economic security, there is a particular need for training on unemployment insurance, its availability to victims, and how to help victims access and navigate the UI system.

Training should be provided on a recurring basis in order to account for staff turnover, as well as changes in public benefits programs and policies.

Provide ongoing training for public benefits caseworkers on the dynamics of domestic violence and sexual assault, and on providing trauma-informed services and responses.

These trainings, provided by domestic violence and/or sexual assault advocates, should include:

- Dynamics of domestic violence and sexual assault, with a particular focus on financial abuse and the economic impact of violence
- Safety and confidentiality considerations, particularly when screening for violence and handling victims' information
- Impact of trauma on victims' ability to meet program requirements or expectations
- Trauma-informed service delivery

Develop and sustain meaningful, collaborative partnerships between domestic violence and sexual assault programs and public benefits programs, as well as with other service providers working with low-income families.

Sustained collaboration will facilitate cross-training; allow providers in both settings to share tools, strategies, and resources that promote best practices; and increase the ability to make more effective referrals across systems.

It will also enable providers to engage in systems-level advocacy to improve how

victims and families access programs, and reduce barriers to receipt of benefits, as well as provide opportunities to build coalitions to strengthen policy at the state and federal level and improve the ability of these programs to meet survivors' needs and enhance their economic security.

Voices from the Field

“Many domestic violence and sexual assault victims are not allowed to work, don't have access to the finances of their household, and they leave with nothing but their children, a few clothes and necessities, and no vehicle. Programs like TANF and SNAP give victims a means to take care of themselves while they're building their lives back up, while trying to take care of their needs and their children's, and find safe housing and employment.”

END NOTES

1. We have chosen to use the terms “victim” and “survivor” interchangeably throughout this report. The term “victim” is often used to serve as a reminder of the violence and control faced by those who are abused or assaulted. “Survivor” may be used to refer to someone who has gone through a process of healing or recovery, or when discussing the short- or long-term effects of domestic violence or sexual assault. Some people identify as a victim, while others prefer the term survivor – and many do not like or relate to either of these or other terms that advocates or policymakers typically use.
2. We have tried to use gender-neutral language throughout this report, except for in those circumstance where, as here, research or survey respondents specifically focused on or identified women. We do this because all those being victimized by a partner deserve effective advocacy, protection, and support. We do note, though, that domestic violence and sexual assault are gendered social problems, with women being disproportionately targeted and harmed by men.
3. See, e.g., Eleanor Lyon, *Welfare, Poverty and Abused Women: New Research and its Implications*, National Resource Center on Domestic Violence (Oct. 2000), available at <https://vawnet.org/material/welfare-poverty-and-abused-women-new-research-and-its-implications>; Mary Kay, Inc. (2012). 2012 Mary Kay Truth About Abuse Survey Report. Dallas, TX. At: http://content2.marykayintouch.com/public/PWS_US/PDFs/company/2012Survey.pdf; Lyon, E., Lane, S., & Menard, A. (2008). Meeting Survivors’ needs: A multi-state study of domestic violence shelter experiences. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice. At: http://www.vawnet.org/Assoc_Files_VAWnet/MeetingSurvivorsNeeds-FullReport.pdf; Lyon, E., Bradshaw, J., & Menard, A. (2011). Meeting Survivors’ Needs through Non-Residential Domestic Violence Services & Supports: Results of a Multi-State Study. Harrisburg, PA: National Resource Center on Domestic Violence. At: http://www.vawnet.org/Assoc_Files_VAWnet/DVServicesStudy-FINALReport2011.pdf; Kimerling, R., Alvarez, J., Pavao, J., Mack, K. P., Smith, M. W., & Baumrind, N. (2009). Unemployment Among Women: Examining the Relationship of Physical and Psychological Intimate Partner Violence and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. *Journal of Interpersonal*
4. Id.
5. See, e.g., Kaiser Family Foundation (2016). Poverty Rate by Race/Ethnicity. Available at <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/poverty-rate-by-raceethnicity/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22columnId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>; National Poverty Center (2009). Policy Brief - The Colors of Poverty: Why Racial and Ethnic Disparities Persist. Available at http://npc.umich.edu/publications/policy_briefs/brief16/PolicyBrief16.pdf
6. See, e.g., Wilson, V. & Mokhiber, Z. (2017). 2016 ACS shows stubbornly high Native American poverty and different degrees of economic well-being for Asian ethnic groups. Available at <http://www.epi.org/blog/2016-ac-s-shows-stubbornly-high-native-american-poverty-and-different-degrees-of-economic-well-being-for-asian-ethnic-groups/>; Krogstad, J.M. (2014). One-in-four Native Americans and Alaska Natives are living in poverty. Available at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/13/1-in-4-native-americans-and-alaska-natives-are-living-in-poverty/>
7. See, e.g., Badgett et al., *New Patterns of Poverty in the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community* (2013), <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/LGB-Poverty-Update-Jun-2013.pdf>; Albelda et al., *Poverty in the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community* (2009), <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Albelda-Badgett-Schneebaum-Gates-LGB-Poverty-Report-March-2009.pdf>; Kasanis & Wilson, *Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Socioeconomic Wellbeing of Individuals in Same-sex Couples* (2014), <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Census-Compare-Feb-2014.pdf>; Grant et al., *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey* (2011), http://www.thetaskforce.org/static_html/downloads/reports/reports/ntds_full.pdf.

8. See, e.g., Bread for the World (2016). Hunger and Poverty Among Immigrants. Available at <http://www.bread.org/sites/default/files/downloads/immigrants-fact-sheet-2016.pdf>
9. Vallas, R. & Fremstad, S. (2014). Disability is a Cause and Consequence of Poverty. Available at <https://talkpoverty.org/2014/09/19/disability-cause-consequence-poverty/>
10. Centers for Disease Control (2017). Preventing Intimate Partner Violence Across the Lifespan: A Technical Package of Programs, Policies, and Practices. Available at <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/ipv-technicalpackages.pdf>
11. In a number of cases, respondents more frequently responded “I don’t know” to questions pertaining to the particular role of public benefits programs in sexual assault survivors’ lives. This indicates a need for additional research and training to better understand how these programs can best meet the needs of sexual assault survivors.
12. More than a third of respondents said that they did not know how many domestic violence or sexual assault victims would need UI to help address their basic needs or to establish safety and stability.
13. The report author did not conduct statistical analysis to determine whether these differences are statistically significant, but rather is presenting key observational differences in responses.
14. See, e.g., Postmus, J. L., Plummer, S. B., McMahon, S., Murshid, N. S., & and Mi Sung Kim, M. S. (2012). Understanding economic abuse in the lives of survivors. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 27(3), 411-430.
15. See, e.g., Loya, R.M. (2015). A Bridge to Recovery: How Assets Affect Sexual Assault Survivors’ Economic Well-Being. *SAGE Open*, January-March 2015: 1-13, doi: 10.1177/2158244015573966; Peterson, C., et al., (2017). Lifetime Economic Burden of Rape on U.S. Adults. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 52(6), 691-701. doi: 10.1016/j.amepre.2016.11.014; MacMillan, R. (2000). Adolescent Victimization and Income Deficits in Adulthood: Rethinking the Costs of Criminal Violence from a Life-Course Perspective. *Criminology*, 38(2), 553-588).
16. See, e.g., Loya, R. M. (2014) Rape as an economic crime: The impact of sexual violence on survivor’s employment and economic well-being. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 30 (16), 2793-2813. doi:10.1177/0886260514554291
17. See, e.g., IWPR (2017). The Economic Cost of Intimate Partner Violence, Sexual Assault, and Stalking. Available at https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/B367_Economic-Impacts-of-IPV-08.14.17.pdf
18. The report author did not conduct statistical analysis to determine whether these differences are statistically significant, but rather is presenting key observational differences in responses.
19. Information on relevant TANF regulations that may make it more difficult for people with disabilities to access benefits is available at: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/the-new-tanf-requirements-and-individuals-with-disabilities>. Information on why SNAP is comparatively easier for individuals with disabilities to access is available at: <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/snap-helps-millions-with-disabilities>
20. For a detailed explanation of the FVO, see Wendy Pollack and Martha Davis, *The Family Violence Option of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996: Interpretation and Implementation*, 30 *Clearinghouse Review* 1079-1098 (1997).
21. Note that documentation requirements may be a matter of policy and/or implementation. In either case though, if victims are being told (or otherwise believe) that they must provide certain types of documentation to obtain benefits, this can be a significant barrier to access.
22. More information on the shelter deduction is available at <https://www.cbpp.org/research/snaps-homeless-shelter-deduction-can-provide-much-needed-help-for-homeless-individuals-and>

23. A significant number of respondents said that they don't know whether the UI system works well or not for victims, ranging from **34.5% to 58.9%** responding "don't know" for each identified component of the UI system.
24. Note that documentation requirements may be a matter of policy and/or implementation. In either case though, if victims are being told (or otherwise believe) that they must provide certain types of documentation to obtain benefits, this can be a significant barrier to access.
25. More information on trauma-informed approaches to service delivery is available at <https://vawnet.org/sc/trauma-informed-domestic-violence-services-understanding-framework-and-approach-part-1-3>
26. After careful review of the responses to the SNAP policy questions, including checking for consistency in responses across fixed-choice and open-ended questions, the report author and reviewers determined that respondents did not appear to understand the questions as written. This limits our ability to interpret and report on responses particularly to the fixed-choice SNAP policy question.
27. The Centers for Disease Control has concluded that "efforts to improve financial security for families and women's education, employment and income may reduce risk for IPV." In addition to strengthening TANF and SNAP, the CDC also provides evidence to support policies including the Earned Income Tax Credit, the Child Tax Credit, microfinance programs, comparable worth/equal pay, and paid leave. Centers for Disease Control (2017). Preventing Intimate Partner Violence Across the Lifespan: A Technical Package of Programs, Policies, and Practices. Available at <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/ipv-technicalpackages.pdf>
28. For additional economic security policy recommendations, see Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights (2017). In Their Own Words: Working People and the Need for Policies that Provide Economic Security. Available at <http://civilrightsdocs.info/pdf/reports/economic-security-2017-web.pdf>; Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society (2017). Responding to Rising Inequality: Policy Interventions to Ensure Opportunity for All. Available at http://haasinstitute.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/HaasInstitute_InequalityPolicyBrief_FINALforDISTRO_2.pdf; Prosperity Now (2017). A State Policy Blueprint for a More Inclusive Path to Prosperity. Available at https://prosperitynow.org/files/PDFs/2017-10_state-policy-blueprint-for-a-more-inclusive-path-to-prosperity.pdf; West, R., et al. (2016). Strengthening Unemployment Protections in America: Modernizing Unemployment Insurance and Establishing a Jobseeker's Allowance. Available at <http://www.georgetownpoverty.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/GCPI-UI-JSA-Report-20160616.pdf>; Dutta-Gupta, I. & Grant, K. (2015). Raising Wages, Reducing Inequality, Sustaining Families: Why Raising the Minimum Wage is a Civil and Human Rights Issue. Available at <http://www.georgetownpoverty.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/2015-Min-Wage-Report-Update-WEB.pdf>