



Understanding Victims' /Survivors' Perceptions of Accountability, Justice, Safety, & Care Seeking

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**Violence victimization is
common and underreported.**



**Thus, victim/survivor
voices can get lost in
system response.**

The purpose of this community-engaged needs assessment was to **understand crime victims' perceptions of justice and care-seeking** to inform strategies for serving the nuanced and multiple needs of crime victims in Michigan.

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a white ribbed sweater, is sitting on a blue couch. She is gesturing with her hands as if in conversation. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Phase I: Confidential Qualitative Interviews (n=25)

- **Recruitment**
 - Outreach w/ VOCA-funded agencies in Michigan
 - Network of victim advocates in prosecuting attorney offices
- **Sample**
 - Primarily from Western, Mid, and Northern Michigan
 - Predominately White
- **Interviews**
 - Short- and long-term needs
 - Service seeking; supports and challenges
 - Perceptions of justice



Phase II: Anonymous Surveys (n=71)

- **Recruitment (March-September 2020)**
 - Outreach w/ VOCA-funded agencies in Michigan
 - Network of victim advocates in prosecuting attorney offices
 - Podcast/radio show in Northern Michigan
- **Sample**
 - Predominately Black; 80% women; two-thirds between 25 and 44 years old
- **Focus:**
 - Perceptions of justice, accountability, and their desired outcomes in the aftermath of crime
 - Mental health and care-seeking



Main Findings

1. For victims/survivors, accountability was defined as the people who harmed them acknowledging the harm they caused and taking personal responsibility for their behavior.
2. Victims'/survivors' perceptions of justice were nuanced.
3. Safety was a fundamental dimension of justice for victims/survivors.

Main Findings

4. Victims/survivors described numerous mental health and relational impacts of crime, but formal service utilization was low.
5. Victim service professionals emphasized the need to center the victim/survivor, their preferences, and their perceptions of safety.

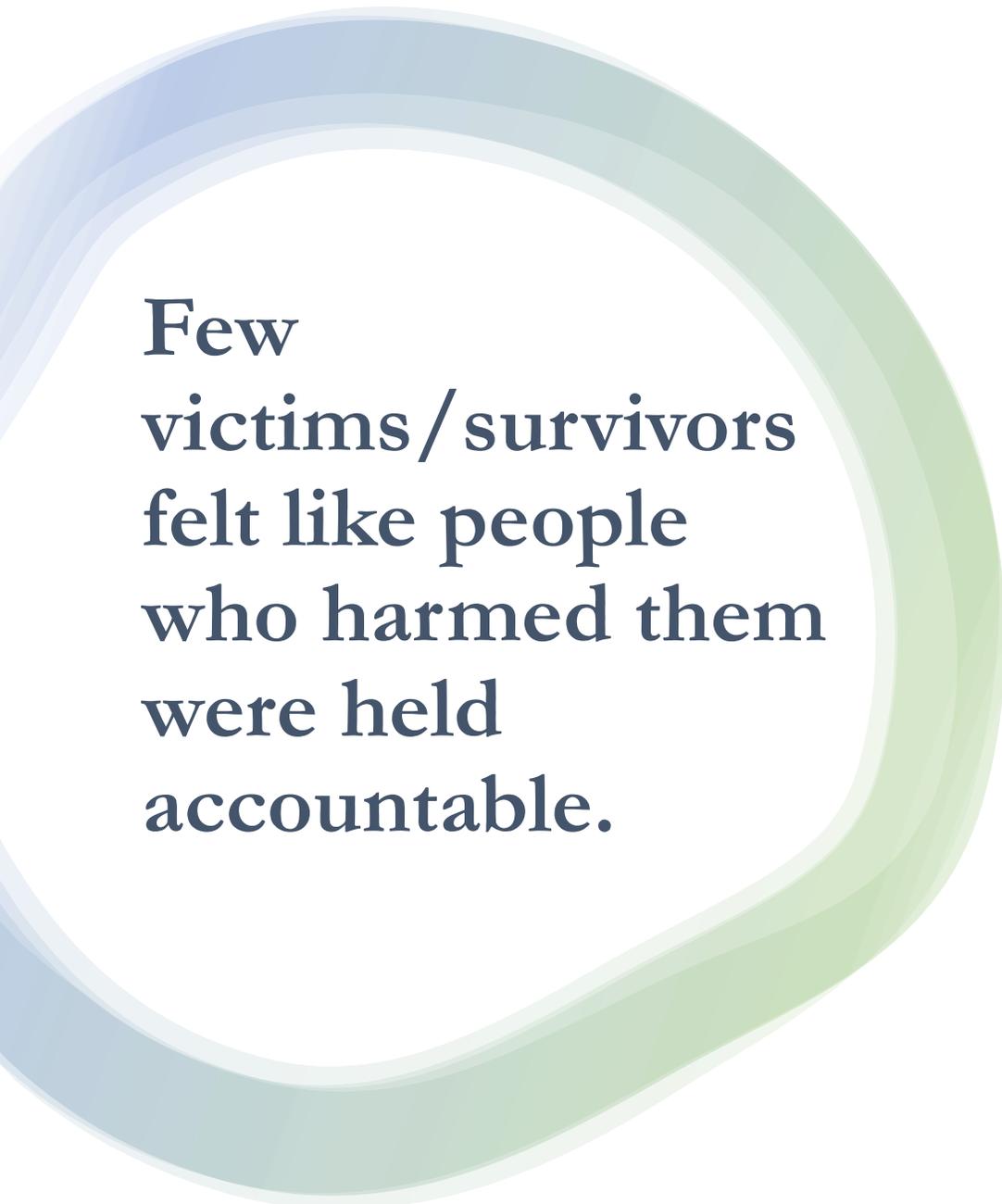
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Accountability

“Accountability ...is owning up to the harm you have caused, whether that harm was done intentionally or unintentionally. This means verbalizing that you understand you have harmed another person and acknowledging the impact your decisions had on others. Another meaning of taking accountability is changing the behavior that caused harm.”

– survey respondent



**Few
victims/survivors
felt like people
who harmed them
were held
accountable.**

“In my case, accountability never happened. He was not held accountable for his crime, for his actions. Accountability is admitting you did something. Standing up and being honest about it. You’re going to admit that yeah, you grabbed that knife and you went outside. But you don’t want to admit that you stabbed him? Accountability is taking responsibility. Admitting when you’re wrong. And facing your punishment. They took a life. A life is a life.”

– mother of a homicide victim

Victims' / survivors' perceptions of justice were nuanced.



**Perceptions of
justice were
nuanced.**

“I wanted him to know that it was not okay and that he couldn’t [hurt me] and that he needed help. I find it really hard not to make excuses for him still. I just want him to go away. I was so conflicted about, am I even doing the right thing? Is this going to help him? If he does go to jail, is it going to help him? Just because I went to the police didn’t mean I stopped loving him. It was reconciling all of those feelings. **Maybe justice just meant having my life restored. I wanted to know that I was safe and that I would be okay and that he was not going to interfere in my safety.”**

– *domestic violence survivor*



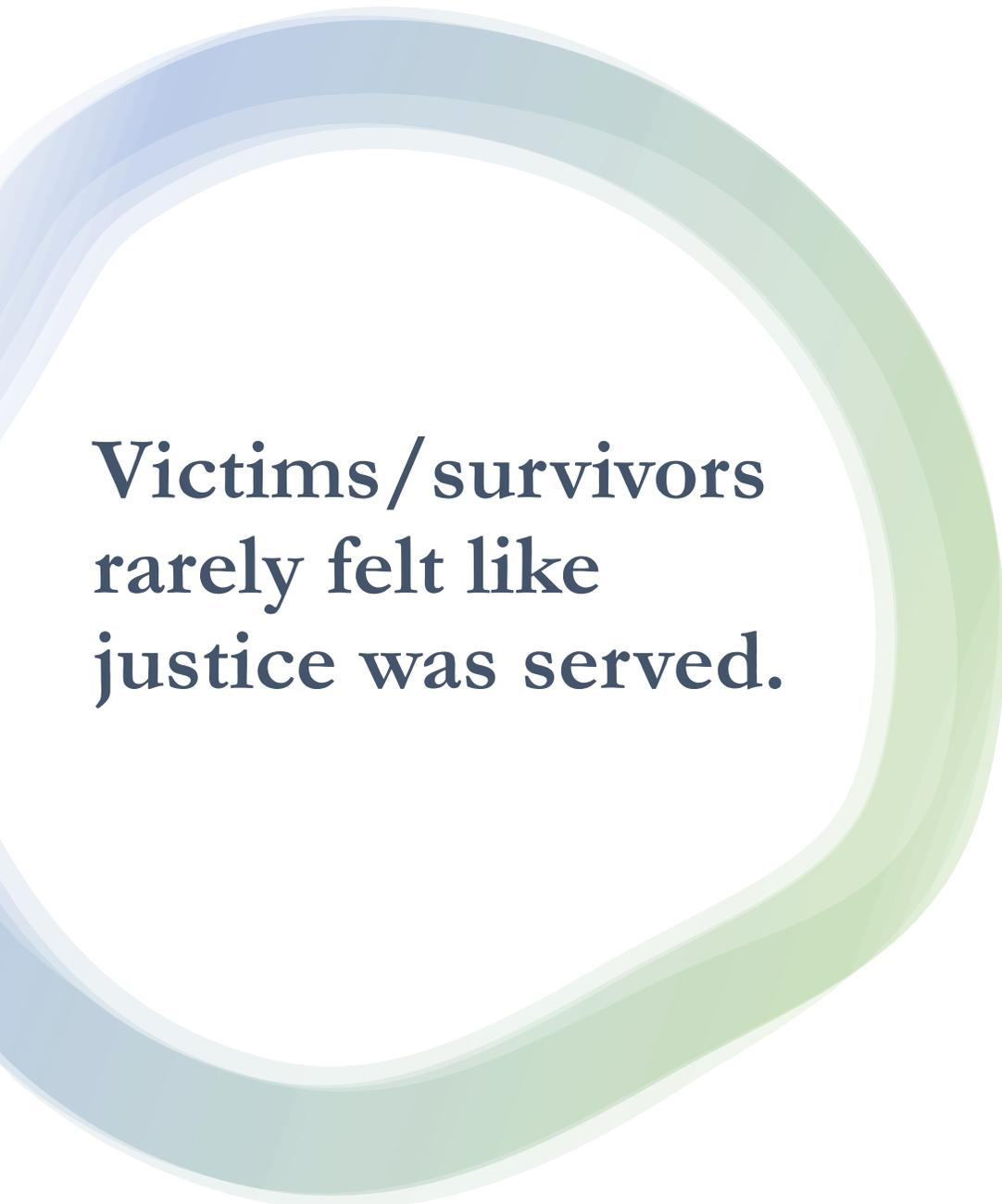
**Keeping children
safe and
protecting their
communities were
motivating factors.**

“There’s been a justice in the fact that the police asked me and my son questions [about what happened to us]. We were able to talk about the abuse. I want, desperately, to know he’s not going to hurt my boy. **Justice would be that he’d never do it again.”**

– domestic violence survivor

Victims/survivors prioritized multiple outcomes.

Prevent other people from having to experience what happened to me	93%	My community to be safer by removing the person who harmed me	78%
The person who harmed me to take accountability for their actions	86%	The person who harmed me to grow and change	77%
My community to be aware that my perpetrator is harmful or unsafe	85%	My children to be safer by removing the person who harmed me	76%
An acknowledgment from my perpetrator that they caused me harm	82%	My community to believe me	71%
The person who harmed me to go to jail or prison	80%	An apology from the person who harmed me	60%
The authorities (like the police) to believe me	79%	Restitution or being paid back for the harm that I experienced	60%



**Victims/survivors
rarely felt like
justice was served.**

“Time and again I have suffered here but the ones who have caused me harm and anguish are given a voice while I remain voiceless.”

– *survey respondent*

“When justice is not served it totally enables someone like him to go ahead and do this to the next person, the next victim.”

– *sexual assault survivor*

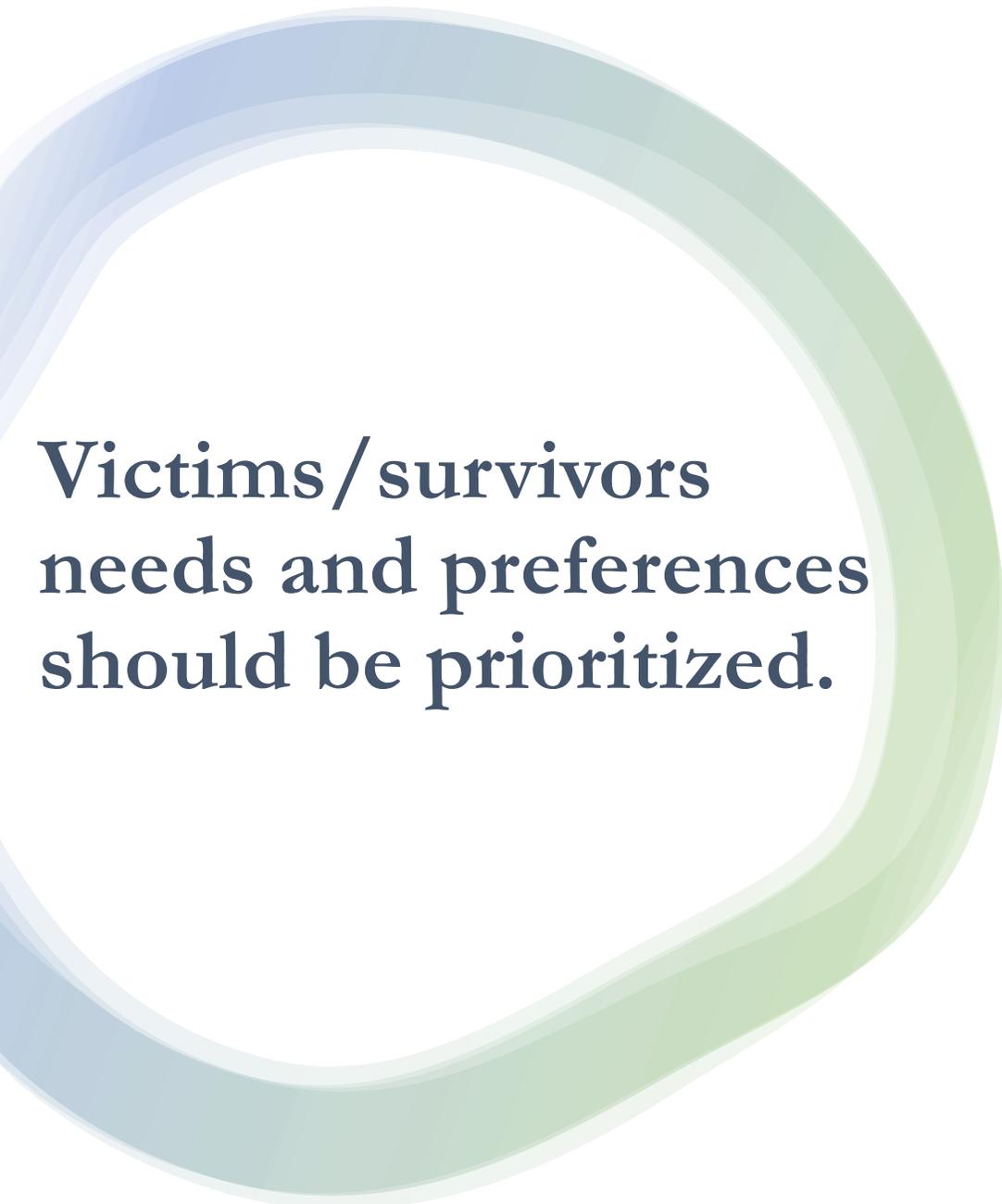
Survey respondents described inequities in the criminal legal systems

“Justice is just a word. They say America is the ‘home of the free’ but we continue to harm others for no reason. I know as a Black man we have to watch what we do and say around [white people] because that’s just how life is.”

– *survey respondent*

“Justice for Black people is totally different than for white people because most white people don't even believe we are human.”

– *survey respondent*



**Victims/survivors
needs and preferences
should be prioritized.**

“Justice is about resolution. Although it is often associated with the criminal justice system, I think that people can feel justice has been served in other ways. Justice means that the person who was harmed, even if they are still impacted by the harm that they were caused, is satisfied with the outcome. It does not mean they are "healed" or has gotten over what happened, but that they feel that the **efforts to make amends matches the harm that was caused.**”

– *sexual assault survivor*

**Safety was a fundamental
dimension of justice for
victims/survivors.**

**Victims/
survivors still
fear for their
safety.**

Almost **half** of survey respondents were regularly worried about their safety in their homes and neighborhoods. Almost **one third** feared for their safety at work.

Firearms.

“He always kept his handgun on the bed stand, and I thought right away, he’s got a loaded gun in there. He started screaming at us. He said, ‘if this gun’s not good enough, I’ll get another one.’ We ran downstairs out the door and to the neighbor’s yard. It took the police awhile... They took us away to a safe place. I never spoke to him again.”

– *domestic violence survivor*



**Victims/survivors
prioritized their
children's safety**

“Dude’s in jail. I’m safe now. Not that jail is going to make him better. But at least then, he’s not hurting my kid and then [my kid is] safe.”

– *domestic violence survivor*

“And she is in prison for 2 to 15 years. Yeah, she got everything that I had wanted. I don’t want her life ruined. I just don’t want her... my gut tells me she has already done this.”

- *mother of a CSA victim*

Victims/survivors described numerous mental health and relational impacts of crime, but formal service utilization was low.

Victim/survivor service utilization

	Very Helpful	Did Not Use
Spiritual support or a faith community	47%	26%
Support groups or other recovery services	37%	42%
Alternative healing modalities (e.g. trauma informed yoga, outdoor activities, culturally specific healing opportunities)	30%	42%
Free or low-cost mental health counseling	28%	35%
Someone to help you walk through the criminal justice system	28%	42%
Assistance with medical expenses	25%	54%
Assistance with a victims' compensation application	13%	63%



The complexities of help seeking

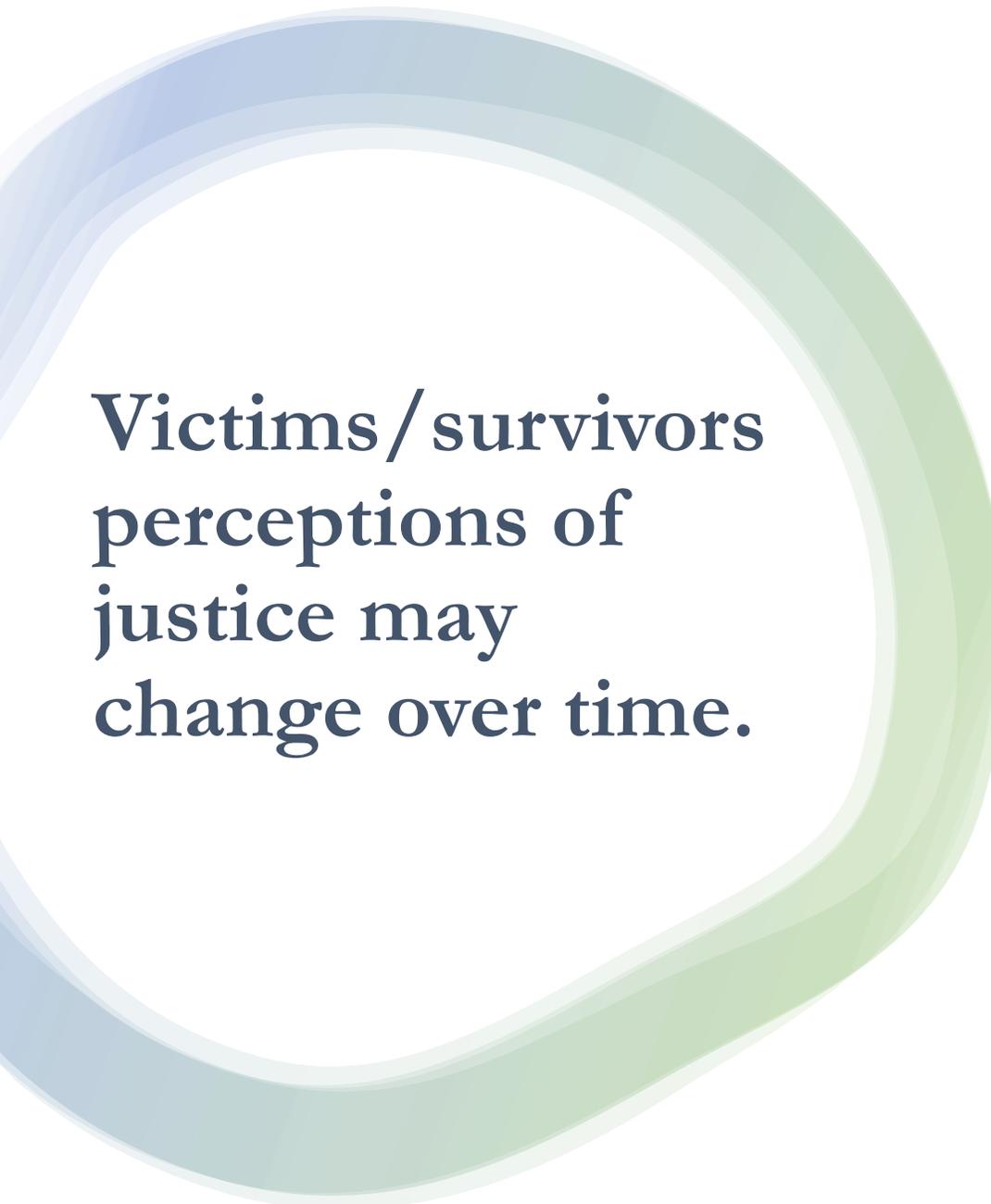
“I never imagined being in a situation as bad as it got. Then to not know what to do... It’s easy to have a plan when you’re not in the situation. I was pregnant. I was not working at the time. I had three other kids. What direction is my life going to take if I go to the police? What are the consequences of this? This is going to have a big fall out. Is it worth it? Can I do this without their help? [The police] had already been called three times before that. Then it was embarrassment. And shame. A lot of confusion. Fear. Anxiety. I think that’s initially why I downplayed things, because I didn’t want anything to get back to me and get me in trouble. Even though I had done nothing wrong. And there was nothing that I would have gotten in trouble for. But I still had that fear.” – *domestic violence survivor*

Victim service professionals emphasized the need to center the victim/survivor, their preferences, and their perceptions of safety.

Stabilization & safety first.

“Initially, their needs are to have a safe place to be able to process what happened. The farther into their healing, if they’re more stable and they feel safe, that’s when I feel like they can start thinking about things, when they’re not in danger anymore.” – *advocate*

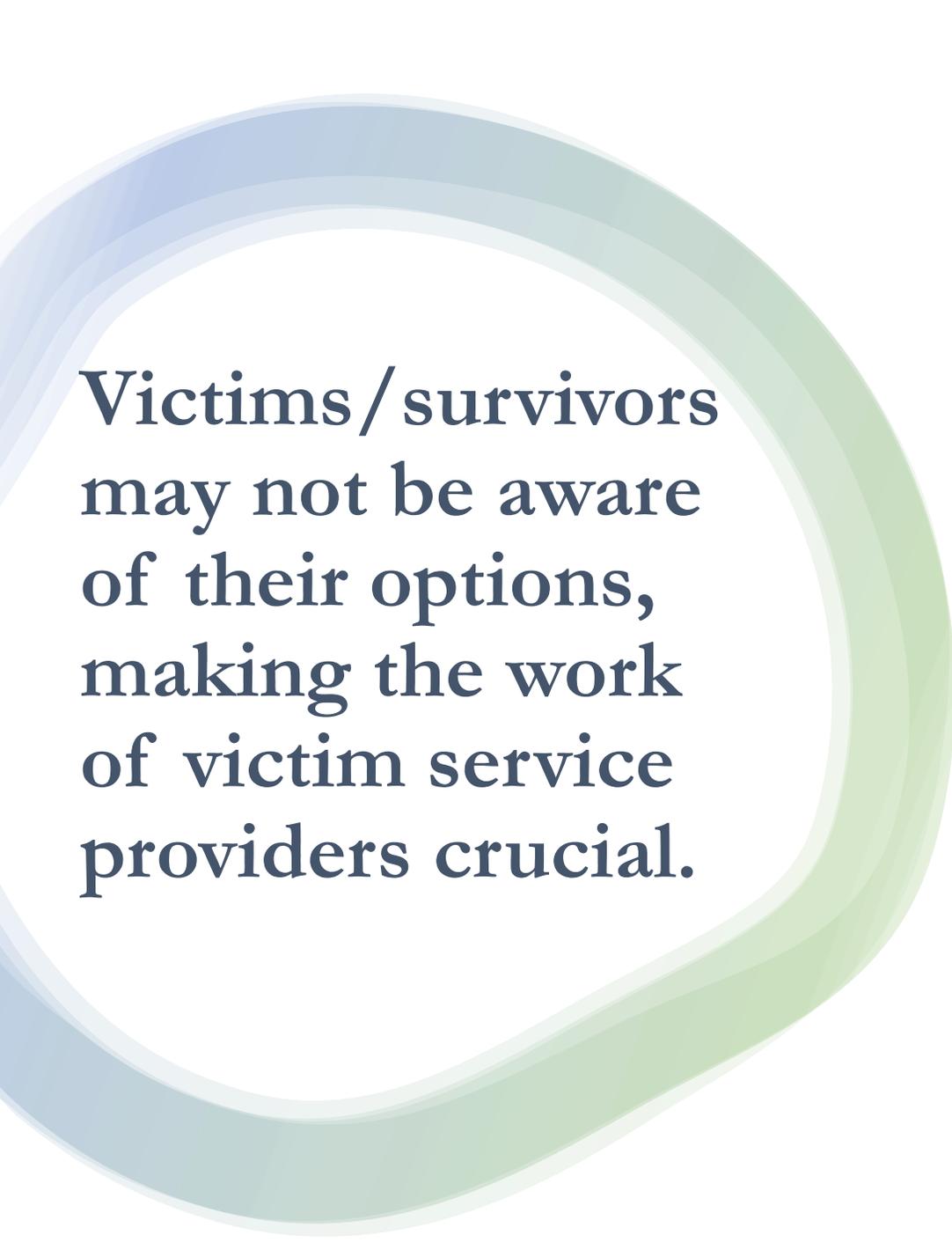
“Validation, I think is the really big piece. And making sure they know that they’re safe. And then meeting them in the moment. We must provide that safe space, and help them understand, these are the next steps. Our initial response is really going to determine if they want to go forward with us or not. We could shut somebody down like this (snaps) with a bad response, and they’re never going to tell anybody else.” – *law enforcement officer*



**Victims/survivors
perceptions of
justice may
change over time.**

“For survivors, [justice] depends on whether it is the first time it happened, or if it has been escalating over time. I’m working with a domestic violence survivor now and she didn’t want him to go to jail, wanted him to get help. Now it has escalated to the point where she was strangled and there are kids involved. She wants him to go to prison for at least five years. She wants to know that she and her kids are going to be safe for that long. And so, she has a very different perspective now than she did a year ago.”

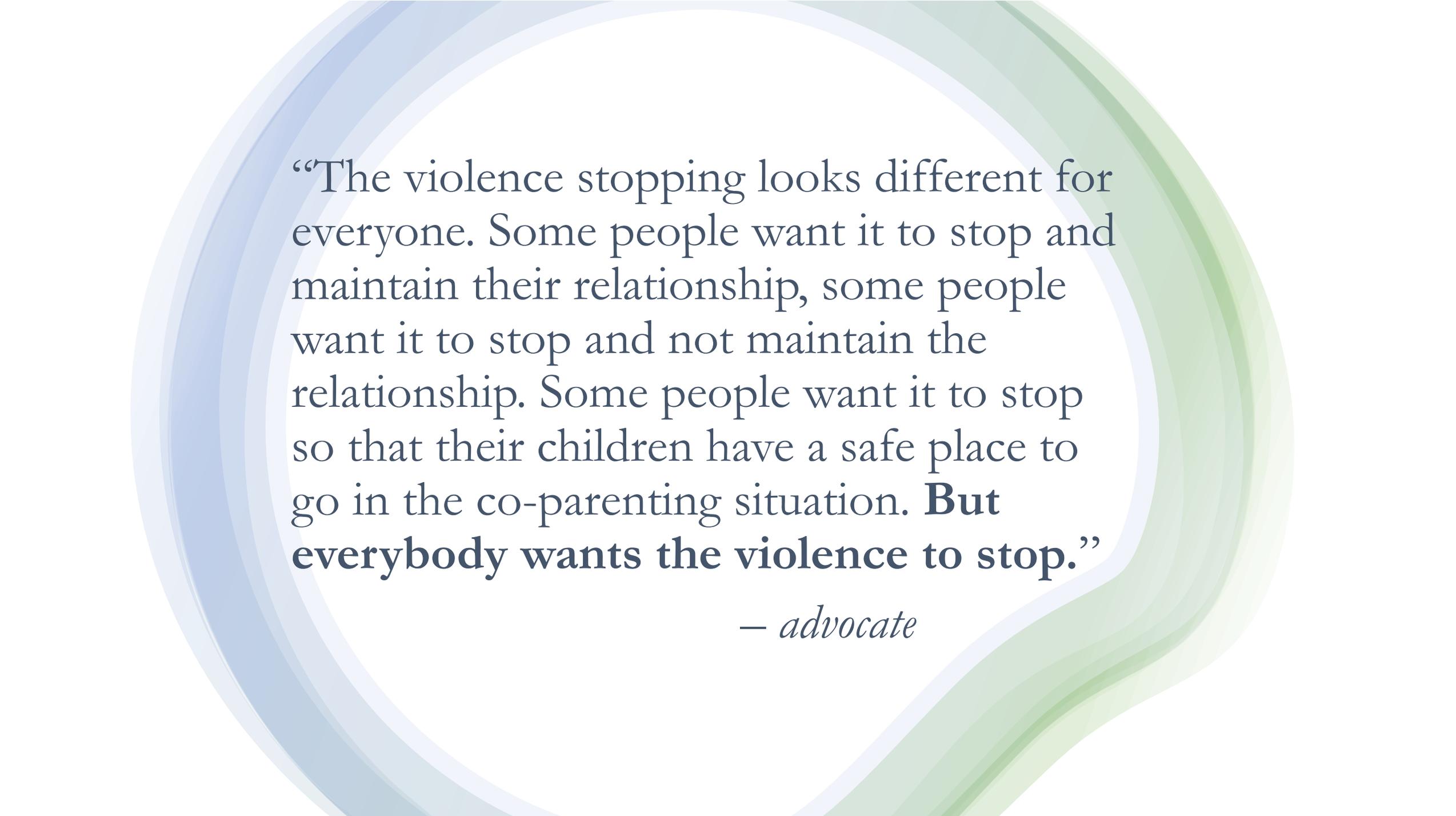
– *advocate*



**Victims/survivors
may not be aware
of their options,
making the work
of victim service
providers crucial.**

“Sometimes they don’t want to give the offenders name right away. They want help, but they’re not ready. A lot of times, they don’t even know what those possible outcomes could be. One of the big motivators for people reporting is, **I don’t want to see this happen to somebody else.** We’ll say, what do you want to see happen here? [Their responses] vary. ‘I want them to go to jail forever. I want the people in his care protected. I don’t want to see him harm other kids.’ With a spouse, ‘I want my family safe. I don’t want him to contact us.’ It really is an individual thing.”

– *law enforcement officer*



“The violence stopping looks different for everyone. Some people want it to stop and maintain their relationship, some people want it to stop and not maintain the relationship. Some people want it to stop so that their children have a safe place to go in the co-parenting situation. **But everybody wants the violence to stop.**”

– *advocate*

Moving forward.



Implications

- Trauma-informed research and practice is characterized by understanding the nuances of the lived experience of violence victimization.
- Accountability is critical, regardless of the other outcomes victims and survivors prefer.
- Our efforts should aim to reduce barriers to accessing systems, while allowing for justice to be pursued.



Thank you!

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