

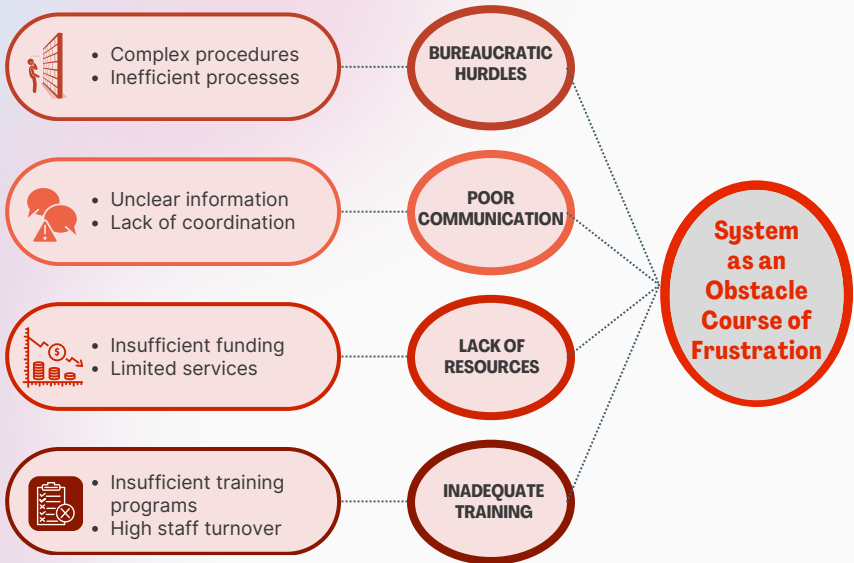
Family Violence in Georgia

AN IMPACT BRIEF

Executive Summary

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The system seems to be an obstacle course in frustration for those impacted.

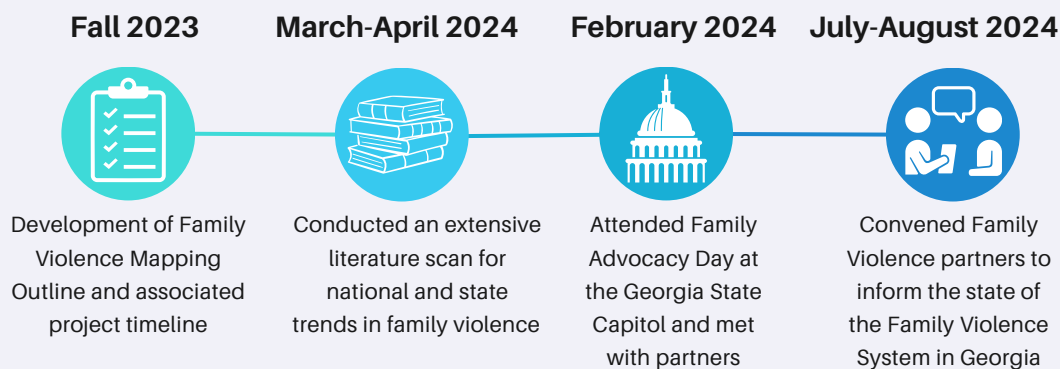
Quote from Family Violence Partner interview



Family violence is a pervasive and deeply concerning issue in Georgia, casting a shadow over the lives of countless individuals, families, and communities. This brief aims to shed light on the current state of family violence in Georgia, exploring its far-reaching impacts, the complexities of existing interventions, and proposing recommendations for meaningful improvements in both policy and practice.

Project Background and Methodology

This comprehensive examination of family violence in Georgia represents a research initiative conducted from October 2023 to September 2024. The project emerged from the pressing need to better understand and address family violence in our state, as incidents continue to strain local resources and demand more effective policy responses.



The research process unfolded systematically, beginning with preliminary literature scan and planning in Fall 2023, followed by methodology development in early 2024. The core research phase, conducted from March to August 2024, centered on 24 in-depth interviews with 28 key stakeholders across Georgia's family violence system. These participants represented diverse perspectives, including service providers, researchers, legal professionals (judges, prosecutors, and public defenders), law enforcement, healthcare providers, shelter directors, and therapists. Importantly, the study encompassed urban, suburban, and rural counties to capture Georgia's geographic diversity.

Our qualitative methodology employed semi-structured interviews lasting 60-90 minutes, allowing for both consistency in core topics and flexibility for unique insights. The interviews explored critical areas such as service gaps, legal system challenges, children's needs in family violence situations, and potential prevention strategies. All interviews were conducted confidentially and anonymously to ensure candid participation.

The analytical process involved transcription of all interviews, followed by systematic coding to identify recurring themes, challenges, and recommendations. To enhance validity, we cross-referenced emerging themes against existing literature in the field. The key findings presented in this brief represent the most frequently cited issues across interviews, lending confidence to their significance within Georgia's family violence system.

While this methodology provides rich, detailed insights from front-line professionals, we acknowledge its limitations. Though diverse, our sample cannot capture every perspective within the state, and while several participants had lived experience, the study primarily reflects professional rather than survivor perspectives. Nevertheless, by amplifying the voices of those working directly with family violence issues, this research offers policymakers and stakeholders actionable insights to improve Georgia's approach to preventing and addressing family violence.

Through this comprehensive approach, we aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of both challenges and opportunities in addressing family violence in Georgia, ultimately informing more effective policies and interventions for our state.

Family Violence in Georgia

The Scope of the Problem

The statistics paint a sobering picture of family violence in Georgia.

37.4%

OF WOMEN EXPERIENCE INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE ¹

30.4%

OF MEN EXPERIENCE INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE ²

118,600

CRISIS CALLS MADE TO GEORGIA'S CERTIFIED FAMILY VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT CENTERS IN 2022 ³

4,176

INDIVIDUALS WERE TURNED AWAY FROM SHELTERS DUE TO LACK OF BED SPACE ⁵

80%

OF THE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE-RELATED FATALITIES IN 2022 INVOLVED A FIREARM ⁴

37,653

FAMILY VIOLENCE INCIDENTS REPORTED IN 2023 ⁶

27,745

CHILD VICTIMS WERE SERVED BY GEORGIA STATE CERTIFIED FAMILY VIOLENCE PROGRAMS FROM 2018-2021

More than one-third of women and nearly one-third of men in the state experience intimate partner violence, sexual violence, or stalking at some point in their lives.⁸ **In 2022 alone, there were 163 domestic violence-related fatalities.**

The strain on support systems is evident, with domestic violence shelters struggling to meet demand.

In fiscal year 2019, while 7,214 victims found refuge in these shelters, an alarming number of individuals were turned away due to lack of bed space. These numbers not only represent a critical shortage in resources but also highlight the courage of survivors seeking help and the urgent need for expanded support services.

1 The National Intimate and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010-2012 state report

2 Ibid.

3 Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (2023).

4 Georgia Commission on Family Violence, Family Violence Fatality Review Project (2023).

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Georgia Commission on Family Violence, Family Violence Statistics and Trends (2018-2021).

8 Georgia Commission on Family Violence, Family Violence Fatality Review Project (2023).

The Human Cost: Impacts of Family Violence

The effects of family violence extend far beyond the immediate incident, leaving deep and lasting scars on survivors. Physical impacts range from visible injuries like bruises and broken bones to long-term health issues such as heart disease and nervous system disorders. In the most severe cases, family violence can lead to disabilities or even death.

The behavioral and emotional toll is equally devastating. Survivors often grapple with significant mental health challenges, including PTSD, depression, and anxiety. Many experience changes in fundamental patterns of daily life, such as disrupted sleep and eating habits. The trauma can lead to self-harm, suicidal thoughts, or substance abuse as individuals struggle to cope with their experiences.

Emotionally, family violence can shatter a person's sense of self-worth and security. Survivors frequently report feelings of hopelessness and unworthiness, struggling with an inability to trust others or find motivation in their daily lives. These emotional impacts can persist long after physical wounds have healed, affecting a survivor's ability to form healthy relationships and fully engage in work and community life.

Understanding Risk Factors and Prevention Strategies

Family violence doesn't occur in a vacuum; it's often rooted in a complex interplay of personal, familial, and societal factors. Economic instability, poverty, and lack of affordable housing create environments of stress and desperation that can exacerbate tensions within families. Untreated mental health issues and substance abuse problems can further contribute to volatile home situations.

The cyclical nature of violence is particularly harmful. Children who witness or experience family violence are at higher risk of perpetuating or experiencing abuse in their adult relationships, creating a generational cycle of trauma. This cycle is often reinforced by cultural norms that either normalize abusive behaviors, particularly towards women and children. Or stigmatize open discussion of family problems, making it harder for victims to seek help.



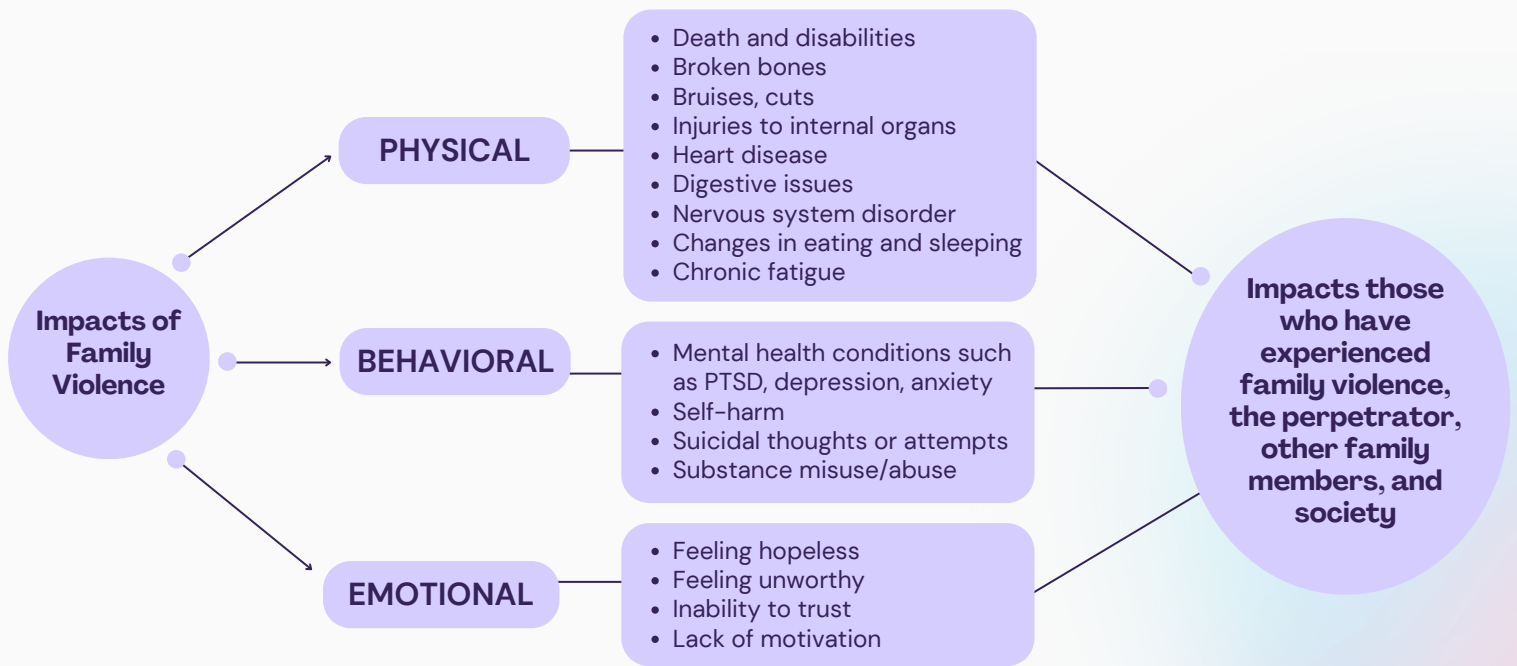
*Image adapted from NCADV's 2020 DVAM Toolkit

Prevention strategies must address these root causes to be effective. Early education programs that start in elementary or middle school can play a crucial role in breaking the cycle of violence.

By teaching children about healthy relationships, consent, and non-violent conflict resolution, we can lay the groundwork for a future with less family violence.

Public awareness campaigns are another vital tool in prevention. By reducing stigma and promoting awareness of available resources, these campaigns can empower victims to seek help and encourage communities to support survivors. Social and cultural norms are highly influential over individual behavior in a wide variety of contexts. Public awareness campaigns can positively influence the norms that underlie the acceptance of violence. Engaging community leaders, particularly in faith communities and other trusted institutions, can help spread these messages and create safe spaces for victims.

Addressing underlying socioeconomic factors is also critical. Efforts to reduce poverty, increase access to affordable housing, and improve healthcare access can help create more stable environments less prone to violence.



Navigating Challenges: Survivors' Struggles and Service Gaps

Survivors of family violence in Georgia face a daunting array of challenges as they seek safety and healing. The lack of affordable housing and economic independence often traps victims in abusive situations, forcing them to choose between homelessness and continued abuse. Fear of retaliation and ongoing safety concerns can paralyze survivors, making it difficult to take steps towards freedom.

Cultural pressures and societal stigma add another layer of complexity. Many survivors grapple with shame and fear of judgment from their communities, which can discourage them from seeking help. This is particularly acute in tight-knit communities or cultures where family privacy is highly valued.

Stockholm syndrome, a psychological response where victims develop emotional bonds with their abusers, can significantly impact family violence cases. This bond makes it difficult for victims to seek help or leave the abusive situation. Victims may develop emotional attachments to their abusers, rationalize the abuse, and feel isolated and dependent.

Small acts of kindness from the abuser can reinforce these feelings, while the constant threat of violence can make victims prioritize immediate survival over long-term safety. Additionally, self-blame can prevent victims from seeking help, as they may feel undeserving of support or believe

they are at fault. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for providing effective support to victims.

For those who do seek help, navigating the complex web of services and legal processes can be overwhelming. The fragmented nature of support services, coupled with the trauma and mental health impacts of abuse, can make it incredibly difficult for survivors to access the help they need. This challenge is even more pronounced for children caught in the crossfire of family violence, who may struggle to understand and articulate their experiences.

The service landscape in Georgia, while staffed by dedicated professionals, is strained and gaps are evident. There's a critical shortage of shelter capacity and affordable housing options, leaving many survivors with nowhere to go. Services often lack cultural specificity and language accessibility, creating barriers for diverse populations seeking help. Mental health and substance abuse treatment options, crucial for both survivors and aggressors, are limited.

Rural areas face particular challenges, with fewer resources spread over larger geographic areas. Specific populations, such as male victims or LGBTQ+ individuals, may struggle to find services tailored to their unique needs. The lack of coordination and communication among various state entities further complicates the delivery of comprehensive support to survivors.

Legal System: A Double-Edged Sword

The legal system, while a crucial tool in addressing family violence, often presents its own set of challenges. Inconsistencies between criminal and family courts can lead to conflicting orders and confusion for both survivors and law enforcement. The process of evidence collection and prosecution in family violence cases is complex, and without specialized training, legal professionals may struggle to build strong cases.

Enforcement of protective orders and firearm restrictions, critical for survivor safety, remains a challenge. Many survivors report feeling unsafe even after obtaining legal protections, highlighting the need for improved implementation and monitoring of these measures.

Perhaps most concerning, the legal process itself can often re-traumatize victims. The adversarial nature of court proceedings, the need to recount traumatic experiences, and prolonged legal battles can take a severe toll on survivors' mental health and healing process.

A Focus on the Future: Supporting Children

Children who witness or experience family violence carry a heavy burden that can impact their entire lives. There's a pressing need for specialized advocates and trauma-informed services designed specifically for these young survivors. These services should not only address immediate safety concerns but also provide long-term support to help children process their experiences and develop healthy relationship models. In families where one child exhibits violent behavior, it's crucial to recognize the needs of their siblings. These young ones may live in fear or feel neglected due to the attention given to the child displaying violent tendencies. Providing counseling and support groups for these siblings can help them express their feelings, understand the situation, and develop coping strategies. Ensuring they have a safe and supportive environment is essential for their emotional well-being.

The importance of maintaining children's relationships with non-violent parents cannot be overstated. When safe and possible, keeping these bonds intact can provide crucial stability and support for children navigating the aftermath of family violence.

Schools and communities also have a vital role to play in supporting affected children and preventing future violence. **School-based services can provide a safe space for children to seek help, while education and awareness programs on healthy relationships, the signs of family violence, and the importance of interventions can help break the cycle of violence for future generations.** Community centers, religious organizations, and local non-profits can offer safe spaces, mentorship programs, and activities that promote positive interactions and relationships.



Charting a Path Forward: Policy Recommendations

Addressing family violence in Georgia requires a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach.

Based on the insights gathered from service providers, legal professionals, and other stakeholders, the following rank-ordered, policy recommendations emerge:

01 Increase funding for domestic violence services

Significantly expand funding for domestic violence services, with a focus on increasing shelter capacity, affordable housing options, mental health and substance abuse treatment, and improving services in rural areas. Develop culturally specific and language-accessible services to ensure all populations can access the help they need.

02 Implement comprehensive education programs

Implement comprehensive education programs on healthy relationships, starting in early childhood and continuing through adolescence. These programs should cover topics such as consent, healthy communication, and conflict resolution.

03 Develop public awareness campaigns

Launch widespread public awareness campaigns to reduce stigma surrounding family violence and promote available resources. These campaigns should be culturally sensitive and reach diverse communities across the state.

04 Enhance training for all professionals who interact with family violence cases

Enhance training for all professionals who interact with family violence cases, including educators, healthcare workers, judges, and law enforcement. This training should cover the dynamics of domestic violence, cultural competency, and trauma-informed approaches.

05 Improve coordination between agencies and courts handling family violence cases

Consider establishing more Family Justice Centers to provide comprehensive, coordinated services under one roof.

06 **Reform legal responses to prioritize survivor safety and support over purely punitive measures**

This could include expanding the use of rehabilitative approaches for first-time offenders and improving enforcement of protective orders.

07 **Expand early intervention and support services for children who witness or experience family violence**

Expand early intervention and support services for children who witness or experience family violence, including school-based programs and specialized counseling services.

08 **Address underlying socioeconomic factors**

Address underlying socioeconomic factors contributing to family violence through policies aimed at reducing poverty, increasing access to affordable housing, and improving healthcare access.

09 **Develop more holistic intervention programs for those who cause harm**

Develop more holistic intervention programs for those who cause harm, addressing root causes like mental health issues, trauma, and economic instability, rather than focusing solely on punishment. This will reduce the likelihood of future aggressive behavior.

10 **Engage community leaders to raise awareness and create safe spaces**

Engage community leaders, including those in faith-based organizations and immigrant communities, to raise awareness and create safe spaces for survivors to seek help.

Conclusion

Family violence in Georgia is a complex and pervasive issue that demands our immediate and sustained attention. The statistics are alarming, the impacts devastating, and the challenges numerous. However, there is hope.

By implementing comprehensive prevention strategies, expanding and improving support services, reforming legal responses, and addressing root causes, Georgia can make significant strides in reducing family violence and supporting survivors.

This work requires the collaborative effort of policymakers, service providers, legal professionals, educators, healthcare workers, and community leaders. It demands both immediate actions to support current survivors and long-term strategies to break the cycle of violence for future generations.

The path forward is clear, though not easy. It requires commitment, resources, and a willingness to confront uncomfortable truths about our society. With concerted effort and a comprehensive approach, Georgia can work towards a future where every individual feels safe in their home and every child grows up in an environment free from violence. The cost of inaction is too high – it's time for Georgia to take bold steps in addressing family violence and creating safer, healthier communities for all its residents.



Thank you for taking the time to read this brief. If you have any questions or would like to discuss our findings further, please don't hesitate to reach out to us.

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