



The City of **WORCESTER**

The Advisory Committee on the Status of Women *presents a report on:*

Gender-Based Violence in Worcester

May 2022

Committee Members:

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INTRODUCTION

This report is a summary of the gender-based violence series hosted by the City of Worcester's Advisory Committee on the Status of Women, along with the committee's recommendations to address gender-based violence in Worcester. Please see the City of Worcester's website for recordings of the November and December 2021 meetings, along with detailed responses from the discussion participants for more information.

Gender-based violence "refers to harmful acts directed at an individual based on their gender. It is rooted in gender inequality, the abuse of power and harmful norms," according to the UN Refugee Agency. Gender-based violence can manifest in different forms, from intimate partner violence to sexual exploitation and trafficking, to sexual assault, and other forms of violence, both physical and emotional. It impacts people of all genders, but women are disproportionately affected by gender-based violence. Gender-based violence is chronically underreported for numerous reasons, including victim blaming, shame, fear of retaliation, and more.

According to the CDC, *more than 1 in 3 women experienced sexual violence involving physical contact during her lifetime.*

Globally, and in Worcester, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated gender-based violence leading to an increase in intensity of violence and a decrease in reporting.

Gender-based violence is a community, societal, economic and political issue. Eradicating gender-based violence requires systemic change, starting with a clear declaration against gender-based violence, continued education, a shift in focus in the conversation from survivors to the perpetrators, and additional funding and resources to service providers to better empower survivors.

INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE (IPV)

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, the YWCA of Central Massachusetts saw a decrease in the number of referrals for Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), because survivors were unable to contact YWCA for their services as they were sheltering in place at home with their abuser. The number of referrals increased in July through August of 2020 as more people went back to work, and increased 98% by March through April 2021.

According to Deborah Hall, Executive Director of the YWCA of Central Massachusetts, the YWCA reported an increase in the intensity of violence, such as homicide-suicide, and an increase in numbers of women affected, as evidenced by new cases of IPV.

Similar to other forms of gender-based violence, IPV is underreported. Not all survivors seek support from a domestic violence organization, either because they are unaware of the free services available, or they are not ready to engage, or do not feel they need the service. Many survivors do not report incidents to the police for fear of retribution by the perpetrator or in some cases fear of losing their children to state agencies.

The YWCA of Central Massachusetts is involved in multiple intervention services through community partnerships and initiatives, including Worcester Intervention Network (WIN), Safety Assistance for Every Person Leaving Abuse Now (SAFEPLAN), Domestic Violence High Risk Team (DVHRT).

WIN FY 21		SAFEPLAN			DVHRT FY 21	
Duplicated	56	FY 19	FY 20	FY 21	Tracked	4,053
Unduplicated	1,161	1,214	1,061	917	Watched	1,407

The pandemic caused a decline or minimal increases in utilization of services. SAFEPLAN had a 13 percent decrease over the prior year, while the WIN program only had 28 new participants during the 2021 fiscal year.

However, the level of service utilization is not reflective of the scope of the problem. Firstly, the number of cases tracked only capture the victims who use these intervention services. The total number of cases is estimated to be higher. Secondly, the service utilization does not measure the intensity of the violence. For example, according to the YWCA, with WIN, there were “multiple calls for the same address within a short period of time as well as a quick escalation in the level and intensity of violence. In a few reports the victims shared that they did not tell the full story the first time the police responded, while they were sheltering in place with the abuser.”

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND TRAFFICKING

Like other forms of gender-based violence, sexual exploitation is chronically underreported due to shame, guilt, the danger of disclosing, lack of trust from providers and the system in general, and criminalization of prostitution.

Over the last fiscal year, Living in Freedom Together (LIFT) saw an increase in people seeking services due to COVID-19, with 130 new individuals serviced. 120 were identified as survivors of sexual exploitation and more than 50 were survivors of some form of trafficking. Of the 120 survivors, 7 were minors. Part of the increase in people being serviced was the expansion of LIFT's services, including youth mentorship and the opening of Jana's Place, a new 15-bed women's shelter.

“Sex buyers who were still targeting marginalized women during a global pandemic speaks to their view on the humanity of individuals in prostitution and regard for the community as a whole.”

Nicole Bell, Chief Executive Officer and Director of LIFT

87% of LIFT participants reported that in addition to daily exploitation they were experiencing another form of interpersonal violence such as homelessness and substance use disorder, which further perpetuates the cycle of abuse.

According to Attorney Beth Keeley, Human Trafficking Division Chief, MA Attorney General's Office, human trafficking and exploitation affects all communities and demographics. Certain issues can make people more vulnerable to exploitation: prior traumatization, poverty or socio-economic struggles, racism, substance use disorder and other disabilities are just a few.

The population LIFT serves reflects that it is the most vulnerable and marginalized in our communities who are exploited, including women and girls of color, those with low-income backgrounds, and LGBTQ+ youth. In FY 2021, the people LIFT served were 25% Hispanic or Latinx, 20% Black or African-American, 6% multiple races, 4% Native, Hawaiian, or Pacific Islanders, and 45% White. LIFT served 22 LGBTQIA+ individuals in FY 2021, 8 of whom identified as gender-expansive. This is most likely severely underreported due to not being able to explore and not feeling safe in their identities yet.

While the pandemic exacerbated sexual exploitation, it also offered an opportunity to rethink the needs of the community. Prostituted women were not able to access shelters in the city, because of issues of safety and support. The YWCA, Abby's House, and other women serving organizations advocated for an independent women's shelter to serve prostituted women during COVID-19, and it has become a permanent program.

SEXUAL ASSAULT

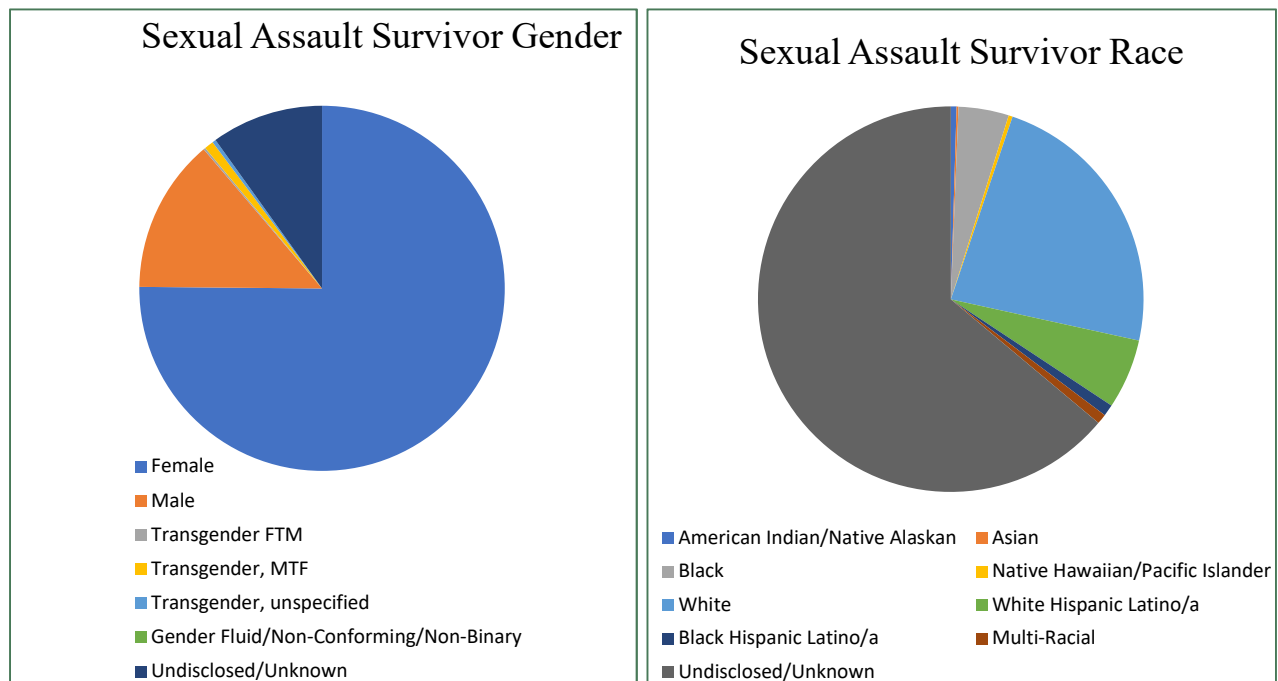
618 people received support services for sexual violence from Pathways for Change in FY 2021, out of Worcester alone. Within Central Massachusetts as a whole, the organization serviced over 2,000 people.

Kim Dawkins, President and CEO of Pathways for Change, cautions that gender-based violence is a silent epidemic that is always underreported. Dawkins stated that sexual violence survivors face many barriers to reporting, including, but not limited to victim blaming, not being believed, being mistreated, fear of retaliation, and many other shaming responses. Another factor Pathways for Change hears anecdotally from survivors is their mistrust of legal and law enforcement systems and institutions.

Throughout the pandemic, Pathways for Change saw a dip in reporting, disclosing, and coming forward due to child care, food insecurity, housing instability, substance abuse issues, abuser, landlord, work, lack of access, and/or danger. However, the dip in reporting did not mean that sexual violence was not happening.

Sexual violence affects everyone. Pathways for Change tracked the following demographic information based on *voluntarily provided* disclosures from survivors they serviced. In FY 2021, 10-15% of survivors that volunteered information were people of color, had mental illnesses, or identified within the LGBTQIA+ community.

The number of survivors serviced by Pathways for Change identifying within the LGBTQIA+ community decreased during the pandemic, for the same reasons that reporting overall decreased. However, according to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), LGBTQIA+ people experience sexual violence often at higher rates than straight people.



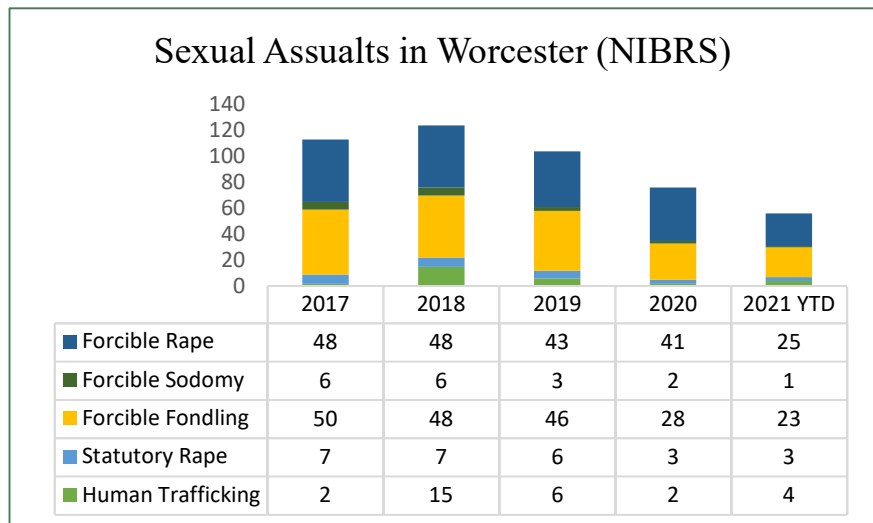
LAW ENFORCEMENT AND LEGAL RESPONSE

According to the National Crime Victimization Survey, which WPD uses for general policy guidance, less than 50% of sexual assaults are reported to police. In 2021, year-to-date as of November, WPD received 57 reports of sexual crimes.

*Based on the number of people serviced by Pathways for Change in 2021 – **618** – the number of sexual assaults reported to police (**57**) is far lower than 50%, not taking into account that many survivors do not report their assault to Pathways for Change, or any other agency.*

The Worcester Police Department tracks and reports data to the National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS) in the following areas: Rape, Sodomy, Fondling, Statutory Rape and Human Trafficking.

There was decrease in reported sexual assault cases during COVID. The data shows that the reported cases have declined every year beginning in 2017. WPD does not have a definitive explanation for the decline but it is consistent with the decline in sexual assaults reports in the United States based on NIBRS data. The outlier is the number of



Human Trafficking victims in 2018. That was due to an investigation with members of the Gang Unit and Massachusetts State Police which uncovered a significant, coordinated effort by gang members to victimize women.

The Worcester Police Department’s Bureau of Investigative Services receives referrals from 911 calls, hospitals, the District Attorney’s Office, Department of Children and Families (DCF), and complaint calls, according to Captain Michael A. McKiernan.

The Worcester Police Department recognizes that there is hesitancy in reporting crime, especially intimate and traumatic crime. To improve reporting, they are improving the Criminal Justice Response Program according to Sergeant Justin Bennes, Detective Unit, Sexual Crimes and Investigations. As part of that effort they are in the process of improving a program for outstanding warrants, and Watch Dog, which focuses on probation violations. During the December 2021 Advisory Committee on the Status of Women meeting, participants raised concerns that focusing

on warrants and probation violations would increase fear of police, and lead to survivors being arrested.

Approximately 30% of cases reported to the WPD are able to move forward to prosecution. According to RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network), only 25 out of every 1,000 perpetrators of sexual assault will end up in prison.

“When it comes down to it, we can arrest an offender, but there is a lot more that needs to work and be done. Whether offenders are detained and serve time or released, they eventually re-enter and go back into the community.”

Sgt. Justin Bennes

The Worcester County District Attorney’s Office shared there was a 40% decline in the number of defendants during the COVID pandemic and charges decreased by

Time Period	Defendants	Charges
March 13, 2019 through March 13, 2020	53	116
March 13, 2020 through March 13, 2021	37	51

more than half, which was a reflection in the reduced number of reported incidents of sexual assault, domestic violence, and restraining order violations cases. The DA’s office does not capture demographics and communities most affected by these offenses, as the data is focused on capturing prosecution statistics.

Attorney Edward Karcasinas from the Worcester District Attorney’s Office stated that lack of cooperation is one of the biggest barriers to prosecution. He believes that more communication with survivors, and more diversity in the District Attorney’s Office is essential to building trust. He would also like to see pathways for survivors to speak about incidents, even if they are not reported to the police.

At a state-level, the Attorney General’s Office has opened seven human trafficking investigations in the last 12 months, four of which have progressed to the litigation stage in criminal court. Attorney Beth Keeley, Human Trafficking Division Chief, MA Attorney General’s Office shared “We often say we only see the tip of the iceberg. There are many, complex reasons for this. Sex trafficking, as it can be charged in MA, is widespread and underreported for a number of reasons, and labor trafficking especially goes unreported due to lack of knowledge about the elements, misdiagnosis (ex. as wage/hour violations), and general difficulty with victim identification and reporting. Bottom line, if folks don’t feel safe and if they don’t have supports available to them, the evaluation of risk for reporting may not make sense for them to do.”

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT HOUSING INVESTMENTS

Over the past 5 years, the City of Worcester’s Executive Office of Economic Development has administered more than \$2 million through various city grants for housing and shelter that target and support women, victims of domestic violence, and victims of sex trafficking.

Organization	Program	Amount	Term	Grant Type
LIFT	HARBOR program	\$400,000	12/1/20-8/31/22	Emergency Solutions Grants COVID-19 (ESG CV2)
LIFT	Transitional Assistance Program (TAP)	\$41,453	7/1/21-6/30/22	ESG CV2
Abby’s House	Rehab and expand their Women’s Housing to 55 units	\$550,000	Completed in 2019	HOME funds
Abby’s House	Rehab and expand their Women’s shelter to 14 units	\$700,000	Committed in 2021	ESG-CV/Community Development Block Grant CARES (CDBG-CV)
YWCA	Rehab and expand their Women’s Housing to 45 units	\$440,000	Completed 2021	HOME funds

Worcester’s Executive Office of Economic Development shared the following information about each program fully or partially funded by city grants.

LIFT

HARBOR Program: ESG CV funds were awarded to support the operation of a 15 bed shelter and drop-in day program for women. From December 1, 2020, to December 21, 2021, 140 people were served in the HARBOR program. Case Managers provide intense case management services, peer mentorship, access to healthcare and treatment programs, advocacy in the court systems, access to stabilization resources (SNAP, SSI, etc.), and rapid rehousing support. A Nurse Practitioner is provided for medical service to program participants. The HARBOR Program will participate in the Homeless Management Information System and the funds will assist with the cost of payroll and services for both the shelter and day program. The expected outcome is to provide up to 150 people access to intensive case management. The beneficiaries are women experiencing homelessness, in the commercial sex trade, having substance or opiod use disorder, and/or mental health disorders.

Transitional Assistance Program (TAP): ESG funds will serve 10 survivors of the sex trade as they transition into permanent housing. The program will provide participants with up to six months of rental assistance in a step down model: 3 months of 100% rental assistance and 3 months of 40% rental assistance. The outreach and advocacy specialist will provide intensive case management focused on assisting participants in stabilizing their transition and supporting their independence through connections with community-based services and through direct service and

by facilitation support groups. The direct service and support groups cover issues like life-management skills, job training, the social-emotional impacts of early recovery, self-advocacy, and the importance of fostering community connections.

Abby's House: Abby's House provides a warm, welcoming and safe place for women who are homeless due to a lack of safe affordable housing, domestic violence, eviction, natural disaster, emotional crisis, economic crisis, or unemployment. They help enable women in need of housing to develop a network of appropriate services and supports to prevent future homelessness. Abby's House is the largest housing provider of its kind in Worcester. The staff at Abby's House works directly with each woman to provide quality long-term permanent housing and supportive services on-site. The housing and advocacy Abby's provides operates year-round, seven days a week, 24 hours a day. Abby's House also provides outreach services to health and fitness facilities and programs, meals and a food pantry for women who are unable to afford or access food, clothing vouchers for use in its thrift shop, transportation to medical appointments and in-home parenting support for households headed by women.

Rehab and expand their Women's Housing to 55 units: Abby's House's is a valuable resource to low-income women in Worcester. The building previously had 53 Single Room Occupancy Units (SROs) for women, and through the renovation two SROs were added, to create 55 rentable units with one SRO set aside as a manager's unit. Abby's House is an important provider of supportive housing for women in Worcester and this renovation helped them to maintain their stock of housing with supportive services. The existing buildings were structurally sound, but had a number of deferred maintenance items and inefficient building envelopes that were updated with these funds.

Rehab and expand their Women's shelter to 14 units: Over the last two years, Abby's House has done extensive work around trauma-informed care. Trauma-informed care seeks to realize the widespread impact of trauma and understand pathways for recovery, as well as the importance of providing safety, choice, collaboration, trustworthiness and empowerment. Over 80% of the women served by Abby's House have experienced some form of trauma during their lifetime including domestic or family violence, sexual or physical abuse, the unexpected death of a loved one, mental or physical health issues, and more. While these can lead a woman to become homeless a path to permanent supportive housing helps her pull through and allows them to take steps to begin healing and find a bright, new beginning. The current Abby's House shelter is able to hold up to 9 women, and has remained largely unaltered since the doors first opened. The building needs substantial structural repairs as well as an updated design in order to meet the needs of today's women and children. This will be done in part by making the shelter accessible, as well as incorporating a trauma-informed design throughout the renovation, creating environments that positively affect shelter guest's sense of identity and worth, dignity, and their empowerment. The current shelter will also be expanded in order to create more bedrooms, especially for families of different sizes, along with new play spaces. COVID-19 has also impacted the way that Abby's House provides shelter and this renovation will allow for each guest to have their own room with a door that closes. The renovation will also provide fresh air to the building making the space safer over the long term for guests and staff. The City of Worcester is supportive of the project and has provided the Agency a commitment of funds, which they can use to leverage other State and Federal resources.

YWCA

Rehab and expand their Women's Housing to 45 units: The funding provided by the City of Worcester allowed for the preservation and rehabilitation of the 41 existing units, while also reconfiguring the space to allow for the addition of four more units for a total of 45 SRO's. The Transitional Housing Program, or THP, provides safe, secure, supportive housing for low-income women. Residents of this program typically have incomes at, or lower than, 30-60% of average median income. The program is designed to help each resident achieve self-sufficiency and permanent, independent housing within two years. In support of this objective, THP was purposeful in its design of SROs with shared kitchens and common areas to encourage and foster community among residents. THP provides each resident with an individualized service plan, which includes the following: case management, advocacy, job search/ placement, permanent housing search, medical and legal referrals, and transportation support.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTIONS

Gender-based violence is a systemic issue that requires systemic change, by shifting cultural and societal attitudes, and addressing gender inequities. Dedicated funding for gender issues is critical to creating change.

“The City must invest time, money, and resources in order to have proper funding to perpetrate any form of change.”

Kim Dawkins, President and CEO of Pathways for Change

Request for information:

- List of available funding for all gender issues and how it is currently being used (ex: the Violence Against Women Act)
- More information is needed on number of women in WPD, and in the sexual crimes unit
- Report on number and nature of complaints filed against WPD related to gender

Request for action:

- Provide dedicated staff for gender equity work
- Participation of City Councilors and School Committee members in future discussions
 - Continue the conversation on gender-based violence, including additional public forums on sexual harassment and street harassment, which are forms of gender-based violence rooted in misogyny
- Create safe spaces for survivors and provide easier pathways for reporting.
 - Require trauma-informed care training for police
 - Require gender-bias police training
 - Include more diversity in the reporting structure of both the WPD and DA’s office
 - For the DA, create office hours at LIFT and other community partners to allow survivors to choose where they would prefer to meet
 - Develop a system that allows survivors to report and be listened to, without having to prosecute if they would prefer not to. Provide them with resources to get the support they need.

- Educate youth to start shifting societal and cultural attitudes.
 - Fund programs that educate about preventing gender-based violence, including, but not limited to, Pathways for Change's Sexual Assault Youth Education Program, the YWCA's Enough Abuse Campaign Ending Child Abuse
 - Decrease the opt-out rate for the Worcester Public School's Advocates for Youth's Rights, Respect, Responsibility sexual health education program. As of October 2021, the opt-out rate was 12.6% overall, and 17% for elementary students. Beginning conversations around gender equity and consent early is critical to shifting societal attitudes.
 - Work with local colleges and universities to prevent gender-based violence on campus
- Publicly support the Equality Model in MA (EMMA) legislation (H. 1761/S. 940). The bill would achieve the following: Decriminalizes people who are bought and sold, repealing the crime of selling sex, automatically expunging all past charges for prostitution
 - WPD commitment to targeting demand for sexual exploitation, rather than arresting victims, and a commitment to not arrest victims of IPV
- Create a safer physical environment wherever possible, including better lighting and monitoring systems in municipal lots and garages