

When Home is Not A Safe Haven:

*Domestic Violence in the Wake of COVID-19 and an Acute Needs
Assessment of the Ventura County Family Justice Center*

Grant Report prepared for the Ventura Council of Governments

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Ventura County Family Justice Center Staff & Agency Partners



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1 | Background

Domestic violence is a serious and pervasive public health problem that has been exacerbated by the global pandemic of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) (Peterman et al., 2020; Taub, 2020). Drawing on the definition used by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), domestic violence includes felony or misdemeanor crimes of violence committed toward a current or former intimate partner, adult or youth family members, or anyone with whom the perpetrator shares a home (U.S. DOJ 2019).

We set out to investigate how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the private lives of some of the most vulnerable members of Ventura County. Statewide stay-at-home orders may have decreased the spread of the deadly virus, but unintentionally led to other dangers within many households. Pandemic conditions (isolation, economic hardship, increased caregiving burdens, and psychological distress) were ripe for creating a perfect storm for domestic violence. These factors increased the risk of domestic violence, and potentially the severity of abuse, both in homes with a history of violence and with previously non-violent family members (Campbell, 2020; Piquero et al., 2021).

The United Nations has called this a “shadow pandemic,” and explains, “Since the outbreak of COVID-19, emerging data and reports from those on the front lines, have shown that all types of violence against women and girls, particularly domestic violence, has intensified” (UN Women, 2021). Further, like the novel coronavirus itself, which has differentially impacted the most disadvantaged, social isolation is more likely to negatively affect and limit the support options of under-resourced populations, thereby increasing the vulnerabilities of the least protected individuals (see Giammarinaro 2020 United Nations Reports on Human Rights).

Survivors of domestic violence have complex needs that often must be addressed by various different criminal justice and social service agencies (Simmons et al., 2016). The Family Justice Center (FJC) model, therefore, emerged as a way to more effectively assist such survivors by offering wraparound services from multidisciplinary helping agencies in one location (Gwinn & Strack, 2010). The DOJ has identified FJCs as a “best practice” in the field of domestic violence intervention and prevention services (Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women [DOJ, OVAW], 2007, p. 1).

Based on this model, the Ventura County District Attorney’s (VCDA) office opened the Ventura County Family Justice Center (VCFJC) in 2019 to centralize the various services needed by the victims of interpersonal violence in Ventura County. They primarily focus on helping survivors of domestic violence, child abuse, sexual assault, human trafficking, as well as elder and dependent adult abuse. It would become the very first of its kind on the central coast of California. Fortunately, the VCFJC remained operational during the COVID-19 crisis, with some social distancing adjustments, and the staff continued to provide vital help to those in crisis.

To investigate the complex and largely hidden public health concern of domestic violence in Ventura County, we sought information from three main sources: law enforcement who respond to acute domestic violence situations, the survivors who seek help amidst abuse, and the professionals dedicated to improving the safety and wellbeing of those in danger.

2 | Executive Summary

Our research indicates that sadly, some residents in Ventura County may indeed be safer outside of their homes. We saw a statistically significant increase of 5.6% in domestic violence-related calls for police service in Ventura County beginning with the stay-at-home mandate issued in March of 2020 up to December 2020. This is in line with, but lower than, national trends, which indicated that domestic violence rose by 8.1% during pandemic-related lockdown orders (Piquero et al., 2021).

Concerning trends were likewise documented during the lockdown period at the VCFJC, the multi-agency center and primary hub in the county for survivors of interpersonal violence. Initially, there was a chilling effect on calls to the VCFJC for domestic violence, but an increase in calls related to child abuse, sexual assault and elder abuse calls. Then over an 8-week period (between March 2020 and July 2020), there was a sharp rise for all VCFJC metrics including a 101%+ increase in Domestic Violence Temporary Restraining Orders (DV TROs), a 52% increase in domestic violence calls, and a 53% increase in sexual assault/child abuse/as well as elder abuse referrals.

We were also interested in investigating domestic violence rates at a city level within Ventura County. We wanted to know if there was an overlap in geographic location between domestic violence-related calls for police service and the residence of victims who utilized VCFJC services.

Table 1.1: City Distribution of Domestic Violence-Related Calls for Assistance in Ventura County and City of VCFJC Clients Served, 2020

City	% of VCFJC Clients	% of DV Calls	Service Level
Oxnard	32.79%	36.50%	90%
Ventura	16.52%	26.00%	64%
Simi Valley	8.76%	8.60%	102%
Camarillo	7.23%	7.10%	102%
Thousand Oaks	5.53%	10.90%	51%
Santa Paula	4.81%	2.10%	229%
Port Hueneme	3.80%	4.90%	78%
Newbury Park	2.63%		
Ojai	2.50%	1.30%	192%
Fillmore	2.42%	2.50%	97%
CA (outside Ventura County)	8.16%		
Outside CA	0.16%		
Missing	4.68%		

Source: Authors' Calculations; Data provided by the California Department of Justice, OpenJustice.

Indeed, as Table 1.1 indicates there appear to be areas within Ventura County that make up a greater proportion of domestic violence-related calls for police service. Specifically, in 2020, 36.5% of all DV-related calls for police service came from Oxnard and 26% came from Ventura. This corresponds to the relative geographic distribution of clients who are using VCFJC services; 32.79% of clients are from Oxnard and 16.52% reside in Ventura.

The general patterns in terms of *who* accesses VCFJC services did not change during the pandemic; our analysis shows that the majority of clients seeking help are women (81.14%), over half identify as Hispanic/Latino (52.06%) and a third identify as White (31.66%). Further, the reasons *why* clients use the justice center have remained consistent: domestic violence as well as stalking and harassment are the most common experiences that bring clients to the VCFJC. Most clients receive assistance with restraining orders and are recommended services provided by the District Attorney's Office. Of those who accessed VCFJC services after the start of the pandemic, many (62.08%) had experienced abuse prior COVID-19, about a third (36.58%) reported that their abuser began hurting them after the pandemic, and a quarter (25.84%) reported that the experiences with their offender have gotten worse since the pandemic.

We found that COVID-19 restrictions have not only impacted clients' lives, but they have also impacted the VCFJC. In terms of work processes, most notably, their client intake procedures had to be adapted to facilitate remote intakes which led to staffing adjustments. While the digitized remote intake process has generally improved data keeping relative to the manual process prior to the pandemic, staff members newer to the intake process vary in their level of intake training and have a degree of discretion during this process which has led to some new data keeping inconsistencies.

Insights from our survey with VCFJC staff and agency partners highlighted some specific strengths and challenges of the multi-agency model for victim services before and during the pandemic. Respondents who completed the survey were overwhelmingly positive on most metrics when asked to reflect on their perceptions of, and experiences with, the operations at VCFJC; this includes questions regarding the accessibility, coordination, efficiency, and comprehensiveness of services offered to victims of interpersonal violence in Ventura County.

One specific area of improvement noted by staff and agency partner respondents was the VCFJC's role in increasing offender accountability. Consistent with an increase in the call volume to the center, the staff and agency partner respondents overwhelmingly agreed that their clients likely faced an increased risk of victimization during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a testament to the confidence the staff and agency partners have in their work, respondents were optimistic about the VCFJC's capacity to deal with a potential surge of clients needing services following the COVID-19 pandemic. Areas of need were also identified, which included a critical need for expanded safe housing for survivors, as well as increased staffing and resources to adequately support the VCFJC and its partners.

In summary, the results of our study just scratched the surface of illuminating the significant needs of the residents of Ventura County who face violent and abusive domestic situations, and reveal that abusers may have weaponized quarantine to further isolate and disempower their victims. Our evaluation study has also reinforced the importance for Ventura County to invest in the VCFJC and related social service agencies in order to promote our community's coordinated efforts to combat domestic violence in the wake of COVID-19. We need to ensure that an immediate, comprehensive response to domestic violence remains available to ensure the long-term stability and wellness for survivors and families.

3 | Overview of the Report

We begin this report by highlighting our key findings and their related implications. We then assess the scope and severity of the domestic violence trends during the pandemic-related stay-at-home orders nationally before focusing on Ventura County. Next, we examine the history of the FJC model and summarize the existing empirical literature on the efficacy of FJCs. We also provide a synopsis of the history and operations of the VCFJC in more detail. Subsequently, we describe our methodological approach and summarize the key findings based on our research. Finally, we offer suggestions and implications to help improve Ventura County's coordinated response to domestic violence and to ensure that the VCFJC can continue offering collaborative, integrated, and comprehensive victim services.



4 | Key Findings and Implications/Recommendations

Key Findings	Implications/Recommendations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was a 5.6% increase in police calls for service related to domestic violence observed in Ventura County beginning with the stay-at-home orders in March through December 2020. • This was similar to, but slightly lower than the pattern observed nationally, where officially reported domestic violence incidents increased by 8.1% after stay-at-home orders were implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. • In terms of how the pandemic impacted specific cities in Ventura County, the data was highly variable so it was difficult to pinpoint exact trends at that level. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a need for higher quality criminal justice data in terms of reliability and validity of the police reports in Ventura County. • The Ventura County Sheriff's Office (VCSO) should develop templates to standardize police reports to reduce the variability in how domestic violence-related calls for police service are categorized and recorded across the county. The VCSO collects its own data from the five cities it serves as well as the unincorporated areas of Ventura County. It also manages the data reported by cities with their own police departments, which include Oxnard, Port Hueneme, Santa Paula, Simi Valley and Ventura. • Evaluate if law enforcement is following reporting requirements for DV per the Ventura County Domestic Violence Law Enforcement Protocol. • Recommendation that the VC District Attorney's office track and analyze DV-related homicides in Ventura County. Using multiple sources, such as medical examiner records, vital statistics and law enforcement reports would help in identifying patterns, such as red flags and manner of injury that could be used to develop intervention and prevention strategies to reduce fatalities.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The VCFJC has faced challenges in record keeping, both in terms of the consistency of paperwork over time, and between various agency partners, as well as in regards to disruptions in work processes related to the pandemic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a data entry handbook that is provided to all staff who engage in client intakes. • Mandate training related to record keeping for all staff and agency partners to ensure that everyone is following the same protocols; this would increase the accuracy and reliability of data records. • Hire a permanent staff member to oversee updating intake forms, provide professional development and training sessions on data keeping, be responsible for internal data management, and write internal and external data analysis reports. • Invest in database software that makes it easier to track individual clients and service recommendations; scalability for record keeping will be extremely important as the VCFJC continues to serve the county.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over 32.79% of clients served by the VCFJC are from Oxnard. • Similarly the largest proportion out of the overall number of domestic violence-related calls for police service are generated from Oxnard. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence suggests that a VCFJC satellite location based in Oxnard is crucial. It would help support the victims in this city more easily, and make the coordination between health care services, social services, and criminal justice systems more effective and efficient. • Advocate for implementing a specially trained, multi-disciplinary domestic violence crisis response team in Ventura County. This would pair victim advocates with specially trained police officers, and Oxnard would be the ideal city to initially deploy this team.

Key Findings	Implications/Recommendations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VCFJC Staff and Agency partners who completed the survey indicated the center is effective in terms of providing services that are efficient, well coordinated, and comprehensive. • Respondents agreed that the VCFJC has been successful in fulfilling its guiding principles, particularly in the areas of providing victim-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally inclusive services. • The areas of providing safe housing and improving offender accountability were noted as weaknesses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordination between agency partners and staff is strong, but could be improved by creating a "data sharing warehouse" in which brief reports (quarterly or biannually) are submitted by all agencies that includes non-identifying, aggregate level data on clients. • This would be helpful for identifying patterns of service needs as well as gaps to ensure that all members of the county are being served and to reduce overlap and duplicate service delivery. • Ongoing surveys and focus groups with staff and agency partners would help to monitor challenges and barriers to access for clients. • Standardized record keeping through a comprehensive data system would shed much-needed insight on the VCFJC's impact on survivor and offender outcomes. • Continue to invest in personnel and facilities, particularly in expanded emergency housing options. This would ultimately reduce the tremendous (social and economic) costs that domestic violence has on Ventura County. • Family Justice Centers like the VCFJC are of critical importance for helping victims, reducing the burden on our health care, criminal justice and social service systems. • Investing in domestic violence prevention and stopping intergenerational cycles of abuse are the most cost effective strategies for increasing the overall wellness and safety of our county. (Camp HOPE, put on by the VCFJC for children impacted by DV, is an example of such a transformative program.) • Future evaluations should include research with victims/survivors of domestic violence in Ventura County. Ideally, in-depth interviews, surveys and/or focus groups would be conducted with people who have utilized services at the VCFJC, as well as those who have not to better understand their experiences and needs. • Research should also explore the relationship between law enforcement and the VCFJC in more depth to evaluate how cooperation can be improved. • This report offers baseline data from which to compare future systematic analyses of domestic violence in Ventura County as well as VCFJC outcomes and processes.

5 | Domestic Violence Trends During COVID-19 Lockdowns Nationally

It is notoriously difficult to assess the full prevalence of domestic violence at any point in time, and even more complicated to get a complete picture of actual rates during the COVID-19 crisis. Given the variety of ways domestic violence is conceptualized and measured makes it challenging to track the scope and patterns of its different forms (Loseke et al., 2005; Tolan et al. 2006). The hidden and complex nature of domestic violence means that it is often unrecognized and vastly underreported; thus, available statistics on domestic violence are inherently underestimations (Davis et al., 2003; Muehlenhard & Kimes, 1999). It is also important to note that decreases in official data related to domestic violence during crises are often interpreted not as a true drop in abuse incidents, but rather attributed to the inability for victims to seek help while stuck in close proximity to their offender. Victims may have also been deterred from pursuing alternative shelter in the homes of friends and relatives, or in crowded domestic violence shelters out of fear of contracting COVID-19. Further, third-party reporting was reduced as vigilant adults and mandatory reporters were not interacting with victims during lockdown. In short, quarantine increased vulnerability while reducing victims' options for support, which consequently impacted the number of known cases of family violence (Usher et al., 2020).

In regards to pinpointing the consequences of the social distancing measures used to control COVID-19 on domestic violence in the U.S., initial evidence used to measure this trend appeared to be mixed and somewhat contradictory. Some studies report domestic violence calls for police service decreasing temporarily and significantly in certain regions (e.g., Ashby 2020; Bullinger et al., 2021) or increasing in some areas (e.g., Leslie & Wilson, 2020; Piquero et al., 2020). Such oscillating trends were also observed by victim support service hotlines during the pandemic. Braced for a surge when social distancing mandates were implemented, many hotlines experienced a dramatic decrease in calls, some by as much as 50% (Evans et al., 2020; Fielding, 2020). Others, such as the National Domestic Violence Hotline (NDVH), reported that while initially slow, there was an increase in call volume (up 9% in 2020 compared to the previous year), and 10% of those callers cited COVID-19 as a condition of their experience (NDVH, 2020).

In regards to sexual abuse specifically, a record number of people (60,437) nationwide sought services from the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN) in a two-month period in 2020 during the pandemic lockdowns, which was an 18% increase in victims seeking help from the same time period last year and the highest number in RAINN's 26-year history (Kamenetz, 2020; RAINN, 2020). Child welfare investigations into allegations of abuse or neglect were dangerously delayed or sharply curtailed during the pandemic, leaving vulnerable children imperiled (Therolf et al., 2020). This contributed to a drop in the number of reported cases of child abuse, but a simultaneous and steep rise in the severity of child abuse cases that have become known to ER physicians and the authorities during the pandemic (Boserup et al., 2020; Hakes, 2020; Schmidt & Natanson, 2020).

A more authoritative answer to understanding domestic violence trends overall has been provided by Piquero et al., 2021 through a systematic review and meta-analysis; their findings revealed that in the U.S. overall, officially reported domestic violence incidents increased by 8.1% after stay-at-home orders were implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. The studies that were included in the Piquero et al. 2021 meta-analysis drew on a variety of data sources, including logs of domestic violence police calls for service, official police-recorded crimes of domestic violence, emergency hotline registries, and other administrative records. Additional empirical research on domestic violence in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic is of vital importance to truly assess the short- and long-term consequences of the stringent lockdown measures. Our study offers a contribution to this literature by focusing on one particular county in the United States.

6 | Focus on Domestic Violence in Ventura County

Ventura County is located on the southern end of the central coast of California, is home to over 846,000 residents and is ranked as the 13th most populous county in the state (US Census Bureau 2019). It includes the ten incorporated cities of Camarillo, Fillmore, Moorpark, Ojai, Oxnard, Port Hueneme, Santa Paula, Simi Valley, Thousand Oaks, and San Buenaventura (Ventura), in addition to some unincorporated communities (County of Ventura, 2021). Agriculture and tourism are the leading economic drivers in the region.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau in 2019, Whites comprised 44.7% of the population in Ventura County, Hispanics/Latinos made up 43.2%, Asians comprised 7.9% of residents, Black or African Americans made up 2.4% and other race/ethnic groups comprised a combined 5.7%. Foreign-born persons were estimated to make up 21.8% of the population. Approximately twenty thousand indigenous migrants are also estimated to live and work in Ventura County, many from the Mixteca region of Mexico, and are some of the poorest workers concentrated in labor-intensive agricultural industries; members of this subculture often exclusively speak their native pre-Hispanic indigenous languages. Thus they not only face challenges due to their immigration status but are also isolated from other Latino populations because of this language barrier (Mixteco.org, 2021).

The residents of Ventura County face challenges that are common throughout California, including a lack of affordable housing, limited public transit options, and low-paying jobs relative to the high cost of living (California Department of Housing and Community Development, 2018). The median household income (in 2019 dollars) in Ventura County was \$88,131 and an estimated 8.2% of the population were living in poverty (US Census Bureau, 2019). In the past decade, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of residents who receive support services from the Ventura County Human Services Agency (VCHSA); from 1 in 10 in 2007 to 1 in 4 in 2018 (VCHSA, 2020). In terms of public safety, the Ventura County Sheriff's Office (VCSO) handles the unincorporated areas of Ventura County and contracts with five cities, whereas the cities of Oxnard, Port Hueneme, Santa

Paula, Simi Valley, and Ventura have their own police departments (County of Ventura, 2021). There have been a number of dedicated agencies that provide resources, shelter, and intervention to victims of domestic violence in Ventura County, such as the Coalition for Family Harmony as well as Interface Children & Family Services. The VCFJC emerged to integrate and centralize government services, non-profit organizations, local law enforcement, and legal assistance or referrals for victims in the county. This multi-agency model grew out of a larger trend nationwide.

7 | The Family Justice Center Model and Existing Research

The FJC movement began in the early 2000s, with the opening of the first family justice center in San Diego in 2002, which is often credited as the first center to take a collaborative step to expand upon other Coordinated Community Response Projects (CCRs) (Gwinn, et al., 2007). FJCs are innovative because they flip a system that was originally designed around professionals by instead prioritizing survivors who need to work with professionals. In 2004, George W. Bush launched the President's Family Justice Center Initiative, which dedicated \$20 million dollars to establish 15 additional FJCs in various communities across the country (DOJ, OVAW, 2007). The FJC model continued to proliferate and in 2018, over 80 programs operating in the U.S. were identified that have criteria common to FJCs; they are multi-agency, multi-disciplinary collaborations that are co-located with services directed to adult survivors of family violence (Abt Associates, 2018). To earn an "affiliated status" with The Family Justice Center Alliance (2020), an FJC is required to have the following full-time, co-located partners: domestic violence or sexual assault program staff, law enforcement investigators or detectives, a specialized prosecutor or prosecution unit, and civil legal services (The Family Justice Center Alliance, 2020).

There is no federal model, however, for defining, structuring, or measuring an effective FJC (Gwinn & Strack, 2010; Abt Associates, 2018). This lack of standardization, combined with methodological challenges in measuring community-based organizations, hampers researchers' ability to provide a comprehensive assessment of FJCs' impact on the clients and communities they serve (Abt Associates, 2018; Allen et al., 2013; Giacomazzi et. al, 2008; Murray et al., 2020). Despite this lack of uniformity, the limited and growing empirical research that has been conducted on FJCs is promising (Simmons et al., 2016). At the individual level, studies of FJCs have shown a high level of client satisfaction and evidence of increased hope, satisfaction with life, emotional well-being, success, and empowerment among victims who have received services from FJCs (EMT Associates Inc., 2013; Hellman et al., 2017; Hoyle & Palmer, 2014; Melton, 2019). Existing research also indicates that FJCs have made demonstrably positive impacts on the communities in which they are located. These promising trends include, but are not limited to, the following beneficial outcomes: an increase in restraining orders, a reduction of victim recantation and minimization, increased prosecution of offenders, reduction in homicide rates, as well as improved effectiveness and community support in preventing and responding to domestic and intimate partner violence more generally (Allen et al., 2008; Family Justice Center Alliance, 2013b; Murray et al., 2020; Simmons et al., 2016).

To date, there are only two studies (EMT Associates, Inc., 2013 and Giacomazzi et al., 2008) that have produced a process and outcome evaluation of FJCs (Simmons et. al, 2016). With this project, we are answering the call of Abt Associates (2018) for more systematic evaluation of FJCs. Our goal is to add to this body of empirical literature by providing an evaluation of the VCFJC with a focus on how the center responds to the needs of victims both before and during a public health crisis.

8 | VCFJC Origins and Operations

In 2015, the Ventura County District Attorney (VCDA)'s office under the leadership of DA Greg Totten began working to open the VCFJC. The VCDA was awarded a California Office of Emergency Services grant in 2018 to fund initial lease costs for the operation and a 501(c)(3) foundation was also formed to secure long-term funding for a facility. Another important milestone was reached in September of 2019 when the VCFJC earned affiliation status with Family Justice Center Alliance (FJCA) through the Alliance for HOPE International. The FJCA serves as the clearinghouse, research center, and national affiliation organization for FJCs nationally and internationally. The VCFJC opened in 2019, the same year that they moved to their current location, a 15,000 square-foot facility in the city of Ventura (VCDA, 2020).

Chief Deputy DA Michael Jump serves as the executive director of the VCFJC, overseeing the coordination of more than 40 agencies and countless volunteers. The VCFJC takes a comprehensive approach, deviating from traditional justice system and

social service practices that are bifurcated by agency. This model strives to help victims navigate complex systems to ensure they receive the necessary assistance. It also aims to reduce the level of attrition common in the progression of family and interpersonal violence cases through the criminal justice system. Indeed, the right intervention and support is vital for holding offenders accountable in order to stop the cyclical pattern of domestic violence.

All VCFJC clients are assigned a navigator who leads them through a centralized intake process and coordinates the services they might need, which are offered at no charge. Core service providers co-located at the facility include: local law enforcement, victim advocates, domestic violence and sexual assault community-based organizations, as well as a prosecutor, and civil legal services. In one location clients of the VCFJC can access emergency and safety support, file a police report, apply for a restraining order, as well as access medical and mental health services. Longer-term support options are also available, including: obtaining shelter and housing assistance, receiving education, career and financial counseling, participating in child development and parenting enrichment programs, and joining survivor advocacy and support groups (VCFJC, 2020).

In the short time since the VCFJC has been opened in Ventura County, it has served thousands of victims. The staff provides clients with information and services in a victim-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally inclusive manner to aid in their safety and recovery. One primary goal of the VCFJC is to interrupt intergenerational violence. Towards that objective, VCFJC puts on Camp HOPE America, an annual week-long camping trip experience for local children and teens who have been exposed to trauma and violence. It is based on a model developed by the staff of Alliance for HOPE International and is an evidence-based camping and mentoring program focused on providing healing and hope to young people who have been affected by family violence.



9 | Data and Methodology

For this study, we utilized a multi-methodological, longitudinal approach to investigate the impact of COVID-19 stay-at-home orders on domestic violence in Ventura County. The time frame we are interested in corresponds to the intervention point of March 19th, 2020. This is the date Governor Gavin Newsom issued the state-wide order for individuals to stay at home or their place of residence. The mandate was issued in an attempt “to protect the health and well-being of all residents of California and to establish consistency across the state in order to slow the spread of COVID-19” (Exec. order no. 33-20, 2019).

We focused on three main sources of data shortly before and after the March 19th date. This includes 1) domestic violence-related calls for police service in Ventura County, 2) domestic violence services accessed by clients from the VCFJC, and 3) a survey of staff and agency partners at the VCFJC. We began our study after obtaining approval from our university’s institutional review board and permission from the Ventura County District Attorney’s Office.

For the first two data sources, we conducted secondary data analysis. For the domestic violence-related calls for assistance, we relied on the data provided by the VCSO to the UCR, which is available through the California Department of Justice OpenJustice database. For our analysis of the VCFJC, redacted data was provided by the center’s staff, which included anonymized client in-take forms as well as administrative data kept by the staff regarding their client services.

Lastly, in early January of 2021, we created and distributed a survey to the staff and agency partners of the VCFJC. The purpose of the survey was to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected survivors/clients and services in Ventura County. Our sampling frame consisted of 58 respondents, which included on-site and off-site partners as well as volunteers. In total, 28 respondents participated in the survey, resulting in a 48% response rate.

10 | Findings

Below, we provide an overview of our major findings from these data sources.

10.1 | Domestic Violence-Related Calls for Assistance in Ventura County

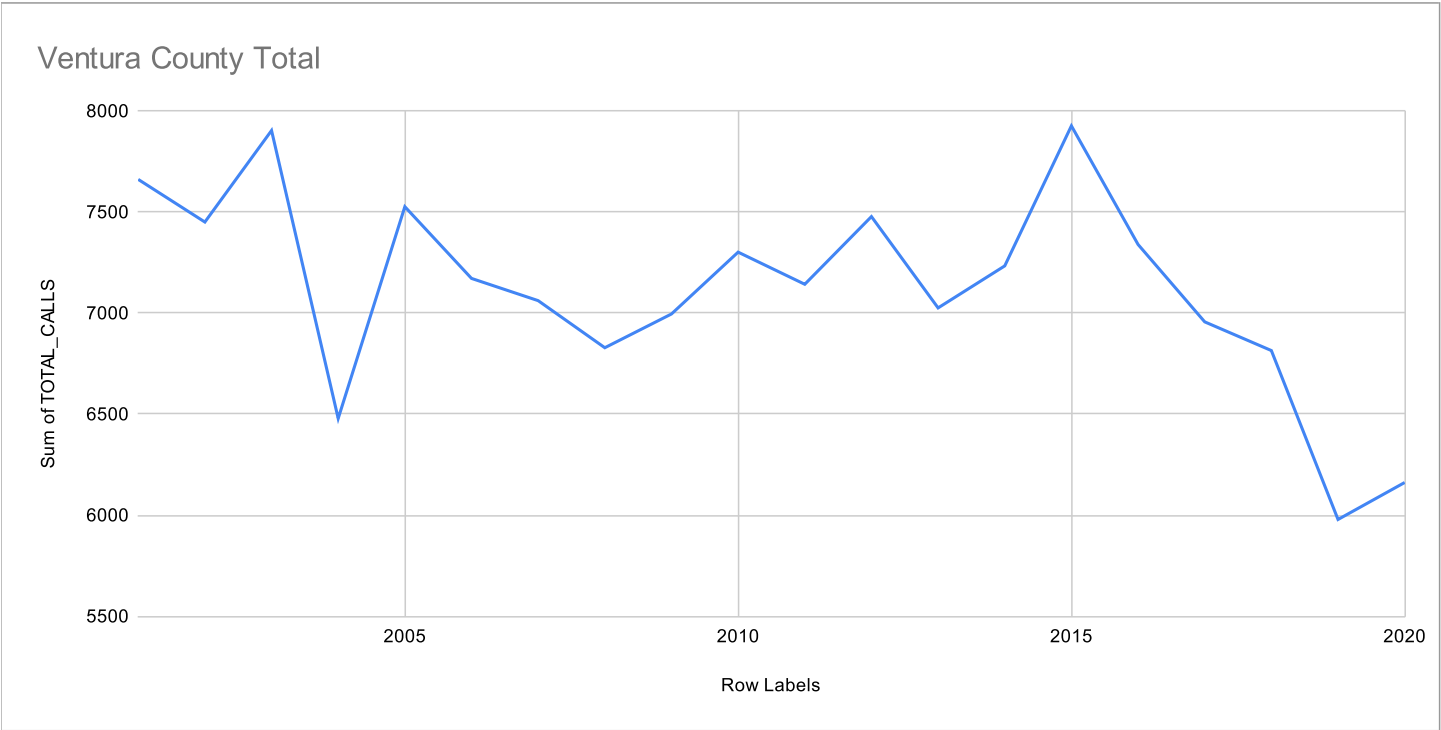
In 2019 the total violent crime rate per 100,000 in Ventura County was relatively low (214.3), compared to the crime rate of California (437.9 overall) and it was also lower compared to the national crime rate (379.4) (based on data from the California Department of Justice summarized by the Conduent Healthy Communities Institute 2021). Also compared with 2018, there was an overall reduction of 10% in Part I crimes reported to the Uniform Crime Reporting Statistics of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 2019 during the COVID-19 pandemic (VCSO, 2021).

The Human Services Agency of Ventura County estimated that the number of Adult Protective Service Cases rose by 22% from 2016-19 and in 2019 alone, they responded to 4,701 allegations of adult abuse (VCHSA, 2020). Cases that are recognized and reported are anticipated to rise given our increasing senior population, combined with the extreme isolation of the elderly or disabled due to COVID-19.

Our study investigated whether the local trends for domestic violence-related calls for police service in 2020 and beyond matched the increased trend seen nationally (see Leslie & Wilson, 2020; Piquero et al., 2020).

So how does Ventura County compare to national rates of domestic violence during the pandemic? This question is not as easy to answer as it may seem. The figures below show both the yearly trends from 2001 to 2020 and the monthly trends from 2015 to 2020 on all recorded DV calls in Ventura County as reported in the state’s OpenJustice portal (CA, 2021). As we can see, Ventura County on average experienced a substantial decrease in DV calls since 2015 (24.6% from 2015 to 2019), but it appears that progress has stalled or even reversed in 2020.

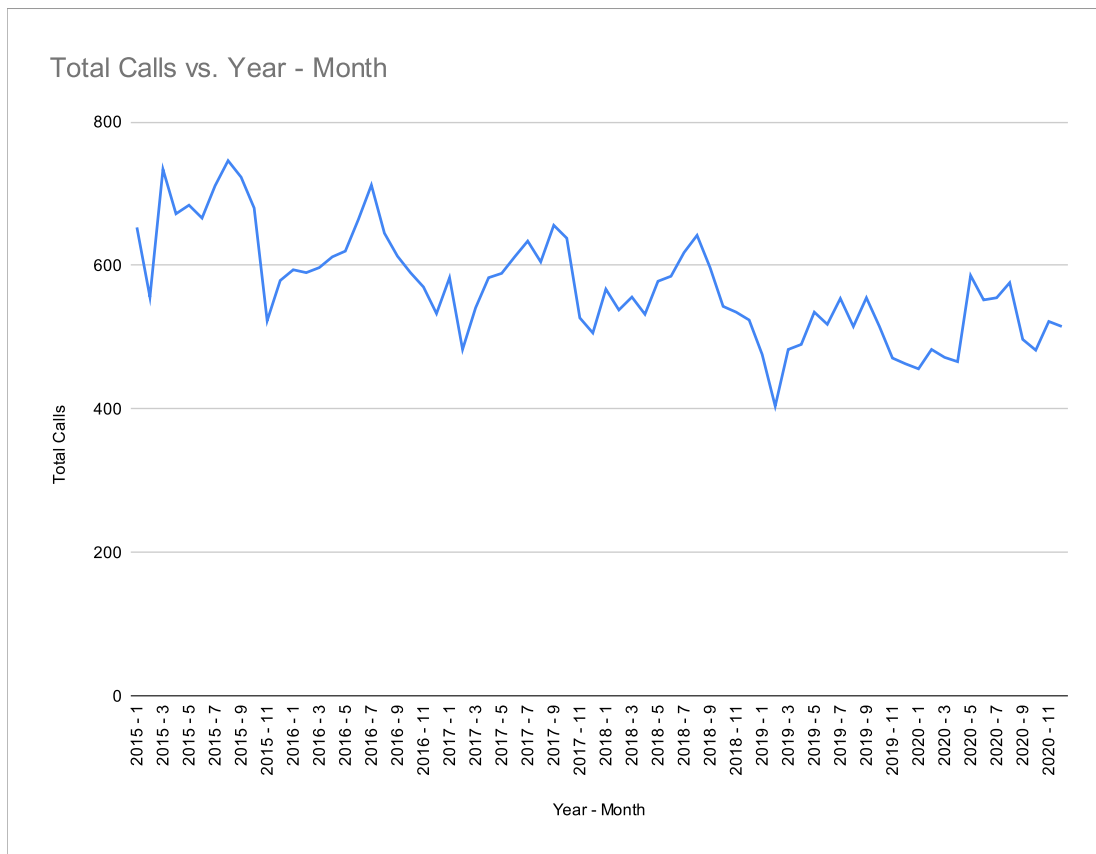
Table 1.2: Yearly Trends from 2001 to 2020 in Ventura County



Source: Authors' Calculations; Data provided by the California Department of Justice, OpenJustice.

The monthly data reveals a more complex picture. As shown below, there are strong seasonal effects in DV calls. As it so happens, March (the month of the first lockdown order) corresponds to a typical seasonal increase in DV calls. However, using a simple regression analysis to control for such seasonality, we find that the COVID-19 pandemic indeed corresponds to a statistically significant 5.6% increase in DV calls over what we would have expected if the progress made over the last 5 years would have continued.

Table 1.3: Monthly Trends from 2015 to 2020 in Ventura County

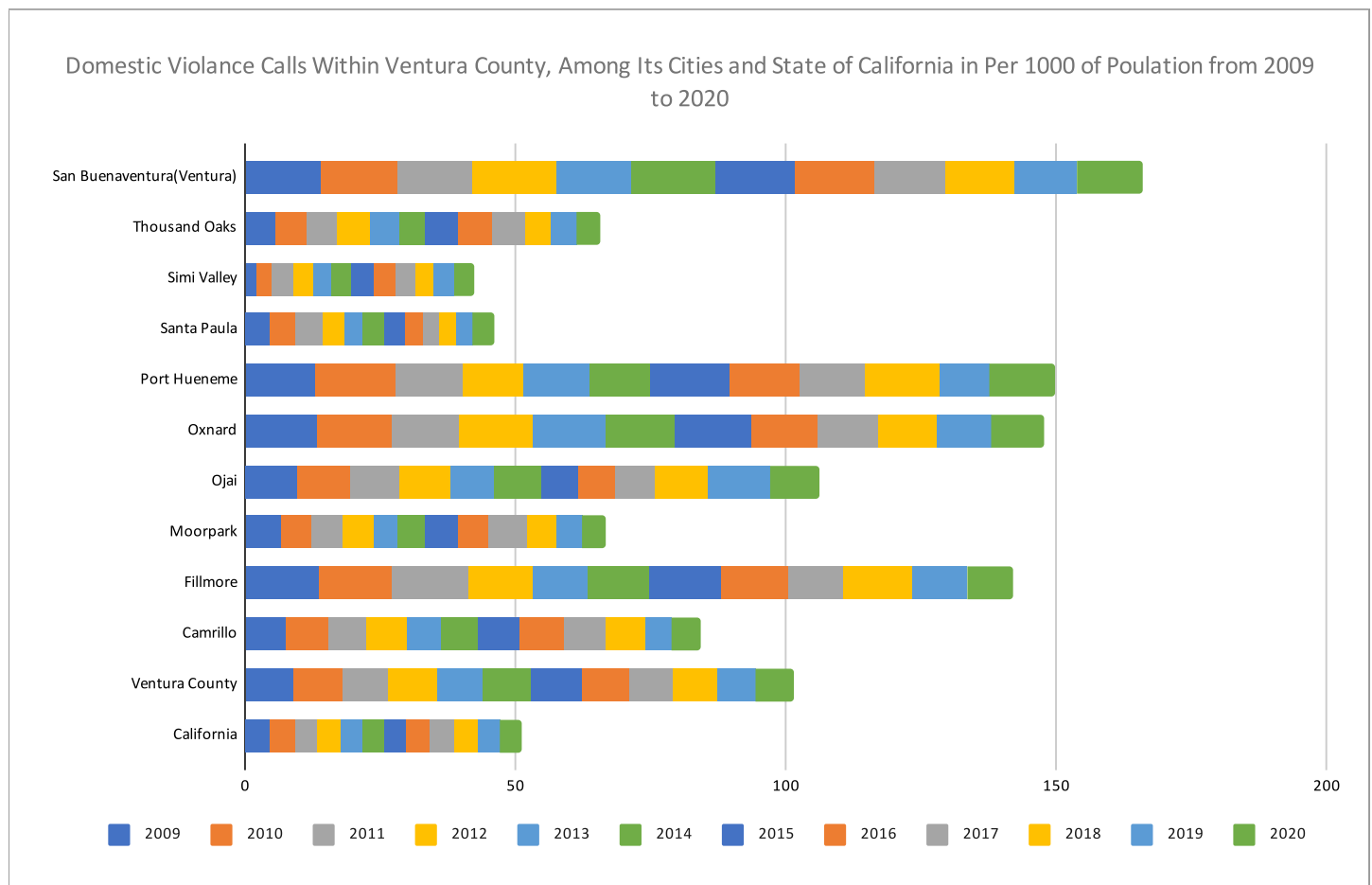


Source: Authors' Calculations; Data provided by the California Department of Justice, OpenJustice.

While a 5.6% increase is substantial, we might ask why the increase was not as pronounced given the unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing lockdown. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), women's employment opportunities were more severely curtailed since many of the industries most affected by the pandemic are those that have higher concentrations of women (e.g., restaurants, hospitality, retail) and a lack of resources can make it less likely for women to risk getting law enforcement involved in domestic violence situations. Second, the increase in unemployment benefits due to the multiple COVID-19 relief packages may have added financial stability to households that may otherwise have fallen on harder times. Finally, the lockdown decreased access to social services (like the VCFJC) that would otherwise have given victims the resources to flee violent situations.

Next, we were interested in investigating domestic violence-related calls for police service on a city level.

Table 1.4: Trends Within Ventura County, Among Its Cities and State of California 2009-2020



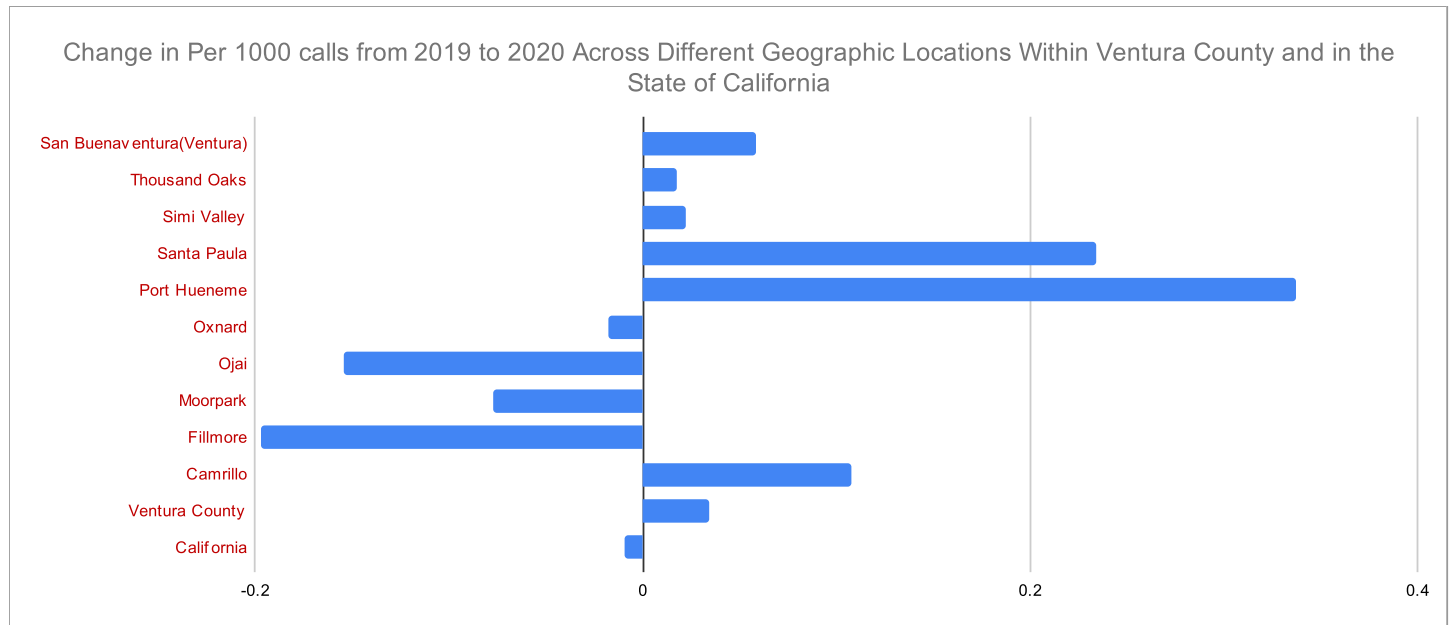
Source: State of California Department of Justice, Domestic Violence Calls, US Census (American Community Survey)

Table 1.4 presents a cross-county comparison of cities, and also contrasts the findings against the county- and state-level incidences. We need to bear in mind that calls for domestic violence can be impacted by a number of exogenous factors. Based on the available data, it may not be safe to make a direct comparison between the per 1,000 calls in California versus Ventura County and its cities. Assuming that conditions within Ventura County are less impacted by exogenous factors, we can make the following observations:

- The city of Ventura appears to have the highest level of domestic violence-related calls for police service. This city is followed by Port Hueneme, Oxnard, and Fillmore.
- There is a clear difference in the rate among cities and the population centers in the eastern and western parts of the county.
- The comparison may also suggest that the socio-economic conditions of people in different parts of the county may play a role in the size of the ratios across different places. This may further suggest that a higher proportion of those who are economically underserved within a geographic location may increase the proportional frequency of calls. This is an indicator of the need for a positive intervention on behalf of law enforcement and the criminal justice system.

Note that we also looked at the data for a COVID-19 effect on a jurisdictional basis, but because of apparent inconsistencies in reporting, we cannot conclusively make the same claim at that level that we did for the county as a whole. For instance, six cities showed an increase in rates and four demonstrated a decline (see Table 1.5). Bearing in mind that this data series presents ups and downs over the entire period, nothing in particular can be deduced from the impact of COVID-19 on the rise or fall of domestic violence calls within any given city conclusively. More cities, however, experienced an increase in DV-calls rather than a decrease, which mirrors the pattern at the national level.

Table 1.5: Change per 1000 Calls From 2019 to 2020 Across Geographic Locations Within Ventura County and the State of California



Source: Authors' Calculation, State of California Department of Justice, Domestic Violence Calls, US Census (American Community Survey)

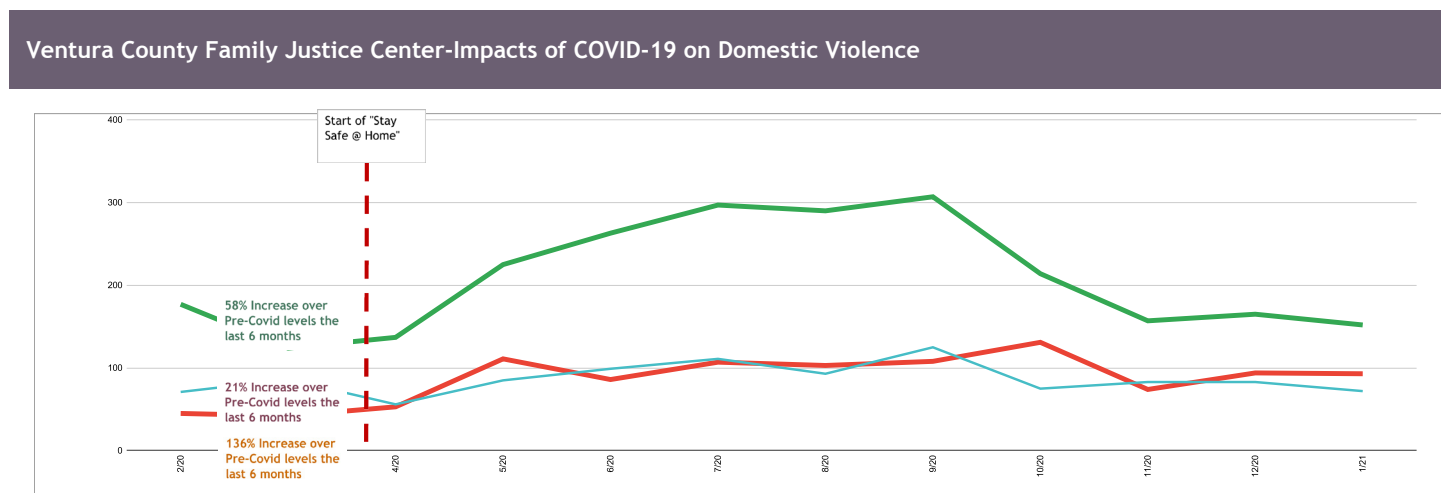
It must also be noted that calls for police service are an imperfect measure for adequately assessing the true scope of domestic violence. As one of the most underreported crimes, many domestic violence incidents are either not recognized, reported, or substantiated. Thus, the dark figure of crime looms large, particularly as the ongoing pandemic continues to isolate people, and the existing evidence we do see for these trends likely belies the underlying reality of more widespread domestic violence.

10.2 | Analysis of VCFJ Client and Service Data

For those victims who were able to access services, the VCFJC remained open and ready to help during the COVID-19 crisis. The staff continued to provide support, advocacy, referrals, as well as assistance with restraining orders to anyone in need in Ventura County. An initial analysis of case trends was conducted by the staff of the VCFJC during the pandemic; they assessed victim calls to the VCFJC, as well as to Safe Harbor East (SH-E) and Safe Harbor (SH-W) two multi-disciplinary interview centers for victims, and to the District Attorney's Crime Victim Assistance Unit (CVAU). They also analyzed the number of referrals provided for sexual assault (SE), child abuse (CA), and elder abuse (EA) as well as the number of domestic violence temporary restraining orders (DV TROs) in Ventura County.

According to their preliminary analysis from the time of the "Stay-Well-At-Home" mandate in March up to July, the VCFJC experienced startling trends. As demonstrated in Table 2.1, initially there was an initial chilling effect on calls to the VCFJC and for domestic violence, but an increase in calls related to child abuse, sexual assault, and elder abuse calls. Tracked across an 8-week period (March 2020 to July 5, 2020), the VCFJC saw a precipitous spike for all metrics including a 101% increase in DV TROs, a 52% increase in DV calls, and a 53% increase in SA/CA/EA referrals.

Table 2.1: VCFJC COVID-19 Case Trends



Source: VCFJC Staff Calculations and Data

Other FJCs nationwide that remained open experienced similar spikes in calls; for example, Guilford County FJC in North Carolina reported a 21% increase in domestic violence calls in 2020 compared to the previous years (cited in Gwinn & Strack, 2020). Some researchers suggest that the surge in family violence may be more delayed (Gonzalez et. al., 2020). Based on studies of how disasters, like pandemics, and other large-scale traumatic events affect behavioral patterns suggest that aggression, substance use, potential violence, and illegal behavior are most likely to occur between three to six months after the initial outbreak (Mauseth et al., 2020) It is vitally important, therefore, to continue tracking these trends in order to help prepare the VCFJC and Ventura County with the empirical evidence needed to meet the urgent and long-term needs of victims in the community.

Our research team focused on VCFJC data related to client service visits. For our analysis, records were restricted to any client who had data on primary experience for coming in, initial service requests, or recommended services. This resulted in a dataset of 2476 unique clients and 2766 unique service visits (15 service visits include multiple offenders and a record is provided for each offender resulting in 2781 total records). Most clients are women (81.14%), Hispanic/Latino (52.06%), between the ages of 25-40 (42.45%), and reside in Oxnard (32.79%) or Ventura (16.52%). Just over half (52.26%) of clients had at least one child at the time of their initial intake.



Table 2.2: VCFJC Client Demographics, March 1, 2019-June 30, 2021 (N=2746)

Gender	
Female	81.14%
Male	18.62%
Other	0.04%
Missing	0.20%

Age	
0-12	0.12%
13-17	1.25%
18-24	9.65%
25-40	42.45%
41-59	27.54%
60+	18.90%
Missing	0.08%

Race	
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0.97%
Asian	2.18%
Black or African American	2.30%
Hispanic or Latino	52.06%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.44%
White Non-Latino or Caucasian	31.66%
Multiple Races/Ethnicities	5.86%
Other Race/Ethnicity	1.53%
Choose not to report	1.05%
Missing	1.94%

City	
Oxnard	32.79%
Ventura	16.52%
Simi Valley	8.76%
Camarillo	7.23%
Thousand Oaks	5.53%
Santa Paula	4.81%
Port Hueneme	3.80%
Newbury Park	2.63%
Ojai	2.50%
Fillmore	2.42%
CA (outside Ventura County)	8.16%
Outside CA	0.16%
Missing	4.68%

Number of children	
Pregnant	0.08%
0	6.18%
1	19.35%
2	18.94%
3	9.17%
4	3.35%
5 or more	1.45%
Missing	41.48%

Source: Authors' Calculations, VCFJC Data

Of the 2766 service visits, 1503 occurred prior to the CA stay-at-home order (March 19, 2020) and 1263 occurred after (through June 30, 2021). The most common initial service request was obtaining a restraining/protective order, and this request increased during COVID-19. Most other initial service requests declined during this period.

Table 2.3: Percent of Client Records' Initial Service Requests, Pre- and Post- Stay-at-Home Order

Initial Service Requests	Pre-Covid	Post-Covid	All
Talk to Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault or Human Trafficking Advocate or Counselor	15.90%	6.57%	11.64%
Talk to law enforcement	3.73%	0.40%	2.21%
Find a shelter	2.86%	2.22%	2.57%
Talk to a chaplain to obtain spiritual support	0.60%	0.16%	0.40%
Talk to someone about divorce and/or child custody concerns	22.69%	7.36%	15.69%
Talk to someone about child support	0.40%	0.71%	0.54%
Create a personal safety plan for myself and my family	11.84%	2.22%	7.45%
Obtain a restraining/protective order	77.78%	92.08%	84.31%
Seek help providing food and basic needs for my family	2.93%	1.98%	2.49%
Talk to someone about my emotional well-being and/or my children's emotional well-being	15.17%	6.81%	11.35%
Talk to a DA Victim Advocate about my rights as a victim or the status of a criminal case in Ventura County	5.99%	2.85%	4.56%
Seek help from legal aid	2.06%	1.98%	2.02%
Other service request	7.05%	3.64%	5.50%

*All: percent of all records with this initial service request
 Clients can indicate multiple requests per visit
 Source: Authors' Calculations, VCFJC Data*

Domestic violence is the most common primary experience prompting clients to visit the VCFJC. On the initial version of VCFJC's intake form, domestic violence and stalking/harassment were recorded as general and separate categories. This means that clients who were stalked or harassed by an intimate partner or strangers were grouped together under "stalking/harassment," and domestic violence was used to capture physical violence. On later versions of the intake form, specific types of domestic violence (physical and stalking/harassment) were disaggregated, and stalking/harassment was revised to specify stranger or acquaintance. Here, we follow the initial intake protocol and group all types of stalking and harassment together and keep physical violence as its own category.¹ Unsurprisingly, most clients report physical domestic violence as well as stalking/harassment as the primary experience that brought them to the VCFJC (49.06% and 46.75%, respectively).

¹ The VCFJC reports that most records of stalking and harassment were domestic cases rather than stranger or acquaintance cases; this overlap is what prompted this particular change on later intake forms. Of the clients who completed the new intake forms, 68.25% indicate that they are coming to the VCFJC for the primary experiences of both DV physical and DV threats/stalking/harassment.

Table 2.4: Primary Experience That Brought the Client to the VCFJC

Primary Experience That Brought the Client to the VCFJC	Pre-Covid	Post-Covid	All
Adult Sexual Assault	2.79%	1.11%	2.02%
Adult Sexually Abused as a Child	0.53%	0.08%	0.33%
Child Physical Abuse	4.92%	0.79%	3.04%
Child Neglect	4.79%	0.24%	2.71%
Child Pornography	0.13%	0.16%	0.14%
Child Sexual Abuse	2.26%	1.58%	1.95%
Dependent Adult Abuse	2.06%	0.55%	1.37%
Domestic Violence (physical)	45.38%	53.44%	49.06%
Elder Abuse/Neglect	7.98%	13.94%	10.70%
Threats/Stalking/Harassment (DV or stranger/acquaintance)	32.34%	63.90%	46.75%
Human Trafficking: Sex	0.20%	0.32%	0.25%
Human Trafficking: Labor	0.27%	0.00%	0.14%
Physical Assault	21.82%	3.64%	13.52%
Teen Dating Violence	1.26%	0.08%	0.72%
Other	17.70%	17.34%	17.53%

All first and repeat visits (N=2766)

Source: Authors' Calculations, VCFJC Data

In earlier versions of the VCFJC's intake packet, clients were recommended services generally; the current version of the intake form specifies which services at each agency are recommended. Generally, clients are most often recommended to the DA's office or DA advocate (84.42% of all records over time); these recommendations have increased since the pandemic (77.45% prior to the stay-at-home order compared to 92.72% afterward). Domestic violence/sexual assault/human trafficking counseling is the second most common general recommendation over time (22.67% of all records). These clients were referred to the Coalition for Family Harmony (CFH) or to Interface Children and Family Services (ICFS).

Since the VCFJC has started to keep track of which agency-specific services are recommended, we can see that the DA's office, CFH, ICFS, and Ventura County Legal Aid (VCLA) are the most often recommended agencies. Clients are typically recommended 1-3 services (1.98 services on average) across all of these agencies. Since the stay-at-home order, the average number of recommended services has increased (from 1.36 prior to 2.73 since). It is important to note that an indication of zero services recommended might not be factually accurate as services may have been recommended to clients, but not noted officially in the records.

Table 2.5: General Service Recommendations

General Service Recommendations	Pre-Covid	Post-Covid	All
DA Advocate (or other DA service)	77.45%	92.72%	84.42%
DV/SA/HT Counselor	29.01%	15.12%	22.67%
Law Enforcement Officer	6.19%	0.63%	3.65%
Legal Aid	18.03%	11.32%	14.97%
Other	3.53%	10.29%	6.62%

All first and repeat visits (N=2766)

Clients may be recommended multiple services per visit

Source: Authors' Calculations, VCFJC Data

Table 2.6: Recommended Service Agencies

Recommended service agencies	Pre-Covid	Post-Covid	All
District Attorney	77.45%	92.72%	84.42%
Coalition for Family Harmony (CFH)	0.60%	13.22%	6.36%
Interface Children and Family Services (ICFS)	0.13%	11.32%	5.24%
Ventura County Legal Aid (VCLA)	0.33%	11.32%	5.35%
Law Enforcement	0.86%	0.63%	0.76%
Department of Child Support Services (DCSS)	1.26%	3.64%	2.35%
Human Services Agency (HSA)	0.67%	5.54%	2.89%
Ventura County Area Agency of Aging (VCAAA)	0.13%	2.06%	1.01%
Public Health	0.07%	0.16%	0.11%
Behavioral Health	0.00%	0.24%	0.11%
Chaplain	0.07%	0.00%	0.04%
Family Justice Center	0.00%	0.24%	0.11%
Ventura County Arts Council (VCAC)	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Healthcare for Justice (HFJ)	0.07%	0.24%	0.14%
VCFJC Foundation	0.00%	0.32%	0.14%

All first and repeat visits (N=2766)

Clients may be recommended multiple services per agency and multiple agencies per visit

Source: Authors' Calculations, VCFJC Data

Table 2.7: Number of Specific Recommended Services per Visit

# Specific Recommended Services Per Visit	Pre-Covid	Post-Covid	All
0 services	4.12%	15.90%	10.52%
1 service	30.25%	44.51%	38.00%
2 services	17.81%	29.94%	24.40%
3 services	25.73%	7.85%	16.02%
4 services	6.41%	1.33%	3.65%
5 services	5.46%	0.33%	2.68%
6 services	4.43%	0.07%	2.06%
7 or more services	1.98%	0.00%	2.68%
Average	1.36	2.73	1.98

All first and repeat visits (N=2766)

Clients may be recommended multiple services per agency and multiple agencies per visit

Source: Authors' Calculations, VCFJC Data

Recently, the VCFJC added several questions to the intake form to assess the impact of COVID-19. Of the 298 clients who answered any of the COVID-19 questions, most (87.25%) stated that COVID-19 had not prevented them from seeking assistance or services compared to 8.05% who felt COVID-19 had prevented them from doing so. While this result may seem counterintuitive, it is important to remember that these clients are currently in contact with the VCFJC, and those most vulnerable and unable to seek out services would not have a chance to be accounted for here. About a third of clients (36.58%) reported that their offender began hurting them after the stay-at-home order was issued, and 25.84% reported that the experiences with their offender have gotten worse since the pandemic.

Table 2.8: Impact of COVID-19 on Clients

Impact of COVID-19 on clients	Yes	No
Have COVID-19 restrictions prevented you from seeking or receiving services?	8.05%	87.25%
Was this person hurting you or your family member before the COVID-19 pandemic?	62.08%	36.58%
Do you feel that your experiences with this person have gotten worse since the COVID-19 pandemic?	25.84%	70.81%

N=298 clients who answered at least one of the three COVID-19 questions

Source: Authors' Calculations, VCFJC Data

The VCFJC's record keeping has varied greatly over time. Initially, a client's record was kept as a single packet which included an intake form and then tracked follow-up visits. Beginning in November 2019, clients' intake and follow up visits were recorded separately so that clients complete a new intake form for each visit (one for their first visit and a "follow-up intake" form for any additional visits). Additionally, since the VCFJC works as a central agency hub, agencies often request updates to the intake forms in order to track their own data. This has led to about 20 "different" versions of the intake form with slight variations across each, often adding or removing one or two questions over time based on agencies' requests. Finally, prior to the pandemic, navigators completed intake forms by hand, and then the data was transferred manually into an Excel file by volunteers or staff. After the stay-at-home order was issued, VCFJC digitized these forms into fillable pdfs so they could be completed with clients over the phone.

Although these updates to record keeping work to the benefit of clients and the VCFJC, such frequent changes have introduced inconsistencies among the data. There are known problems with the use of outdated forms, typos in date fields, and incomplete data entry. Additionally, clients do not always complete intake forms. For instance, clients who are victims of alleged sexual assault and child abuse, as well as some elder abuse and human trafficking victims, do not go through the same intake process that the majority of domestic violence victims do. These clients are generally in crisis and are typically brought in by law enforcement. For these clients, much of the intake information is collected from the police report. Staff also have a degree of discretion with intake forms during follow-up visits and may not always ask a client to complete an additional form. For example, if clients return after a long period of time, staff are more likely to have them fill out a follow-up intake, but if they came back a couple of days after their first visit, they may not ask clients to do so. We offer some recommendations for improving this recordkeeping system in our conclusion. Next, we turn to our analysis of the perspectives and experiences of those working for and with the VCFJC.

10.3 | VCFJC Staff and Agency Partner Survey

In early January of 2021, a survey was conducted with the staff and agency partners of the VCFJC. The purpose of the survey was to gather feedback from the partners and staff to better understand the justice center's strengths and operations as well as potential obstacles to the effectiveness of a multi-agency model. Further, we were interested in understanding how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected survivors/clients and services in Ventura County.

Respondents were given two months to participate; the survey was initially distributed on January 14th, 2021, and data collection was completed by March 14th, 2021. In total, 28 respondents out of the 58-person sampling frame completed the survey, resulting in a 48% response rate.

Survey Instrument

The survey consisted of 34 items. The initial questions asked basic demographic information about the respondents' work roles to gauge the type of services they provide and to measure the frequency and extent of their engagement with the VCFJC. Ten items on the questionnaire asked respondents to reflect on their opinions about the VCFJC itself; this included how well the VCFJC was fulfilling its guiding principles, as well as evaluating the services offered by the center. We were also interested in respondents' perceptions of whether the VCFJC increased offender accountability, as well as if the center led to more positive interactions between agencies in the county. Open-ended questions asked respondents to reflect on what seemed to be working particularly well with the VCFJC as well as challenges that seemed to exist in the integration of services at the VCFJC. The final nine questions on the survey were related to how the respondents' work and their clients' experiences were affected due to restrictions and complications brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Respondent Characteristics

The respondents represented a range of different agencies associated with the VCFJC; out of the respondents who supplied their affiliations, this included 9 respondents (33%) who worked for the Ventura County District Attorney's Office, 3 respondents (11%) who worked directly for the VCFJC, 3 respondents (11%) who worked for Interface Children & Family Services, 2 respondents (7%) who worked for the VC Human Services Agency, and then 1 respondent from a variety of other respective agencies, including Health Care for Justice, the Oxnard Police Department, the Simi Valley Police Department, the Coalition for Family Harmony, VC Area Agency on Aging, VC Health Care Agency, Ventura County Child Support Services, and Voices of Ventura.

Nearly three-quarters of the respondents were on-site partners (73%) and roughly a third were off-site partners (27%). In terms of the frequency of collaboration between the respondents or their counterparts and the VCFJC, slightly over a third (32%) indicated that it was several times a week, 28% several times a day, 16% daily, 16%, several times a month, 4% once a week, and 4% once a month. Information regarding other respondent characteristics are indicated below.

Table 3.1: Survey Respondent Characteristics

Respondent Characteristics	%	N
Length of time in position		
Less than 1 year	16.0%	4
1-3 years	48.0%	12
4-9 years	16.0%	4
10 years or more	20.0%	5
General Categories of Respondents' Job Positions <i>(with an option to select all that apply)</i>		
Administration	6.4%	3
Advocacy	27.7%	13
Case Manager	8.5%	4
Community Engagement/Outreach	10.6%	5
Counseling	2.1%	1
Crisis response	10.6%	5
Direct-Service	6.4%	3
Health/Medical Care	2.1%	1
Immigration Services	2.1%	1
Interpretation/Translation	2.1%	1
Navigator	6.4%	3
Supervisor	4.3%	2
Survivor Support	6.4%	3
Volunteer	2.1%	1
Other	2.1%	1

Source: Authors' Calculations; Primary Data

Assessment of the VCFJC and Its Services

Respondents were asked, “In your opinion, how well does the VCFJC fulfill the following principles?” given a 5-point scale. The results are included in Table 3.2 and indicate that the vast majority of respondents feel that the VCFJC is “Consistently/Very Much So” fulfilling all of the principles.

Table 3.2: Assessment of the VCFJC and Its Services

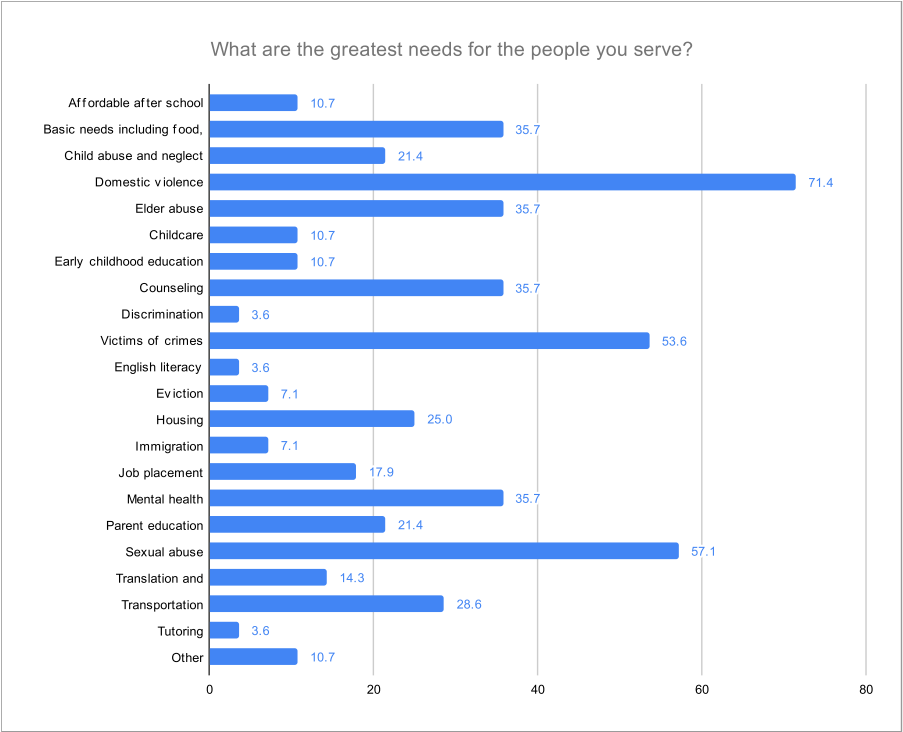
FJC Principles	Consistently/ Very Much So	Most of the time	Sometimes	Only a little	Not at all	Do not know
Safety-Focused	83.33%	12.50%	4.17%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Victim-Centered	75.00%	20.83%	4.17%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Culturally Relevant	62.50%	16.67%	12.50%	0.00%	0.00%	8.33%
Community-Engaged	79.17%	12.50%	4.17%	4.17%	0.00%	0.00%
Survivor-Driven	70.83%	12.50%	16.67%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Transformative	66.67%	12.50%	12.50%	4.17%	0.00%	4.17%
Relationship-Based	66.67%	20.83%	4.17%	0.00%	0.00%	8.33%
Prevention-Oriented	66.67%	12.50%	12.50%	8.33%	0.00%	0.00%
Kind-Hearted	79.17%	16.67%	4.17%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Empowered	83.33%	8.33%	4.17%	0.00%	0.00%	4.17%
Offender Accountability	59.09%	27.27%	4.55%	0.00%	0.00%	9.09%

Source: Authors' Calculations; Primary Data

Greatest Needs for Clients

We were interested in what the staff perceived to be the greatest needs for the people they serve. Victims seeking help for domestic violence was by far the most common need cited (71%), followed by sexual abuse (57%), and then the more general category of victims of crime (54%).

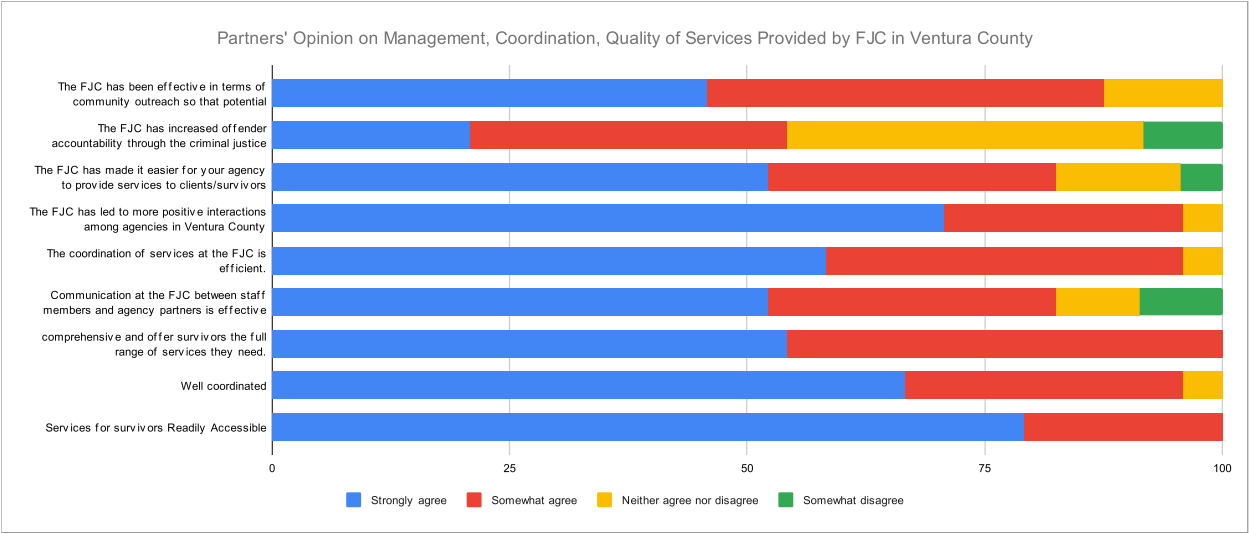
Table 3.3: Perceptions of Greatest Needs for Clients



Source: Authors' Calculations; Primary Data

We were also interested in investigating the respondents' perceptions of the VCFJC in terms of what was working well and what obstacles existed. Respondents were provided a 5-point Likert scale to indicate their opinion about a variety of statements, and the response options ranged from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree* (see Table 3.4).

Table 3.4: Perceptions of the Management, Coordination & Quality of Services Provided by the VCFJC



Source: Authors' Calculations; Primary Data

On all metrics, the respondents generally rated the VCFJC highly. For example, respondents strongly agreed that services are accessible (79%), that the VCFJC has led to more positive interactions among agencies in the county (71%), and that services provided at the VCFJC are well coordinated (67%). When asked about the efficiency and comprehensiveness of services, results were likewise positive, but the answers were split between strongly agree and agree.

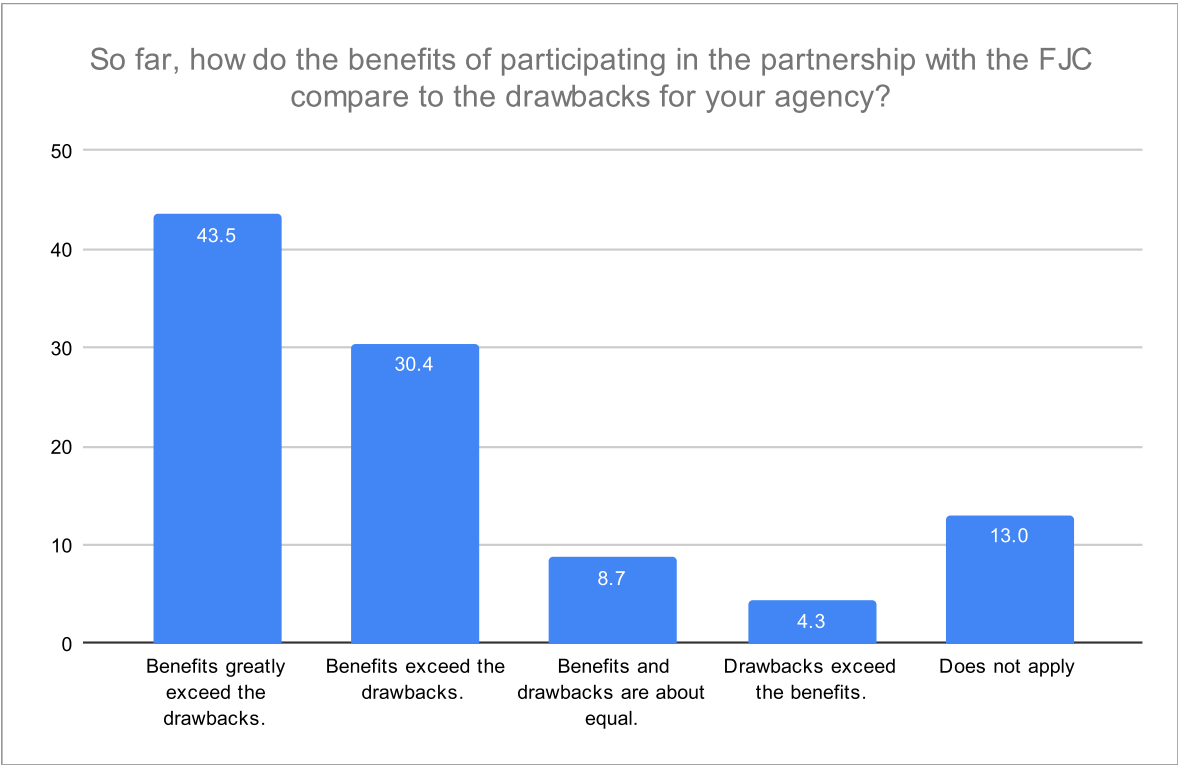
Respondents strongly agreed (52%) or agreed (30%) that communication between VCFJC staff and agency partners was effective, but 9% of respondents answered “neither” and 9% said “somewhat.” Likewise, respondents strongly agreed (53%) or agreed (30%) that the VCFJC made it easier for their agency to provide services, but there were also 13% of respondents who neither agreed nor disagreed with that statement.

In terms of whether the VCFJC has increased offender accountability, respondents were mixed. Only 20% strongly agreed and 33% agreed, whereas 38% neither agreed nor disagreed and 8% somewhat disagreed.

Benefits and Strengths of the VCFJC

The respondents who completed our survey were positive about their participation in their partnership with the VCFJC. As indicated in Table 3.5, approximately 73% of respondents indicated that the benefits exceeded or *greatly* exceeded the drawbacks.

Table 3.5: Perceptions of Benefits vs. Drawbacks of Partnership with the VCFJC



Source: Authors' Calculations; Primary Data

The respondents were also asked an open-ended question about the strengths of the VCFJC. More specifically, they were asked, “Overall, what seems to be working particularly well within the FJC?” The most common answer was the coordination of services for clients and the collaboration between agencies. One respondent articulated the strengths in the following way, “The collaboration within other county agencies is great. The VCFJC is also very organized with the Intake and referral process. I believe the warm hand offs and easy access to our services and the services of our sister agencies is extremely beneficial for victims. Every customer I have assisted from a referral is always very happy with the services they are receiving and express gratitude for making it easier for them to reach us. We are extremely grateful for our partnership with the VCFJC.”

Another respondent reflected,

“There is a county wide collaboration providing a number of critical services to the citizens of Ventura County. This allows a coordinated and streamlined opportunity for people dealing with trauma and victimization to be supported in a wraparound model.”

When asked, “What would you say has been the biggest benefit to partner agencies of having the FJC in the community?” answers were varied, but the most common theme was the “one-stop-shop” aspect of centralized services for victims. As one respondent summarized,

“Having one spot for victims to receive services, rather than [sic] them having to bounce from place to place.”

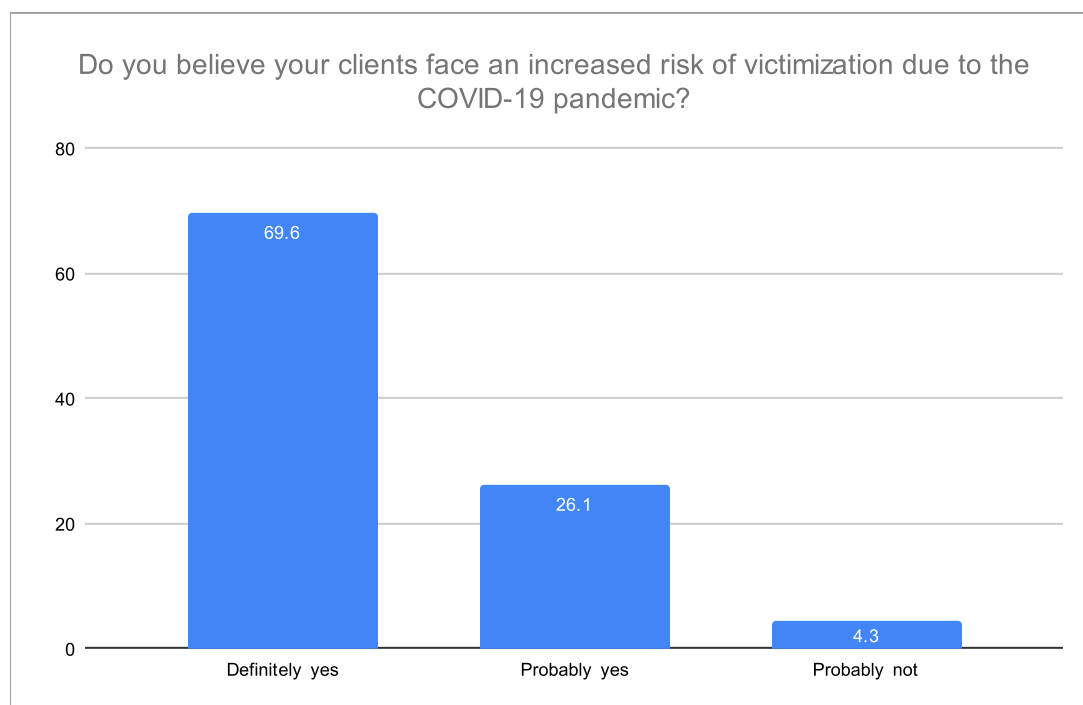
Another appealing feature was the VCFJC’s ability to help victims obtain restraining orders.

Challenges for the VCFJC and the Impact of COVID-19

We were interested in what the staff and agency partners would identify as the largest challenges faced by the VCFJC. They were asked the open-ended question “Overall, what obstacles seem to exist in the integration of services at the FJC?” A few respondents mentioned staff turnover and understaffing as challenges that negatively affected the integration of services at the VCFJC. The most common obstacles noted by the respondents were restrictions related to the global pandemic of COVID-19, which occurred during the VCFJC’s second year of operations. Respondents specifically mentioned that the social-distance policies implemented during the pandemic made it impossible for staff to meet with clients in person and contributed to fewer partners working on-site.

We asked a range of questions about the impact of COVID-19 on the clients’ current and future needs and to what extent respondents felt as though the VCFJC was prepared to meet these needs. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed (69% answered *Definitely yes* and 26% said *Probably yes*) when asked to consider if their clients face increased risk of victimization during the COVID-19 pandemic.

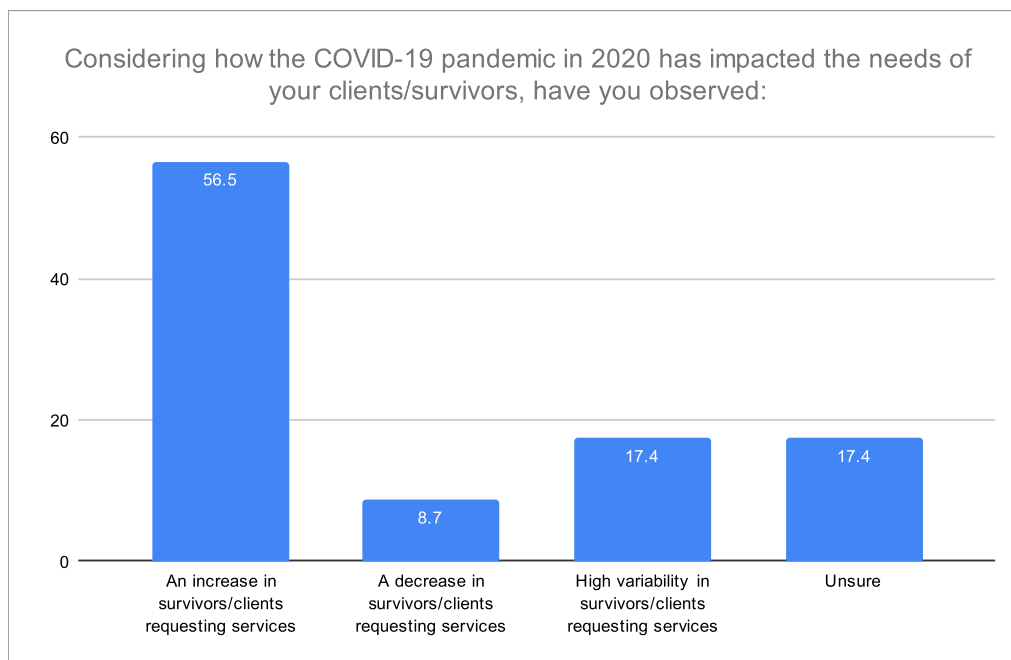
Table 3.6: Perceptions of Clients' Increased Risk of Victimization During COVID-19



Source: Authors' Calculations; Primary Data

This perception was supported by the respondents’ experiences as over half (57%) of respondents indicated that they had seen an increase in survivors/clients requesting services during the pandemic; interestingly, 17% of respondents also indicated that they observed high variability in requests for services, 17% were unsure and 8.7% reported seeing a decrease in service requests.

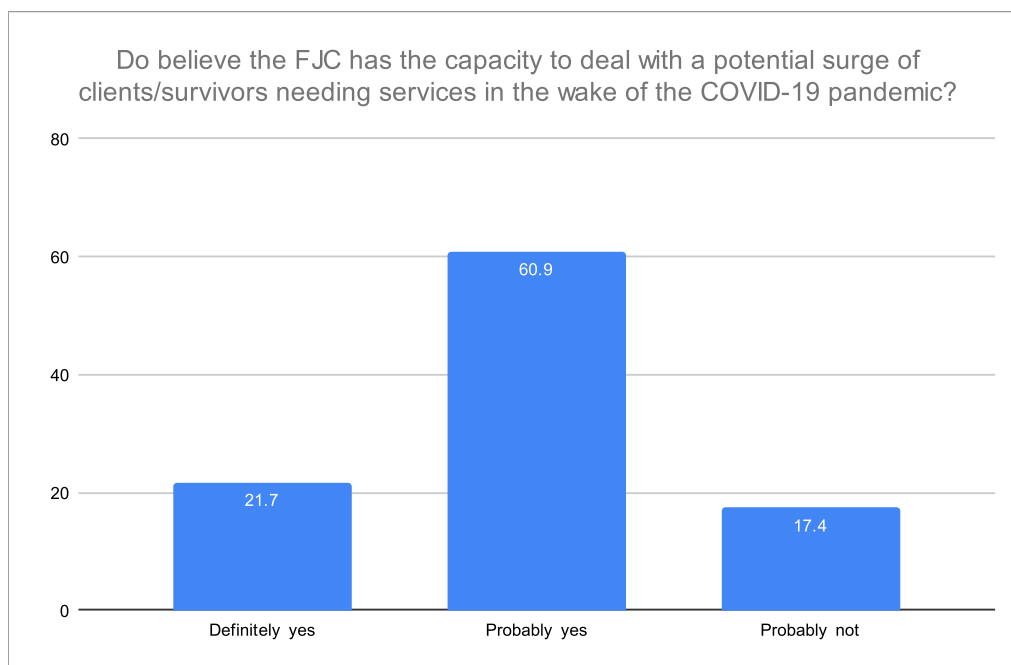
Table 3.7: Perceptions of How COVID-19 Has Impacted Clients' Needs



Source: Authors' Calculations; Primary Data

When asked about the VCFJC's capacity to deal with a potential surge of clients needing services following the COVID-19 pandemic, respondents were largely optimistic. 60.9% indicated *probably yes* and 21.7% *definitely yes* that the VCFJC could meet a potential uptick in the needs in the community. Only 17.4% said *probably not* when considering capacity.

Table 3.8: Perceptions of VCFJC's Capacity to Deal With Potential Surge of Clients Post Pandemic

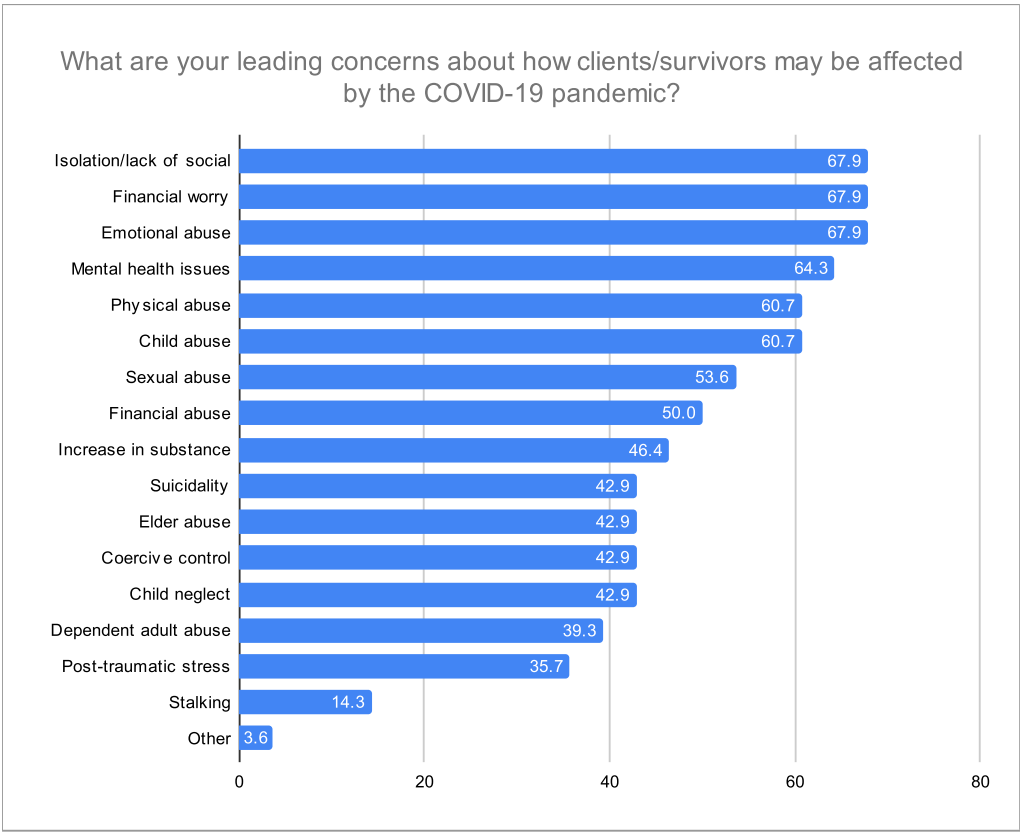


Source: Authors' Calculations; Primary Data

We also wanted to know respondents' leading concerns regarding how their clients may be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and associated quarantines. Our findings indicate a range of concerns. The most highly ranked categories were isolation/lack of social support (67.9%), financial worry (67.9%), and emotional abuse (67.9%). In addition, other categories of worry included

mental health issues (64.3%), physical abuse and child abuse (both at 60.7%), as well as sexual abuse (53.6%). One respondent indicated “other,” and then specifically “sex and labor trafficking,” which is a category that was unfortunately not included as one of the response options.

Table 3.9: Leading Concerns for Clients Post Pandemic



Source: Authors' Calculations; Primary Data

Finally, as noted by many of the respondents on the open-ended questions, housing issues and homelessness are some of the most pressing issues faced by clients. As one respondent noted,

“Housing is the biggest issue clients are facing. Not feeling they can afford to leaving [sic] or not having anywhere to go as with COVID-19 family, friends and shelters are being cautious of who comes into the homes.”

The high cost of housing and limited housing options in Southern California have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, making it even more difficult for many victims to leave unsafe environments.

11 | Conclusion

The questions we set out to answer are not simple ones. Focusing on the immensely private phenomenon of domestic violence at any time is difficult and becomes even more complicated in the context of a pandemic. Our research questions were focused on understanding how the stay-at-home order influenced rates of domestic violence in Ventura County, and how the VCFJC was responding to survivors’ needs before and after the pandemic.

What we discovered was not entirely surprising. There was a statistically significant increase in domestic violence-related calls for police service when comparing the start of state-wide lockdown orders in March of 2020 up to the last available date of December 2020. This was an increase of 5.6%, which is concerning, but lower than trends observed on the national level, which were estimated to be 8.1% during that same time period. When comparing DV-related calls for service county-wide on a city-level, it was difficult to discern an absolute trend. On the whole, however, more cities saw an increase in DV-calls rather than a decrease. This echoes national trends.

Domestic violence, like COVID-19, does not discriminate and affects people of all genders, racial and ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The frequency, severity, and impact of such violence, however, disproportionately affects women, communities of color, the poor, and other marginalized groups. This was observed in our analysis of the trends regarding the demographics of clients who have used, and continue to use, the VCFJC. The majority of clients who seek help from the VCFJC are women of color who reside in Oxnard or Ventura. The primary reasons are for domestic violence (49.06%) or for threats/stalking/harassment (46.75%), and these reasons remained consistent before and during the pandemic.

Our analysis of VCFJC data also revealed that the pandemic has created hiccups in the training and data recording process. Before the COVID-19 closures, many of the VCFJC's partner agencies provided staff to complete the intake navigation and the DA advocates assigned to the VCFJC assisted clients after that intake process. Due to the pandemic, these partner agency navigators were unable to perform this initial step and many other DA advocates, without the same degree of intake training, began performing this function. Additionally, some staff had difficulty transitioning to the new electronic process to remotely facilitate the intake and navigation of new and returning clients. These staffing and procedural changes led to some inconsistencies in data recording. Although the VCFJC staff has diligently worked to identify and address these irregularities in the data provided to this research team and feels that record keeping has ultimately improved with the additional support of electronic tools, more efficient software and more formalized training and processes could proactively limit future data entry errors.

There are several short and long-term strategies that the VCFJC could pursue to improve its record keeping. An immediate strategy would be to develop a data entry handbook that is provided to all staff who engage in client intakes and to mandate training to ensure that all staff understand the importance of accurate data records and follow the same protocols. We also recommend the VCFJC hire a permanent staff member who would oversee updating intake forms, provide professional development and training sessions on data keeping, be responsible for internal data management, and write internal and external data analysis reports. Finally, we recommend investing in database software that makes it easier to track individual clients and service recommendations; scalability for record keeping will be extremely important as the VCFJC continues to serve the county.

Overall, the 28 VCFJC staff members and agency partners who completed our survey were overwhelmingly positive in their perceptions of how well the VCFJC was operating in terms of achieving its core principles. Most respondents also rated the center as effective in terms of providing services that are efficient, well coordinated, and comprehensive. One key area that was highlighted as needing improvement was the VCFJC's ability to "increase offender accountability." The issue of housing also stood out as a primary challenge facing many of the clients/survivors. While the center provides emergency domestic violence shelter, they only have enough housing to serve about 24 people and are almost continually at capacity. Given the housing shortage, the cost of housing more generally in California, and the necessity for social distancing during the pandemic, there is an acute need for more spaces to shelter those in crisis in Ventura County. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic generated great concern for the staff and agency partners as they were asked to consider the potential increase in risk for clients during the stay-at-home period. On a positive note, the respondents felt the VCFJC was prepared and able to handle a potential surge in clients in the wake of COVID-19. We want to ensure the center has the appropriate resources to provide victims of abuse access to the support and refuge they need.

In closing, the pandemic, as well as the concurrent social movement for racial justice, have underscored the importance of fortifying and improving our public health, social service, and criminal justice systems. Our current context has also put a spotlight on the interconnectedness of these systems and our interconnectedness to one another. This is true not only on a national level but in our own backyard. Ventura County has the opportunity to leverage the tremendous cooperation that already exists between its cities and organizations; the Ventura Council of Governments and the VCFJC exemplify how much we can accomplish collectively to improve the lives of our residents.

The social and economic impact of domestic violence is staggering; our governmental and nonprofit agencies spend millions on medical care, mental health care services as well as police services, legal services, and incarceration related to domestic violence, not to mention the untold intangible costs it generates. To reduce these costs, early prevention programs and intervention strategies (such as Camp HOPE America) are key; stopping violence before it occurs rather than treating victims and punishing perpetrators is paramount. In addition, our study echoes existing research that suggests co-located,

multi-agency models like the VCFJC are wise investments as they are highly effective in providing wrap-around services for those most in need. They reduce the duplication of services in the county and decrease the hurdles victims often face when navigating systems during a crisis. Additional research is needed to more fully assess survivor and criminal justice outcomes of the VCFJC, but our study shows that community members are aware of and accessing services, and that staff and agency partners are encountering few obstacles in their collaboration.

Ultimately, challenges generated by the public health problems of COVID-19 and domestic violence are burdens we must all shoulder together. We have an opportunity to use evidence-based insights to reimagine what we can do for the common good. The time has never been more urgent to develop smart policies and practices that will allow us to respond more quickly to threats, improve access to resources for all, and increase the well-being of Ventura County in both the short and long term.



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