



# The news about domestic violence: Findings from an analysis of California news, 2023-2025

Prepared by Berkeley Media Studies Group

# Executive summary

We can't solve a problem we don't know is happening — and when it comes to domestic violence, decades of research suggest that news coverage may miss the scope and impact of the problem, and the important work advocates and organizations are doing to end it.

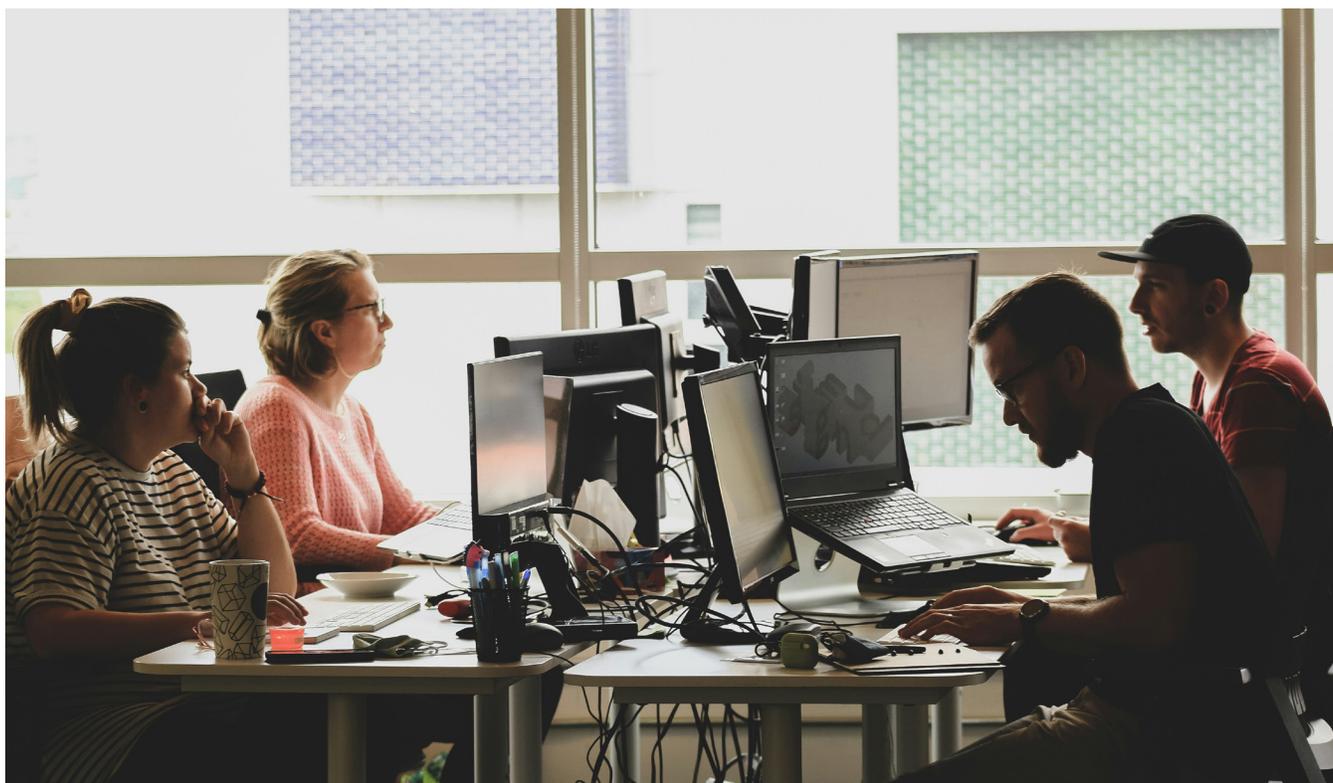
## **What is the current story about domestic violence?**

Where could recommendations from the newly released [Journalist Playbook](#) to improve reporting on domestic violence make the biggest impact? To find out, Berkeley Media Studies Group (BMSG) analyzed English-language news about domestic violence published in California outlets between 2023 and 2025.

## **We asked:**

How does California news characterize domestic violence?

How do these patterns align with — or differ from — best practices outlined in the [Journalist Playbook](#)?



## The analysis showed that:



Just 1 in 5 (21%) articles included a quote or anecdote from a survivor of domestic violence.



Stories rarely included content warnings about graphic details that might upset audiences or resources for people who might need help addressing violence in their own lives.



Solutions to keep survivors safe appeared in almost half of news articles (44%), although many stories focused only on funding or policy change at the state level.



Few articles (11%) addressed the specific complexities of domestic violence in historically marginalized or under-resourced groups, such as Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities.

## To tell a more complete story, reporters can:



Connect with local domestic violence organizations that have relationships with survivors (and other stakeholders with important perspectives on domestic violence).



Share resources and use content warnings to alert audiences that stories may be disturbing. More than half of California adults (63%) have a personal connection to domestic violence; therefore, many readers will, too.

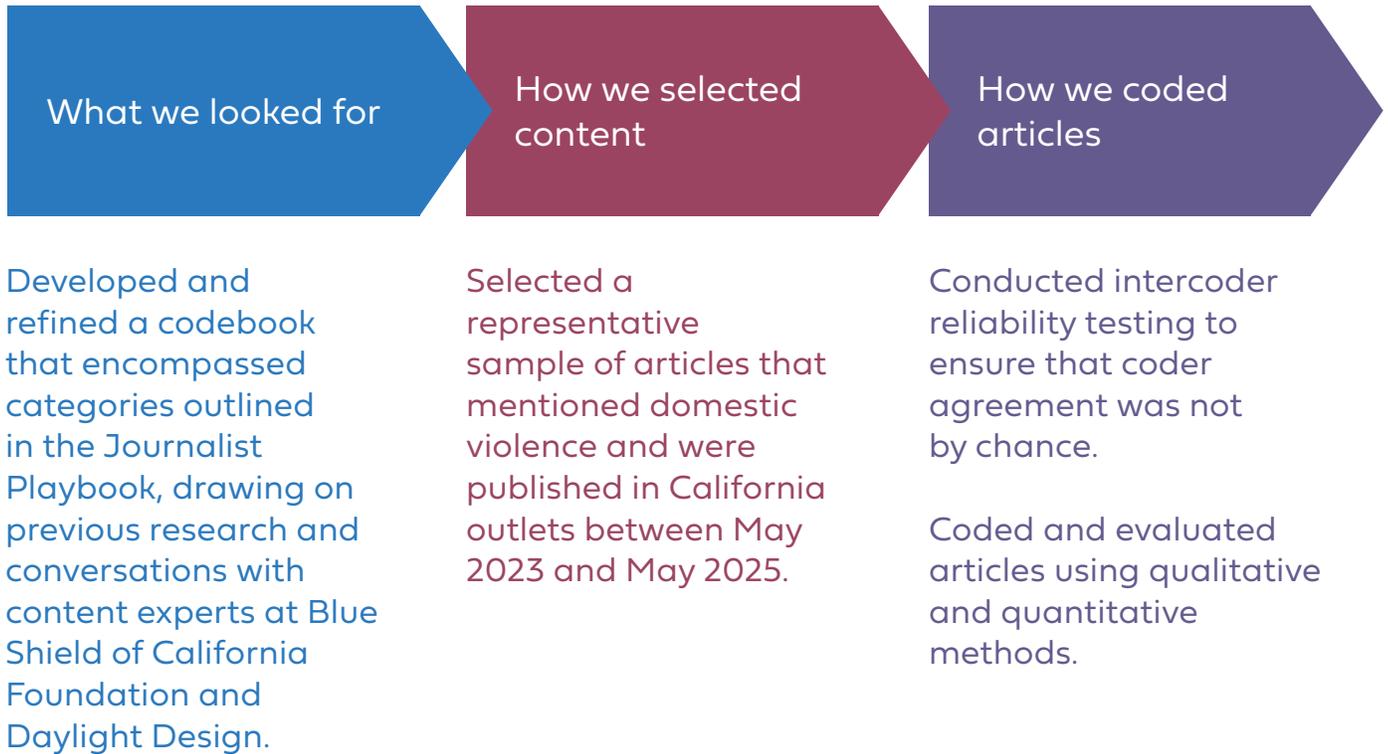


Draw on the Journalist Playbook to report on local approaches to support survivors, illustrate the impact of federal policies at the local level, and look beyond the criminal justice system for solutions.



Build relationships with organizations that serve communities of color and explore questions about how to report with nuance and sensitivity on inequities in systems that serve survivors, or other issues relating to domestic violence that are unique to those communities.

## Our process



### Time range:

May 15, 2023 -  
May 15, 2025

### Total universe:

895 articles

### Representative sample:

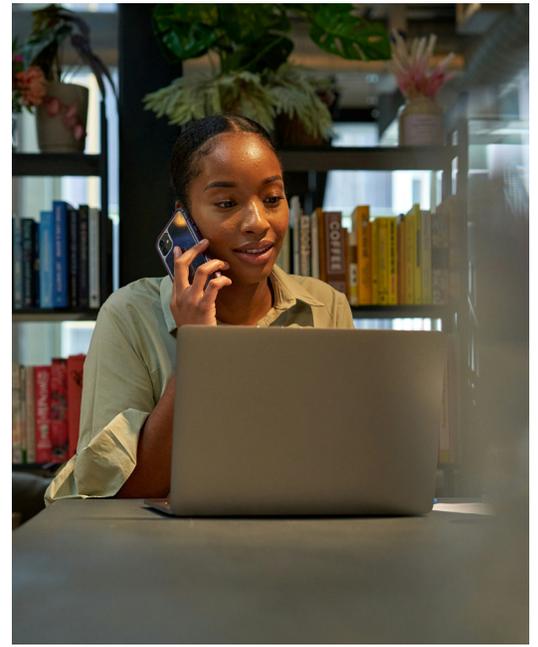
20%

### Sources:

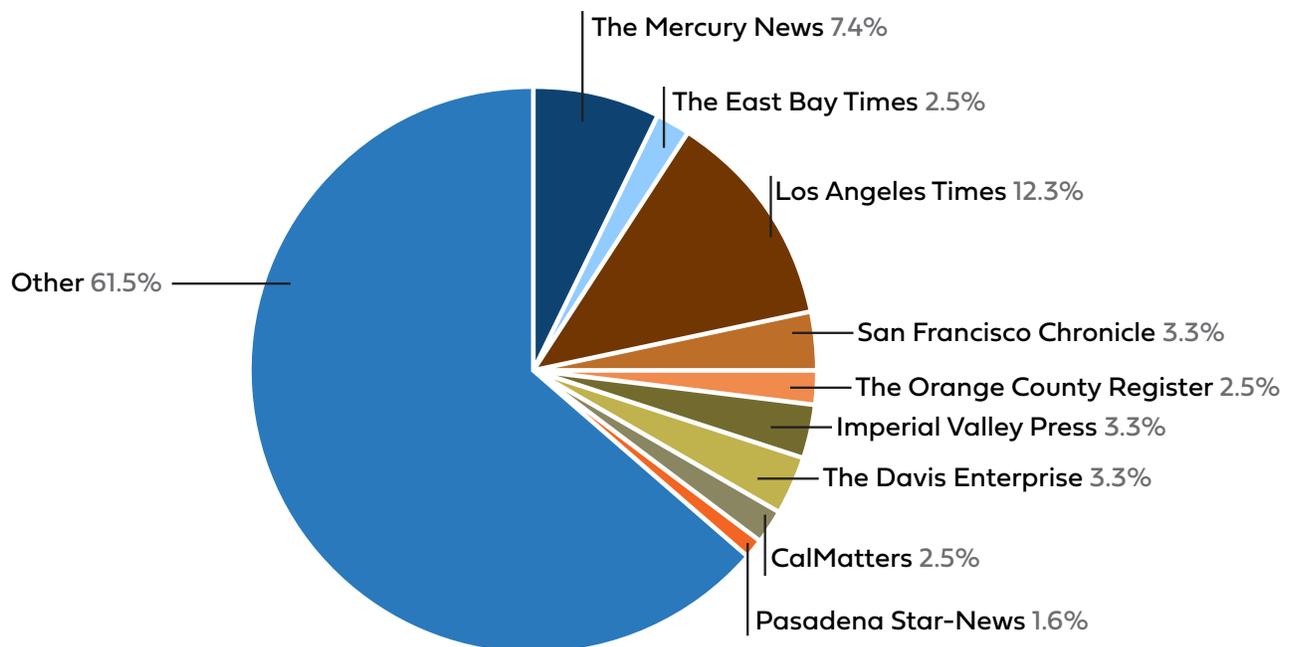
All English-language  
California newspapers

## News overview and patterns in coverage

- 895 stories published in California outlets mentioned domestic violence during the study period, from which we sampled 180.
- 76% of relevant articles in our sample were news articles, while 24% were opinion pieces.
- Stories were most often in the news because of a milestone in the criminal justice or policy process.
- 17% of stories were features or long-form stories, suggesting an opportunity to increase in-depth reporting on the issue.



## Outlet distribution



Although several high-profile outlets accounted for over one-third of the coverage, the majority of articles came from smaller outlets around the state, suggesting that coverage is evenly distributed.

# Principles

Fundamentals to keep in mind, and tips for putting them into practice

Safety

Solutions

Transparency

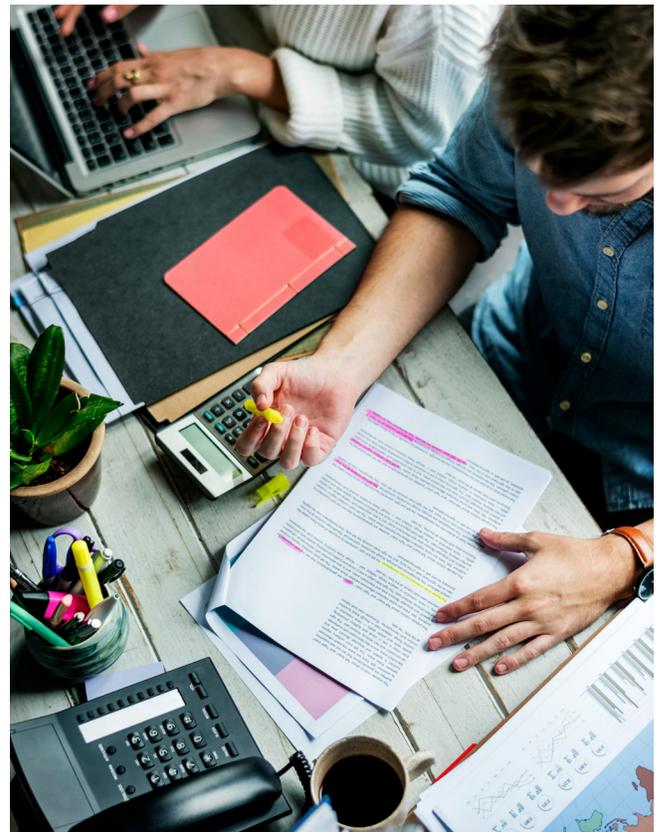
Expertise

Sensitivity

Diversity



Berkeley Media Studies Group evaluated published news stories, focusing on solutions, sensitivity, diversity, and expertise. Two other principles in the Journalist Playbook, safety and transparency, refer to the reporting process before publication and could not be assessed in this research.



## What we found



Government officials (33%) and domestic violence service providers and practitioners (31%) were quoted in over one-third of articles.

Few articles addressed the specific complexities of domestic violence in historically marginalized or under-resourced communities such as Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities. The rare articles that did focus on these communities discussed the cultural context around domestic violence in Latino households or reported on how Black and brown survivors are particularly susceptible to losing custody of their children. Such stories help illustrate that while domestic violence is widespread, not all communities have equal access to healing and prevention. For communities of color, the risks of seeking help can be substantial.

### To tell a more complete story, consider . . .

. . . building relationships with organizations that serve Black, brown, Latinx, and Indigenous communities to explore questions about how to report with nuance and sensitivity on inequities in systems that serve survivors, or other issues relating to domestic violence that are unique to those communities.

. . . seeking out representatives of organizations that have created culturally responsive programs or solutions and can talk about the need to apply these approaches more widely.

. . . using data to report on disparities in systems such as the child welfare system, the criminal legal system, and the housing system.



“Oftentimes, domestic violence situations can be messy, and what often happens — particularly in minority communities and Black and brown communities — is the survivor, the victim of domestic violence, is the one who loses custody because the child has been present in the instance of domestic violence,” said Sen. Dave Min, D-Irvine, the bill’s sponsor. “By making it explicit and clear that mandated reporters don’t need to report just on the basis of being present in domestic violence, this allows for more discretion and hopefully will prevent families from being taken apart.”

*“Mandatory reporting in domestic violence cases can affect children, bill’s author argues”*  
— San Bernardino Sun

Speaker	Appeared at least once in % of relevant articles
Government officials	<b>33%</b>
Domestic violence service providers and practitioners	<b>31%</b>
Representatives of the legal and criminal justice system	<b>30%</b>
Survivors of domestic violence	<b>21%</b>
Opinion authors (like columnists or editorial boards)	<b>12%</b>
Researchers	<b>8%</b>
Community representatives	<b>7%</b>

Government officials were most often quoted — 26% of the 33% were officials whose jobs do not directly relate to domestic violence or victim services. Higher number of survivors being quoted is an opportunity; service providers are a strength to build on.

# What we found



Only one-fifth of stories (21%) quoted domestic violence survivors; by comparison, one-third of articles (33%) quoted government officials.

Over 40% of articles connected domestic violence to related issues like lack of housing, historical trauma, gun violence, or economic insecurity.

## To tell a more complete story, consider . . .

. . . connecting with local domestic violence organizations that have relationships with survivors (and other stakeholders with important perspectives on domestic violence). These organizations often can support survivors in telling their stories in interviews.

. . . asking survivors for insights about the systems they use to get help, since survivors are experts in their own stories and in navigating these systems.



### Survivors in the news

"I'm a survivor," she said in April. In the alley where she lived, she shook her self-cut bangs out of her eyes as she pulled a black leather jacket over her flowered dress. A swimsuit, camouflage basketball shorts and gold Vans completed her outfit. "I'm 5-foot-2, but I'm fierce."

*"I'm constantly under threat': Homeless women in S.F. share stories of survival and resilience" — San Francisco Chronicle*

Personal stories of domestic violence survivors rarely appeared in the news (16% of articles).

# Framing

In a news story framed as a portrait, audiences learn about an individual person or event, but the bigger picture is missing. A landscape story, on the other hand, takes a broader view to include context, the systems involved, or the surrounding environment.



**Portrait (episodic)**

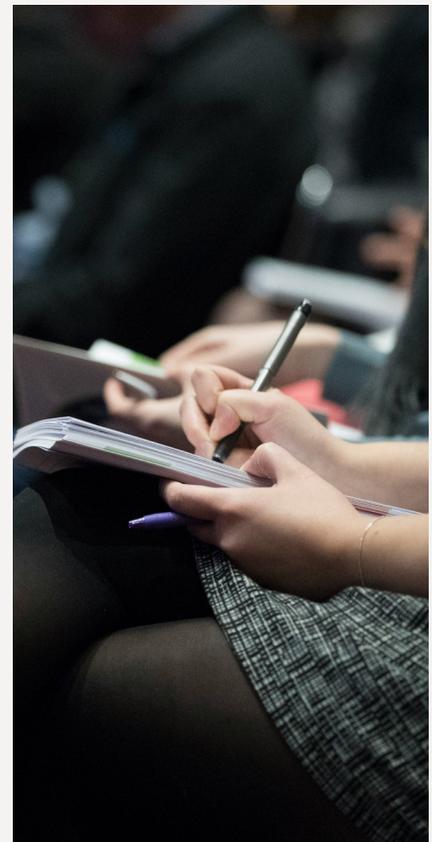
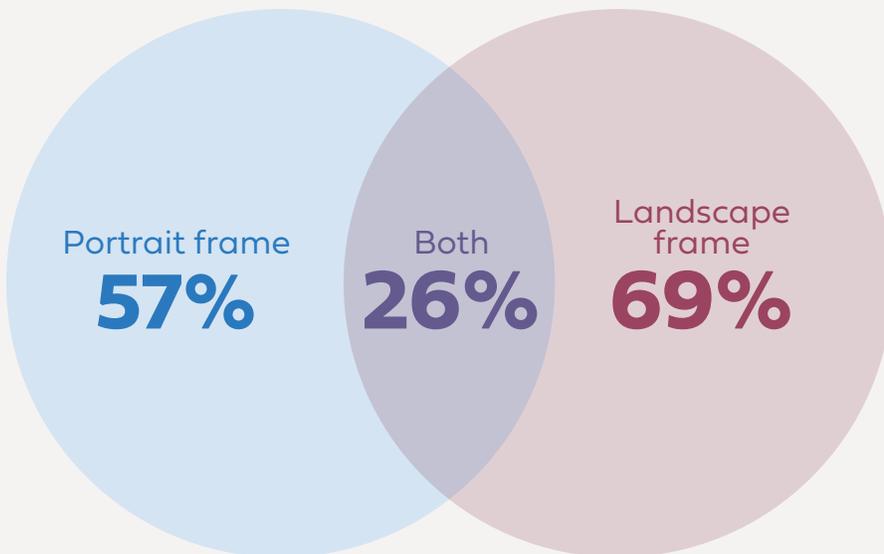
- Personal responsibility →
- You're on your own →
- Duty to family →

**Landscape (thematic)**

- Shared responsibility
- We're in this together
- Duty to the collective good

## Framing domestic violence

Each story that is in the both category is also counted in the portrait and landscape categories, so  $69\% + 57\% - 26\% = 100\%$



## Portrait and landscape frames

### Portrait

"In 2011, investigators found her hanging from a bath robe's belt inside a closet. The Solano County Coroner's Office declared her death a suicide. But Lewis, 36, had previously sought restraining orders against her husband, Vacaville pastor Mark Lewis, accusing him of domestic violence."

### Landscape

"The review comes as California lawmakers consider a bill that would give the extended families of domestic violence victims the right to request additional scrutiny of death investigations they deem suspicious as well as provide additional training for law enforcement to spot cover-ups of domestic violence murders. Its supporters are citing Joanna Lewis's death as they advocate for the bill."

*"Are California police missing domestic violence murders? New bill would let families review cases"*  
— CalMatters

### Portrait

"The defendant in *United States v. Rahimi* was suspected of five shootings in Texas between 2020 and 2021. Police searched his home and found multiple firearms. He had a domestic violence restraining order which prevented him from owning a firearm under federal law.

The New Orleans-based Fifth Circuit agreed to rehear his case after the Bruen decision and applied the new "history and tradition" legal test. The court found that the federal statute was not sufficiently similar to any historical laws raised by the government. The prosecutor presented numerous historical laws that disarmed individuals dating from the colonial period. The court thought these laws were aimed at preserving political and social order, and not protecting an identified person from a specific threat posed by another."

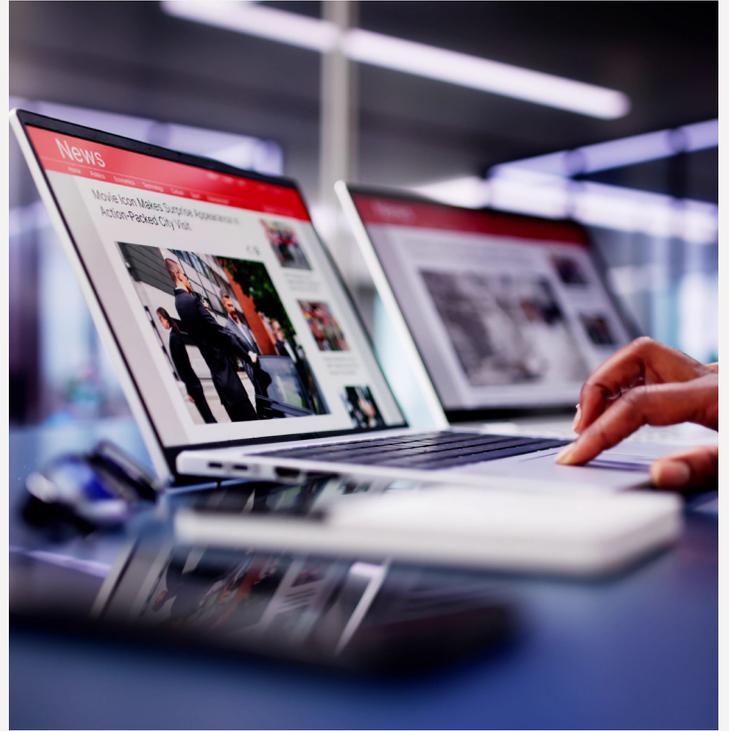
### Landscape

"If the Fifth Circuit decision in *Rahimi* is upheld, Thompson's office said 'it would open the floodgates to domestic violence abusers and other dangerous people seeking to possess firearms.' California has its own red flag laws that allow victims of domestic violence to seek protective orders to prohibit their abuser from possessing a gun. Across the nation, 45 states have similar laws enacted that limit the ability of those under a domestic violence restraining order from accessing firearms saving lives and protecting victims from potential violence. The governor's amicus brief defends the federal government's ability to enact commonsense gun safety laws, and builds on California's longstanding efforts to reduce gun violence, protect victims and survivors, and save lives."

*"Governor, members of Congress file amicus briefs in U.S. Supreme Court case on gun access in domestic violence cases"* — Lake County News

## What's in the landscape?

- Over 40% of articles connected domestic violence to related issues like lack of housing, historical trauma, or economic insecurity.
- More than half of articles used data to illustrate the landscape.



“Looking only at homicides that occurred in homes, the Stanford researchers found that spouses or intimate partners were seven times more likely to be killed if their partner owned a gun, and that 84% of the victims in those cases were female...”

*“Cook’s Corner mass shooting a horrifically common display of domestic violence”* — The Orange County Register

“In California, state data for the first half of 2023 show 21% of those seeking homeless services reported having experienced domestic violence outside of some shelters specifically serving survivors. A survey last year of unhoused women in Los Angeles County found 44% said domestic violence caused them to become homeless, and 29% said they left a permanent housing placement because of it.”

*“Bleak outlook: Domestic violence funds face cutback”*  
— Fort Bragg News

# What we found



While many opinion pieces (76%) written by advocates and policymakers discussed approaches to reducing domestic violence and keeping survivors safe, less than half (44%) of traditional news stories referenced solutions.

More than half (56%) of articles named systemic challenges facing domestic violence survivors, such as gaps in services for certain communities.

Many articles highlighted failures of local systems and the impact of budget cuts on programs for those who are experiencing domestic violence.

Stories regularly (29%) included language affirming that state government officials are responsible for enacting solutions to keep survivors safe.

## To tell a more complete story, consider . . .

. . . reporting on local approaches to support survivors or prevent violence, and who is responsible for enacting them, like: restorative justice; community-based programs that support multiple generations of families to break the cycle of violence; policy solutions such as including screening for intimate partner violence in the Medicaid (Medi-Cal) program; and including the needs of survivors in local homelessness and housing programs.

. . . continuing to illustrate the impact of federal policy changes at the local level.

. . . looking beyond the criminal legal system for solutions that may instead focus on prevention and be led by youth, faith leaders, health care providers, cultural programs, or others in the community.



“The Department of Justice has summarily cut hundreds of federal grants that channeled \$811 million to community organizations doing violence prevention work and helping victims of domestic and sexual violence. Attorney General Pam Bondi said the funds were an example of ‘wasteful spending.’”

*“Sudden Trump cuts leave Bay Area violence prevention groups reeling” — San Francisco Chronicle*

## Solutions in the news

- Over half (55%) of all articles named solutions — but solutions appeared far more often in opinion pieces than in traditional news articles.
  - 44% of news articles included solutions.
  - 76% of opinion articles included solutions.
- 13% of these articles presented problems, but provided no solutions.



### Solutions on the opinion page

“By recognizing critical issues such as IPV as a core component of the homelessness crisis for women, we can collectively work toward comprehensive solutions that prioritize safety, health and housing simultaneously ... Finding more ways to finance and build sustainable affordable housing with the help of multiple public and private sectors are key to meet the challenge we are facing.”

*“Women who flee domestic violence often will face homelessness” — The Desert Sun*

- Most often, articles laid responsibility with state government (29% of articles).
- Government officials or agencies were held responsible in 29% of articles, whereas the federal government was mentioned far less (12%), often in conjunction with Supreme Court cases.



“Negri and his allies are asking the state for \$200 million to cover the expected shortfall over the coming years. They are attempting to drum up public support ahead of the creation of the state budget this January, asking state residents to call their local representatives and legislators to ask for the funding.”

*“‘Disastrous’ funding cuts to domestic violence, child sexual abuse services will hit South County hard” — East Bay Times*

## Solutions in the news

16% of stories described a criminal justice response to acts of domestic violence.

“

“Darien Diaz, 29, was found guilty after a 17-day trial in San Mateo County. Prosecutors said Diaz, who faces up to five years in prison, will return to court on Dec. 17 for a sentencing hearing.

‘Any time a jury holds to account a domestic abuser like Darien Diaz, the community is a safer place,’ a spokesperson from the San Mateo County District Attorney’s Office said in a statement given to the Bay Area News Group.”

*“Man convicted of domestic violence, other felonies following brutal Pacifica Halloween party assault” — The Mercury News*



## What we found



Although graphic language about incidents of domestic violence was present in several articles, content warnings designed to prepare readers for those descriptions rarely appeared.

Only 11% of stories included resources for readers who might need help dealing with domestic violence in their own lives.

Though few articles included explicitly harmful language about survivors, only 13% of articles highlighted survivors' resiliency and humanity.

### To tell a more complete story, consider . . .

. . . reporting on local approaches to support survivors.

. . . using content warnings to alert audiences that stories may be disturbing; more than half of California adults (63%) have a personal connection to domestic violence and, therefore, many readers will, too.

. . . sharing resources (like hotlines or websites from local organizations, etc.) to help news consumers learn more about domestic violence or find out how to get help.

. . . if a survivor is comfortable, including information about their healing or resiliency that goes beyond their experience of victimization.



## Sensitivity in the news

- Few articles included explicitly harmful language about survivors that stigmatized or shamed them.
- 3% of articles included explicitly harmful language.
- 13% of articles used exemplar language (see “Better language” below).
- “Survivor” seems to be a widespread term in California outlets.

## Language



### Stigmatizing language



“She has always described the couple’s relationship as toxic and leading to Rosa’s deteriorating mental health and paranoia . . . ‘I see it like ‘La Llorona’ who killed her kids because she was abandoned. She became crazy.”

*“10-year-old killed in stabbing lived in house with history of domestic violence”* — The Mercury News

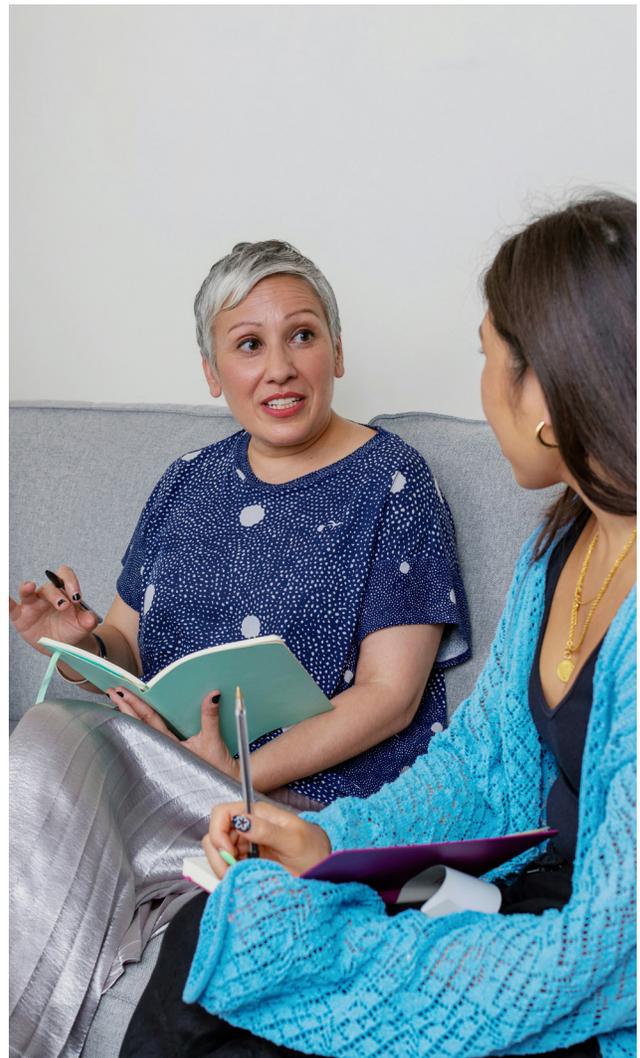


### Better language



“A former exotic dancer said she became homeless and lived in her car after finally gathering the courage to leave her fiancé, who managed the club where she worked and controlled all aspects of her life. One woman said she, her husband and seven children looked like a model family to outsiders, who never saw his drunken and violent rages at home.”

*“Trauma has shaped Jennifer Siebel Newsom’s life. Now it helps fuel her work for California”*  
— Los Angeles Times



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