



Tech Abuse in the Pandemic & Beyond

REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD

Safety Net Project

NATIONAL NETWORK TO END DOMESTIC VIOLENCE | [TECHSAFETY.ORG](https://techsafety.org)

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THANK YOU to the over 1,000 dedicated advocates and legal systems professionals who took the time to complete our survey in December 2020 to January 2021. We're grateful for your responses and your work every day alongside survivors to increase safety, privacy, and healing. We recognize your efforts and the strength and resilience of survivors in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ongoing, long-standing struggles for individual and collective liberation from multiple forms of oppression that form the roots of domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, and tech abuse.

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SAFETY NET, a project of the National Network to End Domestic Violence, was founded in 2000 by Cindy Southworth. We focus on the intersection of technology and safety by:

- **Working with communities, agencies, and technology companies** to address how current and emerging technology impacts the safety, privacy, accessibility, and civil rights of victims.
- **Educating victim advocates and the general public** on ways to use technology strategically to increase and maintain safety and privacy.
- **Training law enforcement and justice systems, social services, coordinated community response teams and others** on tactics of technology abuse and offender accountability.
- **Advocating for strong local, state, national and international policies** that ensure the safety, privacy and civil rights of all victims and survivors.

Contact us at SafetyNet@nnedv.org and find more information at TechSafety.org.

Recognition of Land and People

The NNEDV office sits on the lands of the Anacostans (Nacotchtank), and along the Anacostia and Potomac Rivers. It was shaped by the enslaved labor of Black people. We must all learn histories and hear present experiences, and strive to honor, protect, and sustain both land and each other.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Tech abuse is a widespread problem seen by advocates and legal systems professionals across the US. People who work with survivors told us that tech abuse increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Survivors and their communities also encountered additional barriers to safety, justice, and healing. Advocates and other victim service providers inside and outside of legal systems shifted to new ways of using technology to communicate with survivors and each other while coping with profound personal, professional, and pre-existing societal challenges and inequities.

This report shares the results of a needs assessment conducted at the end of 2020. We began planning the assessment prior to the pandemic, and we shifted the timeline and scope as the pandemic unfolded in order to capture this snapshot of tech abuse and victim services in the time of COVID.

The findings are not just a picture of a moment frozen in time. The implications of the responses from over 1,000 victim service providers offer us glimpses of the future, post-COVID world – including both troubling trends in the misuse of technology to harm and control survivors, and also promising new avenues to increase access for survivors to services and ultimately safety, justice, and healing.

Key Findings:

- The most common types of tech abuse - **harassment, limiting access** to technology, and **surveillance** - increased during the pandemic.
- **Phones, social media, and messaging** were the technologies most commonly misused as a tactic of tech abuse.
- Internet of Things (IoT) devices, next generation location trackers, and other emerging technologies are increasingly used in tech abuse.

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- **Survivors' lack of access to technology**, sometimes called the “Digital Divide,” is a barrier to accessing services, legal support, courts, and other services and social supports.
- Though victim service providers increasingly offered services via video, text, and chat during the pandemic, most found that traditional phone service or meeting in person (with health precautions) remained essential strategies.

Takeaways:

- As we emerge from the pandemic, we should be prepared for the strong likelihood that tech abuse tactics adopted or increased during the pandemic will not be given up easily.
- We should work together to promote digital equity and tech safety, ensuring that survivors can access and enjoy the benefits of technology in their personal lives, as well as at work, school, and in public life.
- We should reflect and build on lessons learned about using technology in this work. Safety Net will support these efforts through technical assistance, resources, and training to help ensure privacy and safety.

Related research on victim services throughout the pandemic highlights what we have always known: that advocates and service providers are resilient and dedicated. However, there is a cost to excessive flexibility and creativity in burnout, vicarious trauma, and exhaustion.¹ Technology can amplify abuse but is also used strategically by survivors and those who support them.² Moving forward, we should bring this knowledge even more deeply into our work to respond to and prevent violence and abuse while supporting the well-being of providers.

¹ Wood, et al. (2020)

² Freed, et al. (2017); Matthews et al. (2017); Dragiewicz, et al. (2018); Richard & Gray (2018); Douglas, Harris, & Dragiewicz (2019); Harris & Woodlock (2019); Messing, et al. (2020); Leitão (2021)

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INTRODUCTION: REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD, 2021

In many ways, 2020 was a year with unprecedented challenges. Across the US, advocates, legal professionals, and survivors grappled with profound changes to daily life, work, and school due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic trapped many survivors of domestic violence in close quarters with abusive individuals, and added more barriers to access to safety, justice, and healing.

Beginning in mid-March 2020, advocates and other victim services providers across the US pivoted almost overnight to new ways of connecting with survivors and each other to adapt to the physical distancing measures and other steps taken to slow the spread of the virus. The Safety Net teamed answered a tidal wave of requests for the content of our [Digital Services Toolkit](#), including guidance on the use of video, text, chat, and other tools for remote work that would still prioritize survivor safety and privacy while promoting access.

Safety Net was already planning to conduct a needs assessment of victim service providers and legal professionals to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of tech abuse on survivors, the role of technology in providers' daily work, and the type of support survivors and programs need from their communities and from NNEDV as a national technical assistance provider. As we drafted questions, it became clear that we needed to ask directly about the effects of the pandemic. We wanted to understand how tech abuse may have been amplified during the pandemic, and how technology created opportunities or barriers for providers in working with colleagues and survivors.

With support from the Office on Victims of Crime (OVC), we opened two online surveys between December 2020 and January 2021. They mirror topics from our previous needs assessments conducted in 2012 and 2014, and also offers a snapshot of services during the pandemic. We received more than 1,000

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responses from service providers who work with survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, human trafficking, elder abuse, and general crimes.

This report offers a summary of key findings from the needs assessment, beginning with tech abuse, and followed by service providers' use of technology and their needs, with an emphasis on how the pandemic impacted their ability to provide services. An appendix includes our methodology and the survey instruments.

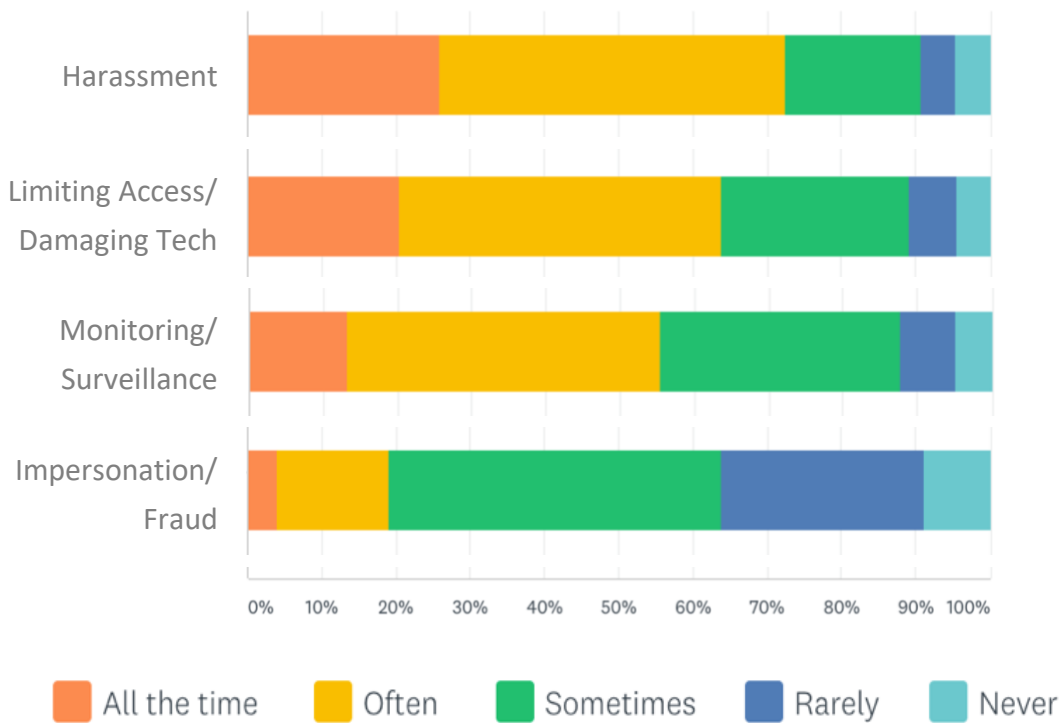
TECHNOLOGY ABUSE

How is technology being abused as a tactic to harm survivors? We asked advocates and legal systems professionals to tell us about the abusive behaviors and types of technology they see in their work with survivors. We also asked whether abusive behaviors changed during the pandemic.

Tech Abuse

Respondents told us that the most frequent tech abuse they see is **harassment**, closely followed by **limiting survivors' access to technology** and **monitoring or surveillance**. Respondents indicated that although **impersonation or fraud** through technology is a problem, it was less frequent.

What kinds of tech misuse are survivors experiencing (not just during the pandemic?)



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Effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Tech Abuse

Respondents reported an **increase in every type of tech abuse** during the pandemic. Mirroring findings about the most frequent kinds of tech abuse overall, harassment, limiting access, and surveillance were reported to have greater increases than impersonation.

We are concerned that as we emerge from the pandemic, abusive people who have adopted or increased their misuse of technology against survivors during the pandemic will have no incentive to discontinue this form of abuse. There is a strong likelihood that the spike in tech abuse that advocates and legal professionals have seen will stay with us.

The Types of Technology Being Misused

The types of technology most commonly misused were **phones**, followed by **social media**, and **messaging**. Other types of technology commonly seen were **computers, pictures or videos**, and **shared accounts**. Some of the less commonly seen types of technology in tech abuse were **hidden cameras, gaming consoles, data brokers or online information**, and **apps**.

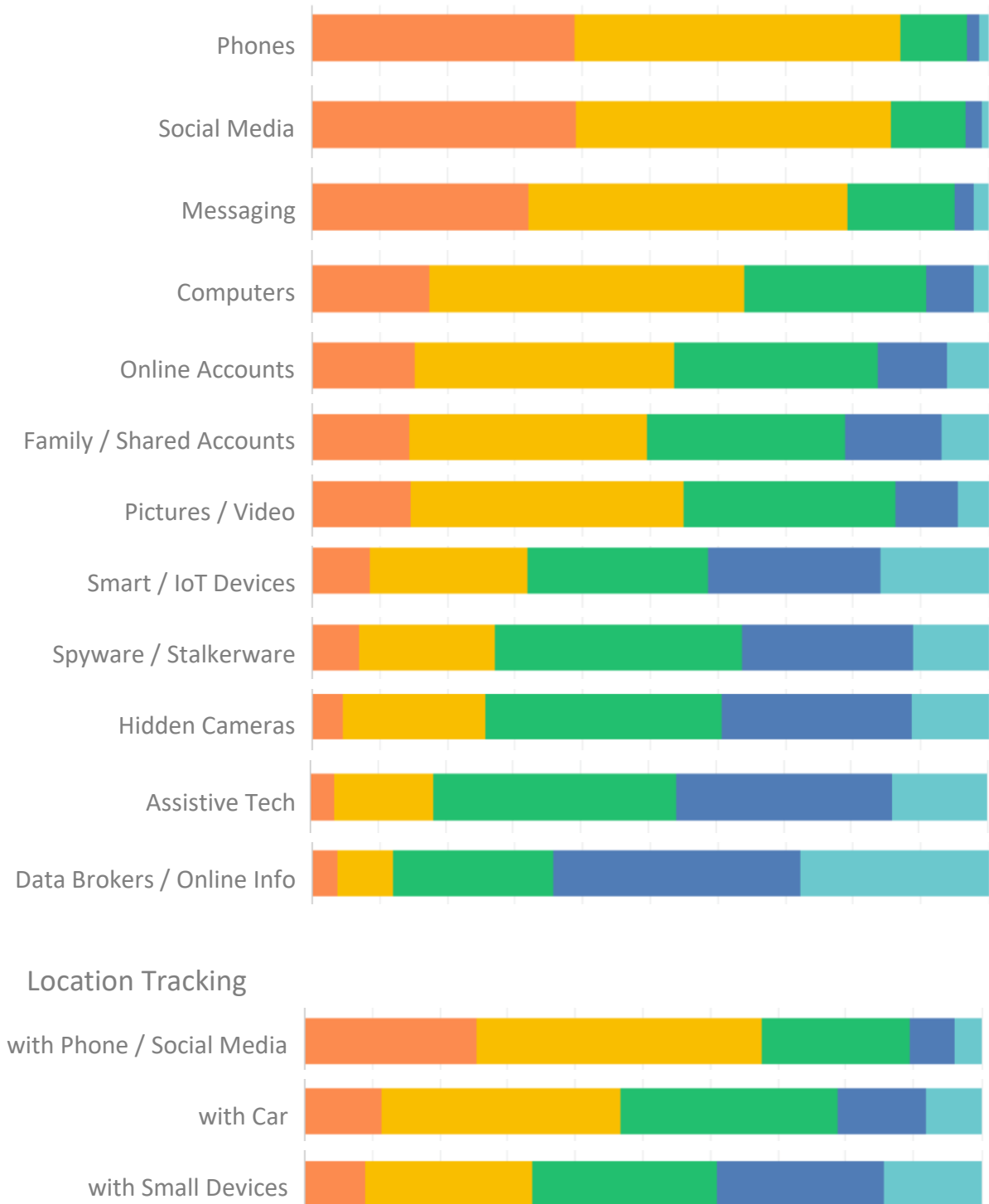
Phones and social media are far more commonly used technologies than a decade ago. Nearly all Americans (97%) have some sort of cell phone, and 85% use a smartphone according to the Pew Research Center. Social media is used by 72% of Americans.³

We also asked about **location tracking**. Tracking through a **phone or social media** was most commonly reported, followed by tracking via a **car**. Tracking with next generation **location trackers** (such as AirTags, Tile, or Trackr) was seen far less often but is still significant given how new these products are to the market.

³ Pew Research Center's factsheets from 2021: [Mobile](#) and [Social Media](#).

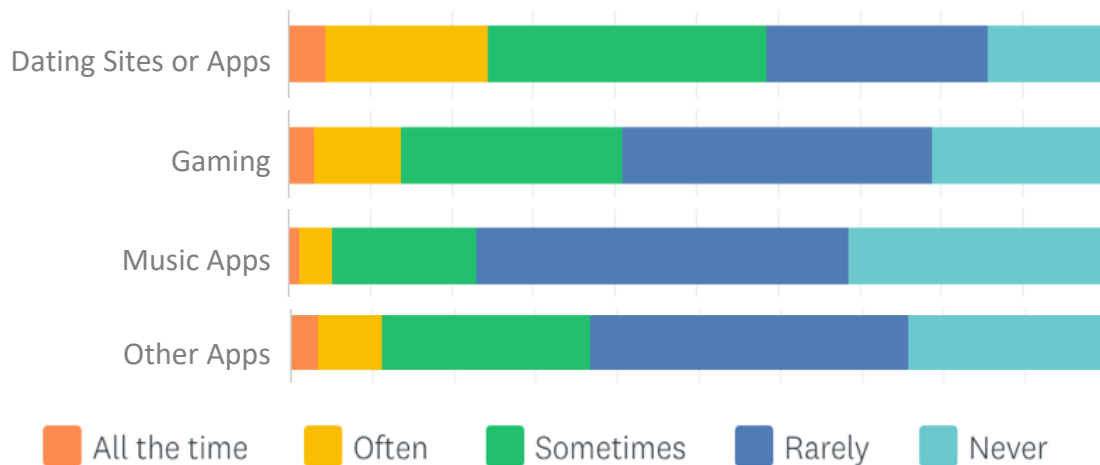
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How often are these kinds of technology misused against survivors you work with (not just during the pandemic)?



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Apps & Gaming



“**Smart**” or **connected devices** often referred to as the Internet of Things (IoT) turn up in cases “all the time” or “often” for a third of advocates and 1 in 5 legal systems professionals. While this is rather low, people are increasingly using these types of technology. With additional use we may see increases in abuse through them. Additionally, advocates and legal systems professionals are often not aware of how these technologies can be misused, so they may not ask about them.⁴ Recent research suggests that when support professionals do not ask about tech abuse, it may not be raised as an issue by survivors, pointing to the need to integrate it into assessments and intake.⁵

We also asked about abusive behavior through **apps**. Apps used for dating and gaming were seen more commonly than all other apps, including gig economy (e.g. ridesharing) and music apps, which were reported to be misused rarely. Our surveys asked about apps commonly used by survivors; we did not ask about the prevalence of apps installed by abusers to stalk survivors. Recent research has documented the increasing prevalence of apps used in this way and the

⁴ Lopez-Neira, et al. (2019); Slupska (2019)

⁵ Freed, et al. (2017)

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proliferation of information available online to abusers to learn how to use apps as a tactic of abuse.⁶

Spyware/stalkerware was also reported less frequently than other forms of tech abuse. About two-thirds of respondents said that they saw it only “sometimes,” “rarely,” or “never.” About 1 in 5 respondents said stalkerware is used “often,” while only 7% of advocates and 3% of legal professionals report it being used “all the time.” However, security companies worldwide reported a significant spike in stalkerware use during the pandemic.⁷ Safety Net’s ongoing work with the Coalition Against Stalkerware along with the recent research on this topic cited above should help to clarify frequency, risks, and responses to stalkerware.

Assistive technology used by people with disabilities was only sometimes seen in tech abuse cases by the survey respondents. Nearly half of advocates reported that they saw this misuse “rarely” or “never,” and almost three-quarters of legal systems professionals reported the same. Only 3.5% of advocates (and no legal systems professionals) said that they saw this kind of abuse “all the time.” One possible reason for such low reporting could be that advocates and legal professionals may not be asking about reliance on assistive devices and abuser’s threats, control, or destruction of this type of technology.⁸ We also know that many survivors with disabilities don’t access services due to the fear of or actual inaccessibility of agencies.

⁶ Chatterjee, et al. (2018); Roundy, et al. (2020); Tseng, et al. (2020)

⁷ Coalition Against Stalkerware (2021)

⁸ Research suggests that survivors with disabilities experience additional impacts from tech abuse, see Woodlock, et al. (2020).

SURVIVORS' NEEDS AND BARRIERS

We also wanted to know about survivors' needs and barriers as related to technology misuse, so we asked providers to share their perspectives. Consistent themes emerged on the challenges survivors face, such as securing their own technology, documenting and reporting abuse, and developing strategies on managing the abuse. Responses were fairly comparable for both advocates and legal systems professionals in most areas.

Securing, Controlling, and Accessing Technology

Advocates and legal professionals reported that a top challenge was helping survivors to **secure their technology**. When survivors seek to replace a compromised device, they can also face the challenge of **accessing new devices or accounts**. This challenge was reported by less than half of all respondents. For survivors who relocated, three-quarters of legal systems professionals and nearly as many advocates said that survivors **struggled to keep their new information private**. In our ongoing relocation and identity work, this has been noted as a significant concern for relocation safety for many years and is only getting harder with the growing amount of data available online.

A vast majority of legal systems professionals and advocates reported that survivors face challenges **managing technology while co-parenting** with the abusive person. This may include gifts given to the child by the abusive person that have location tracking or communication features that the survivor finds concerning. Survivors also have difficulty **talking with their kids about online and device safety** according to about two-thirds of both legal systems professionals and advocates.

Documenting Abuse

The next most frequently reported challenges for survivors were **documenting and reporting harassment** and developing **strategies for dealing with that**

harassment. Working with companies to deal with harassment (which is often needed to document the harassment or to manage the harassment) was noted as another challenge, although this was heard more by legal systems professionals (71%) than advocates (53%).

Survivors experiencing **surveillance** faced challenges in **documenting or reporting** the surveillance according to three-quarters of legal systems professionals and nearly two-thirds of advocates. They also faced challenges in identifying **strategies to deal with the surveillance**.

Documenting and reporting economic abuse was also a challenge for survivors, as reported by about two-thirds of legal professionals and advocates, as was **developing strategies for dealing with economic abuse**. Negative **credit checks** resulting from economic abuse were reported as leading to discrimination or reputational harm for survivors by two-thirds of advocates and half of legal systems professionals.

Reputational Harm

We also wanted to know the types of public information that could lead to discrimination or reputational harm. Inaccurate online information and a poor credit report can be difficult to remove or fix. About three-quarters of respondents noted that online content, such as news stories, social media posts, or intimate images, lead to reputational harm and discrimination for survivors.

Respondents reported that **the misuse of data brokers and online information** was not often seen. However, as stated above, online content was frequently noted as causing harm. It is possible that survivors experience more harm from harmful or false information posted purposefully by abusers rather than from information generally available online from public sources. Further research could be helpful.

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The “digital divide,” or lack of equity in access to the benefits of technology, has always been an area of concern for survivors. This is particularly the case in the context of COVID, where isolation and stay-at-home orders often required survivors and their children to have access to technology in order to work or go to school. As much as technology has become a daily part of our lives, there are still a significant number of communities across the U.S. that do not have high-speed internet, and for many people, technology can be too expensive to replace. Both advocates and legal systems professionals reported that the lack of access to technology impacted survivors’ ability to access **employment, housing, benefits and insurance, health care, and education**.

The digital divide also impacted survivors’ ability to access **support services and social connection and support** according to over two thirds of advocates and legal systems professionals. In addition, survivors’ **participation in public and community life** was also impacted by the digital divide, as noted by half of advocates and legal systems professionals. Other less reported impacts included barriers to seeing children when in the other parent’s custody, transportation, emergency services, and language access.

During the pandemic, many court hearings and appointments shifted to virtual. We asked legal systems professionals about technology barriers survivors experienced during that time. Over 80% reported that survivors struggled with basic **access to the internet or cell signal, or access to devices** (phones, laptops, etc.). Survivors also often struggled to know how to set up **or use technology**.

Beyond basic technology access, legal system professionals also noted other barriers. Several respondents noted that **live-streaming of court proceedings was a concern for survivor privacy and safety**. Other court-related barriers include **access to court-ordered services, language access, and accommodations** for people with disabilities.

TECHNOLOGY USED TO PROVIDE SERVICES DURING THE PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic not only had an impact on survivors but also on programs, particularly in their use of technology to continue to provide services. We asked advocates about how they were using technology in their work with survivors and with each other during the pandemic.

What technology are you using for your hotline?



Hotlines

- **55% routed calls to home**
- **22.5% added text**
- **20% added chat**
- **11% forwarded to another hotline**

For many providers, identifying **how to answer hotline calls** was an urgent problem at the outset of the pandemic considering stay at home orders. Over half of respondents routed hotline calls to employees who were on shift, while only 11% reported having to forward calls to another hotline. To increase access to services, about 1 in 5 reported adding text messaging or web chat to their hotline. Many reported that they simply kept answering their hotlines as usual, either by taking turns in the office or because their shelter or office remained open.

How are you doing ongoing work with survivors?



Advocacy

- **89% voice calls**
- **71% met in person**
- **69% email**
- **54% text**
- **48% video calls**
- **17% web chat**

For **ongoing advocacy** and other work with survivors, the vast majority said they used voice calls and over two-thirds met in-person and/or used email. **About half of respondents said they used text or video to work with survivors**, and only 17% used web chat. About a third said they used electronic document signing. Based on these responses, we could infer that “old school” technologies should not be discounted, or that in the crisis of the pandemic providers chose to keep using more familiar technology.

How are you holding support groups?



Groups

- **38% video calls**
- **27% Suspended**
- **16.5% in person**
- **11% conference calls**
- **7.5% web chat rooms**

Over a third of respondents shifted **support groups** to video meetings during the pandemic, while only about 1 in 10 used voice-only conference calls or web chat rooms. Unfortunately, over a quarter of respondents reported suspending support groups during the pandemic, while others supported survivors one-on-one in absence of support groups. Although the suspension of support groups is concerning, it is understandable given how different virtual methods are from meeting in person, and that there are significant challenges to shifting to video, phone, or chat. Using virtual platforms to provide services requires thorough assessment of these platforms to ensure privacy and confidentiality, training of staff, and having processes in place to provide services safely and effectively. On the other hand, the lessons of the pandemic may reveal an opportunity for

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programs to expand access through virtual services. This would also help programs prepare for future emergency situations.⁹

There are many challenges to using technology effectively, particularly if the program doesn't already have the tech in place, along with policies, processes, and trainings. The highest ranked challenge during the pandemic, as noted by advocates, was **privacy and confidentiality**. With the use of any technology, programs need to ensure that the privacy of both advocates and survivors and the confidential discussions they have do not inadvertently become disclosed. The second highest challenge was **survivors' lack of access to the technology**.

Challenges to Providing Digital Services, ranked

1. Privacy and confidentiality
2. Survivors' lack of access to tech
3. Technical capacity to manage devices and accounts
4. Lack of funding
5. Training for employees

While advocates ranked privacy and confidentiality as the greatest challenge to communicating with survivors via tech, when asked about their confidence in their skills related to communicating safely and privately with survivors, both advocates and legal systems professionals indicated that they felt confident. It is important to note that, as a technical assistance provider on confidentiality and technology safety, we have found that providers often only realize how much they don't know after they receive a training.

⁹ US Department of Health & Human Services (2021)

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We also asked whether advocates were using their own equipment, or if their organizations provided equipment during the pandemic. The majority of the respondents were using computers, tablets, and VoIP “desk” phones provided by their organizations. However, **nearly half were using their personal mobile phones**, and one-third were using their own text messaging accounts or virtual phone numbers to communicate with survivors. Using personal mobiles and accounts to communicate with survivors can create substantial privacy risks for survivors and advocates. This points to the benefits of programs developing emergency preparedness plans that include the use of technology by employees with specific consideration to confidentiality and privacy.

Programs themselves also need greater access to technology, and advocates reported **that technical capacity to manage devices and accounts, lack of funding, and training employees** were ranked third, fourth, and fifth respectively. Happily, few reported any issues with funders not understanding or supporting the use of technology to communicate with survivors.

We separately asked legal systems professionals what they were currently using during the pandemic. Email was the most common response, followed closely by mobile phones, and video calls or desk phones. When asked **what they thought would be useful after the pandemic**, 92% felt that video would be useful, followed closely by mobile phones and email. Text messaging and desk phones were also noted by most respondents.

PROVIDERS' NEEDS

Finally, we wanted to know what service providers needed to support survivors experiencing technology-facilitated abuse. We asked them to assess their own knowledge and confidence related to tech misuse and the type of resources and information they would like more of, specifically in regards to the legal system since this is an area of recurring interest in our conversations with providers. We also asked how they currently access Safety Net resources to ensure that future resource developments reach them most appropriately.

Providers' Confidence in Tech Abuse Cases

More than half of respondents were at least “somewhat” confident in **recognizing tech abuse**, but slightly less so with **explaining basic tech safety strategies and planning**.

However, an overwhelmingly majority of respondents lacked strong confidence in **finding out what kind of tech is being misused**. Similar feelings were reported about confidence in **where to find accurate information about how technology works**. Both of these gaps in confidence speak to a need to increase the basic level of knowledge of how technologies commonly misused against survivors function, or at least where to find accurate information when needed.¹⁰

Collaboration to address technology-facilitated abuse has been a key feature of the response to domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking since the passage of the Violence Against Women Act in 1994. Yet, both advocates and legal systems professionals indicated they didn't have a lot of confidence in building collaborations with community partners around tech abuse.

¹⁰ This is supported by research from Freed, et. al. (2017) and Freed, et. al. (2019), among others.

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A common goal of collaboration is to increase offender accountability and ultimately minimize tech abuse. Only 35% of legal professionals and 45% of advocates indicated they were either “very confident” or “somewhat confident” in **increasing accountability and minimizing tech abuse**.

Seventy-nine percent of legal professionals indicated feeling either “very confident” or “somewhat confident” in **explaining documentation and evidence**; compared with only 63% of advocates.¹¹ This is understandable given the different roles and the varying evidentiary standards between jurisdictions. It also suggests that stronger collaborations could assist with helping survivors to document abuse.

Needed Topical Resources

Both advocates and legal systems professionals noted that resources related to legal cases involving technology misuse were greatly needed.

Needed Topical Resources, ranked

1. How to include technology in protection orders
2. Preparing tech abuse cases for court
3. Getting documentation from tech companies
4. Applying existing laws
5. Processing or analyzing evidence
6. Supervising offenders in tech abuse cases post-conviction

¹¹ Related research identifies the difficulty of determining what constitutes useful evidence, see Freed, et. al. (2017) and Freed, et. al. (2019).

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Both groups also noted gaps in the ways that other partners in the community, such as schools and employers, support survivors. Community awareness can be critical for survivors who are being harassed or stalked through technology, as they can support survivors' and their children's safety strategies. The most commonly noted gap was simply in **recognizing or acknowledging tech abuse**, followed closely by gaps in **protecting survivors' privacy, addressing the digital divide** (lack of access to technology), and **protecting online spaces from harassment and abuse**. These responses point to potential areas of collaboration, which could include supporting survivors in communicating their needs to schools and employers and proactively encouraging stronger protections for all community members to decrease tech abuse and online harms.

CONCLUSIONS & FUTURE WORK

As we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, we must take stock of the profound challenges we faced in our work with survivors, and also lessons we've learned that can positively shape our work into the future.

Many people hope for a return to a normal way of life. However, we are concerned that abusive people who have adopted or increased their misuse of technology against survivors during the pandemic will have no incentive to discontinue these forms of abuse, and it may become normalized. In other words, although much of the discourse is around spikes in behavior during a crisis, we should be prepared for the strong likelihood that tech abuse tactics adopted or increased during the pandemic will not be given up easily.

As a field, we need to continue increasing awareness of tech abuse. We must work together with re-doubled effort to remedy the deep social inequities that hold up and create barriers to accessing technology, safety, justice, and healing for survivors and their communities.

The needs assessment revealed opportunities for Safety Net to update and develop new resources, and provide training and technical assistance to victim service providers in the field. Three key areas are: 1) Assessing for tech abuse, 2) Including elements of tech abuse in cases in legal systems, and 3) Increasing survivors' access to accurate and usable information about tech abuse.

The COVID-19 pandemic also revealed opportunities for programs to use technology to provide services, and expanded concern about the privacy and confidentiality risks that come with using new methods of communication. Safety Net will continue to support these efforts through technical assistance, resources, and training to help ensure access, privacy, and safety.

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As a final note, the findings of this needs assessment in combination with other research point to a victim services field that shifted greatly with the emerging conditions of the pandemic.¹² Service providers showed incredible commitment and survivors continue to be resilient. However, there is a cost to this flexibility and creativity in burnout, vicarious trauma, and exhaustion.¹³ We must work together to support frontline advocates and everyone who works with survivors to respond to tech abuse.

If you would like to be notified of upcoming training opportunities and when new materials are released, please contact safetynet@nnev.org to be added to our mailing list.

If you need technical assistance about responding to tech abuse or managing your organization's use of technology to provide services, please contact safetynet@nnev.org.

¹² Wood, (2020); Tseng (2021); US Dept. of Health & Human Services (2021)

¹³ Wood (2020)

Appendix A: METHODOLOGY

This needs assessment was conducted through a survey from December 2020 to January 2021. Two versions of the survey were available: one for advocates and one for legal systems professionals. The surveys were similar in most respects, though we asked additional questions of advocates about their use of technology to communicate with survivors, and we asked separate questions of legal systems professionals about their experience with tech abuse cases in legal systems. You can review the survey instruments in Appendices C & D. Nine hundred and eighty-nine (989) people responded to the advocates' survey, and 162 responded to the legal systems professionals' survey. Of the latter, 36 respondents indicated they were advocates.

Results of the surveys were then reviewed and summarized for this report.

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