45 YEARS OF TRANSFORMING LIVES

Why Domestic Violence Education Matters to Family Law Practice



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A United Way agency

United Way of Greater Houston

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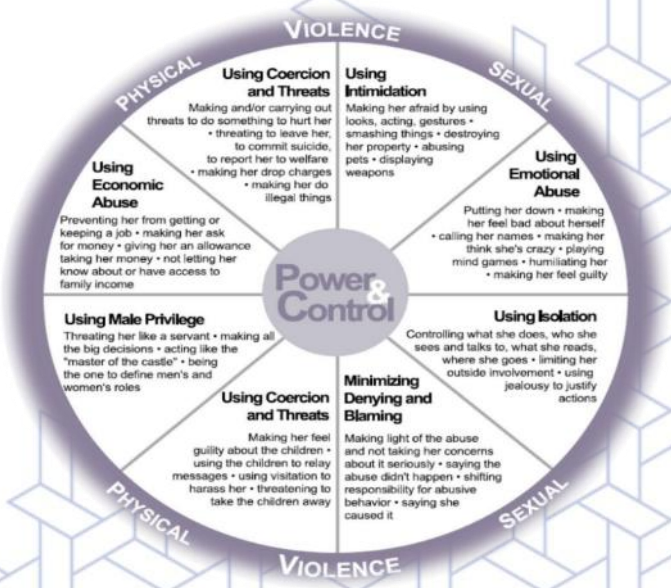
Domestic Violence Is Defined As:

The systematic pattern of behaviors in a relationship that are used to gain and/or maintain power and control over another.

It's more than just a family matter.
It's a public health issue.



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Domestic Violence is a Public Health Crisis

- Crimes classified as intimate partner violence are unlike most crimes due to the intimate relationship between the victim and the accused.
- Traditionally, this distinction led authorities to treat these crimes as though they were not crimes but private family matters.

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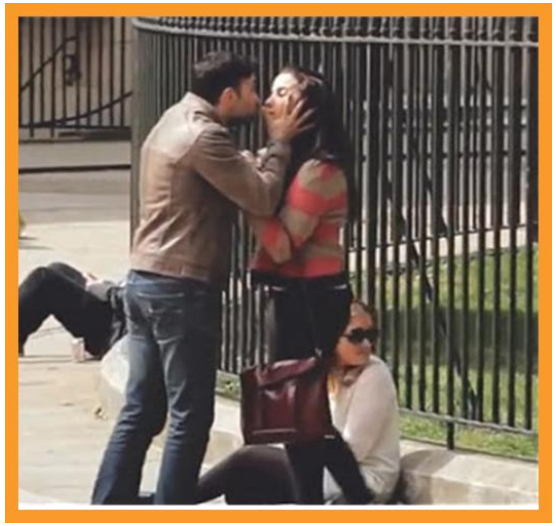
Domestic Violence is a Public Safety Crisis

More than 1 in 3 women

Lifetime contact sexual violence,

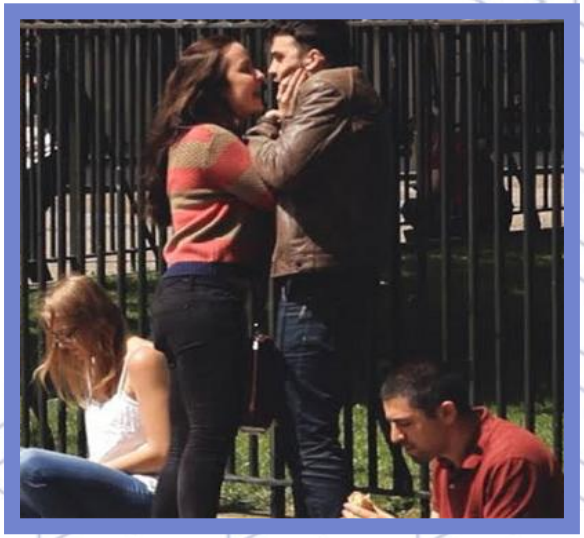
physical violence and/or stalking



More than 1 in 6 men

Lifetime contact sexual violence,

physical violence and/or stalking



Domestic Violence is a Public Safety Crisis

- 247,896 family violence offenses reported in Texas in 2023

DPS offense counts are not prosecutions or convictions.

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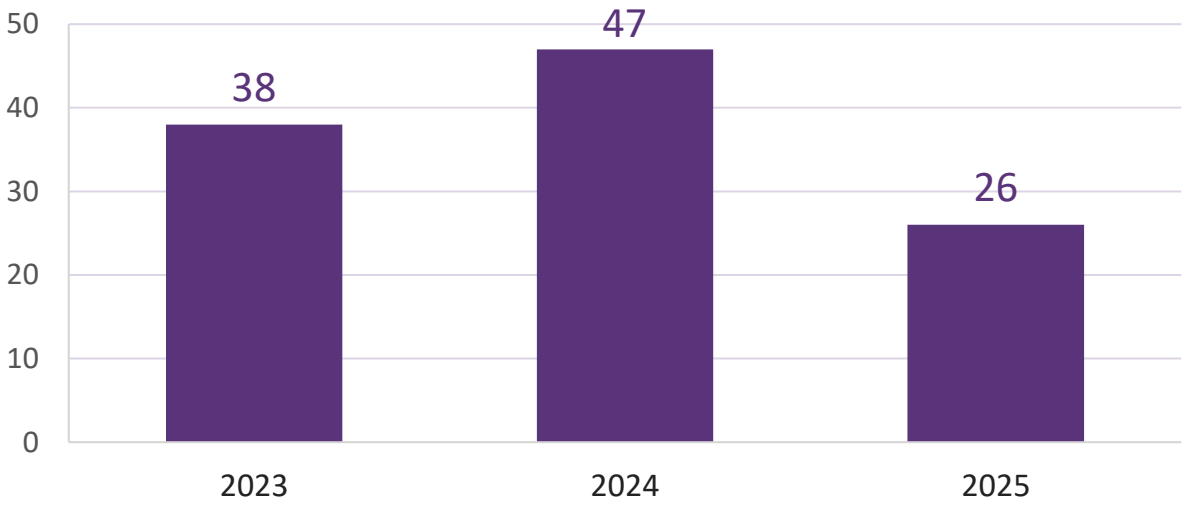
Domestic Violence is a Public Safety Crisis

- HPD domestic violence calls for service
  - **2023: 48,147**
  - **2024: 49,947**
  - **2025: 46,396**

Harris County intimate partner homicide victims

Victims identified by TCFV



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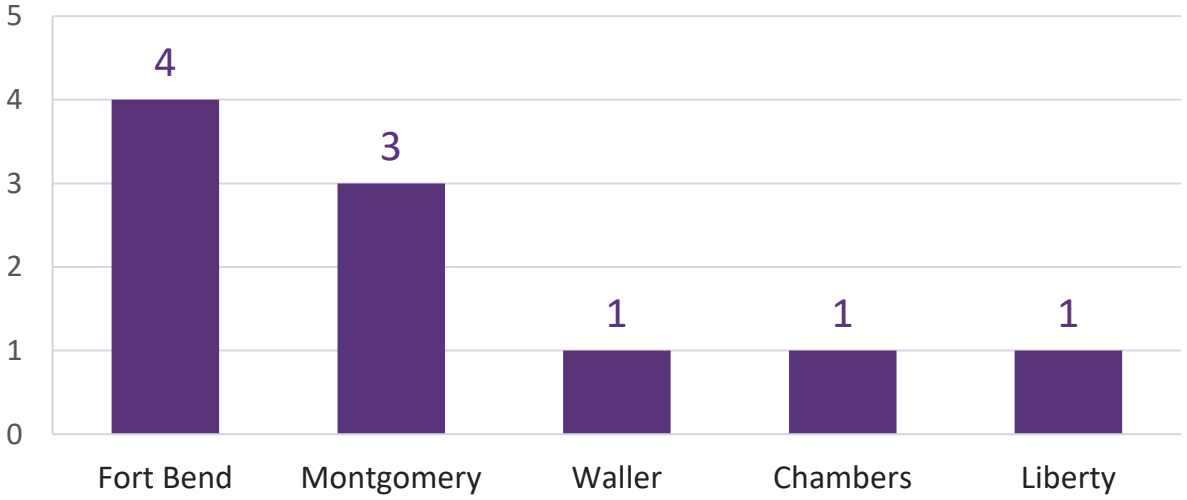
Harris County victims across these three years

Texas totals: 205 in 2023 • 161 in 2024 • 160 in 2025

Source: TCFV annual HTV fact sheets, p. 1. Counts, not population-adjusted rates.

The impact extends beyond Harris County

Selected surrounding counties, 2023



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additional victims in these five counties

These counties plus Harris accounted for 48 identified victims in 2023

Source: TCFV 2023 Analysis Report, Jan. 2025 update, printed p. 10. Selected counties only.

Texas losses reach beyond the intimate partner

160

intimate partner homicide victims

15

additional family members, friends or bystanders killed

128

minor children lost one or both parents

TCFV also identified 95 adult children who lost one or both parents

Source: TCFV 2025 HTV fact sheet, p. 1. Texas statewide data.

Seeking safety can coincide with continuing danger

52% **of 2023 Texas homicide victims had taken steps to address the abuse**

Steps included separation, relocation, divorce filings and seeking protective orders

A legal filing should trigger renewed safety planning and safe communication

Source: TCFV 2023 HTV fact sheet, p. 2; full report, printed p. 11. Statewide.

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Lethality & Risk

- Firearm access is associated with higher homicide odds
- Prior strangulation is an important warning sign
- Separation can be a period of elevated danger
- Safety requires an individual assessment

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Understanding Victim Behavior

- Fear, economic dependence, children
- Hope, love, pressure
- Many do not identify as victims
- Trauma bonding and coercive control
- Fear of retaliation or escalation

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Law Enforcement Impact

- Domestic violence calls are among the most frequent and complex calls for service
- High likelihood of repeat calls to the same households Incidents often escalate over time without intervention
- Officers must make rapid decisions with limited information
- Without coordinated services, law enforcement becomes the default safety net

System Gaps

- 293,206 Texas crisis-line calls in 2023
- 59% of shelter requests referred elsewhere for space in FY 2023
- Repeat contacts can require coordinated follow-up
- Survivors may have to navigate several systems

System Gaps

Missed Opportunities for Early Identification

- Lack of routine domestic violence screening across systems
- Abuse often not identified until escalation or crisis
- Non-physical abuse (coercive control, fear, isolation) frequently missed
- Limited safe ways for survivors to disclose abuse

System Gaps

Inconsistent Follow-Up & Intervention

- Follow-up after a call may not connect the survivor to services
- Repeat calls without coordinated intervention
- Survivors left to navigate systems alone
- Investigations can face barriers when evidence or participation is limited

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System Gaps

Fragmented Systems & Data Sharing

- Limited coordination across law enforcement, courts, healthcare, and schools
- No single record should be assumed to contain the full history
- Critical risk information not shared in real time
- Systems operate in silos instead of as a coordinated safety net

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System Gaps

Gaps in Offender Accountability

- Inconsistent enforcement of bond conditions
- Limited use of monitoring tools (ankle monitors, geo-fencing)
- Substance use often not addressed as a risk factor
- Lack of universal domestic violence education for offenders

System Gaps

High-Risk Moments Not Adequately Addressed

- Leaving an abuser significantly increases danger
- Limited targeted intervention during separation
- Survivors often return due to lack of safe alternatives
- Firearm access not consistently addressed

When Systems Fail

- 59% of Texas shelter requests were referred elsewhere for space in FY 2023
- Safe housing may remain unavailable
- A referral requires follow-through
- Advice should reflect the client's actual options

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What Works?

Closing the Gaps

- Coordinated response
- Early identification
- Legal + advocacy integration
- Offender accountability

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AVDA Services

- Legal services, counseling, advocacy
- Safety planning
- BIPP for offenders
- Community education and prevention

AVDA Model Lessons for Practice

- Legal strategy works alongside advocacy and counseling
- The client's goals guide options and the pace of decisions
- A warm referral includes consent and a clear next step
- Separate survivor support from work on offender accountability

Practice recommendations informed by SAMHSA and AVDA's service model

Private Screening With Specific Questions

- Meet privately and explain confidentiality and its limits
- What happens when you disagree or say no?
- Has anyone controlled money, tracked you or threatened you?
- Ask about weapons, strangulation and threats involving children

Behavior-based intake recommendations. Assess context and immediate safety.

Interviews That Support Participation

- Explain the process and give the client meaningful choices
- Use short questions, breaks and a timeline built over time
- Affect and fragmented recall alone do not establish credibility
- Use qualified interpreters and confirm safe contact methods

Adapted practice recommendations based on SAMHSA trauma-informed principles

Trauma-Informed Case Preparation

- Connect specific conduct and evidence to the relief requested
- Assess conservatorship and possession under §153.004
- Evaluate mediation safety and the §153.0071 process
- Request confidentiality and prepare the client for court

Tex. Fam. Code §§153.004, 153.0071, 82.011 and 85.007

Safety Around Legal Case Events

- Revisit safety before service, hearings and exchanges
- Confirm a safe device, portal, email and voicemail plan
- Plan arrivals, waiting areas and remote-hearing privacy
- Preserve evidence before technology changes, with safety support

Practice recommendations. Coordinate with a trained advocate and the client.

Counsel for the Person Accused of Abuse

- Investigate facts and protect the client's right to be heard
- Explain every order and address prohibited contact or monitoring
- Preserve evidence and prevent misuse of legal processes
- Discuss BIPP and respond to credible threats under Rule 1.05

Tex. Disciplinary R. Prof. Conduct 1.05, 3.04 and 4.04

Changes Your Firm Can Make Tomorrow

- A private screening and safe-contact routine for every client
- Staff training on disclosure, access needs and escalation
- A case plan linking client goals, evidence and specific relief
- A consent-based referral and follow-up responsibility

The goal is informed participation, safer case planning and effective representation.

Safety and Effective Representation

- What does this client need to participate safely?
- What will our next legal step change outside the courtroom?
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Thank you. Protective Order Law Update follows with Melissa Cass Pickett.