



RESEARCH REPORT

Advancing a Coordinated Response to Intimate Partner Violence

A Systemwide Assessment from Allegheny County, Pennsylvania

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June 2021



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Acknowledgments

This report was funded by Hillman Family Foundations and FISA Foundation. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission.

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute's funding principles is available at urban.org/fundingprinciples.

We thank Lauri Fink and Hilary Brown from Hillman Family Foundations and Kristy Trautmann from FISA Foundation for their thoughtful contributions to conceptualizing and conducting this study. We are thankful to all Allegheny County partners who have engaged with us through interviews, data exchanges, observations, and connections with clients. We are also thankful to all survivors and aggressors who participated in focus groups and observations and otherwise provided meaningful contributions beyond these data collection activities. We also want to extend our gratitude to Sanjeev Baidyaroy, Loraine Bittner, Kathryn Collins, Erin Dalton, Janice Dean, Dara DeChellis, Jacki Hoover, Beth Keenan, Jess Klein, Frank Scherer, Angharad Stock, Mike Sullivan, Natalia Perez Pena, and Chengyuan Zhou for being our thought partners in this study and going above and beyond in ensuring that our findings are well rounded and encompass multiple perspectives. We thank them for their willingness to engage with us frequently, lending their expertise during the study and during our preparation of this report, and staying committed to implementing its recommendations. Finally, we want to thank our colleagues at Urban, Malore Dusenbery and Janine Zweig, for lending their expertise and assistance in ensuring the quality of our reporting and findings.

Glossary

Aggressor versus defendant versus participant	It is difficult to decide how to refer to someone who might use violence. In this report, we use the term “aggressor” with caution. This choice reflects our attempt to differentiate the dynamics between intimate partners and should not be interpreted as a determination of someone’s guilt or innocence. We think about these incidents as episodic, rather than labeling partners as incapable of resolution or change. We also recognize that their roles may be described differently throughout the life of their case in the system, and as such, we may refer to aggressors as defendants when they become involved in the criminal justice system or as participants or clients when they become involved in programming.
Battering Intervention Programs (BIPs)	Such programming is a widely used response to intimate partner violence and focuses on holding people who use violence accountable while providing them psychosocial support, attempting to change their attitudes and behaviors, and protecting victims from further harm. In Allegheny County, there are several providers that offer BIP sessions, and aggressors referred to in this report may have attended sessions with one or several providers.
Conviction	A conviction is a formal declaration that someone is guilty of a criminal offense, made by the verdict of a jury or a judge in a court of law.
Court disposition	This refers to a court's final determination of a case or issue.
Court of Common Pleas	This is a higher court that makes determinations on intimate partner violence cases that have not been resolved in Magisterial District Court.
Indirect Criminal Contempt (ICC) cases	When the conditions of a standing Protection from Abuse order are violated, the process through which these violations proceed is called an Indirect Criminal Contempt case. In Allegheny County, ICC cases are heard in the family division of the court once a week, where an assigned assistant district attorney makes a determination on how they will be resolved based on the nuance of each case.
Domestic violence (DV) versus intimate partner violence (IPV)	Domestic violence is defined as the physical, sexual, and/or emotional maltreatment of one family member by another. Although this term is often used interchangeably with intimate partner violence, DV is a broader category that typically includes all forms of family violence, including elder abuse, child abuse, and violence between family members or intimate partners, whereas IPV refers to acts of physical, sexual, and/or emotional aggression between intimate partners in particular.
Formal arraignment	This is a court event that occurs at the Court of Common Pleas where a defendant is informed of their charges, is assigned a judge, and, if appropriate, has a pretrial conference scheduled.
Legal advocate	A legal advocate is someone who is not acting in attorney capacity but is part of a domestic violence program that offers survivors support in navigating the legal system. In Allegheny County, legal advocates offer a range of supports in the criminal and family divisions of the court system, including but not limited to in-person court accompaniment of and support for survivors appearing as victim witnesses, explanation and guidance around court processes, and referrals to agencies outside the court.
Magisterial district judge (MDJ)	This is a local minor court, where forty-six magisterial district judges serve as the first level of judicial authority and hear cases at preliminary arraignments and preliminary hearings. Some cases are resolved in the courtrooms of magisterial district judges and do not proceed to higher court, whereas other cases are heard to determine whether enough evidence exists to proceed to higher court, which in this case means the Court of Common Pleas.
Preliminary arraignment	This is a court event that generally occurs within six hours after an arrest, where a defendant is read the charges against them at a magisterial district judge courtroom.

Preliminary hearing	This is a court event at a magisterial district judge courtroom. The event generally occurs 14 days after arrest for defendants who are held in custody or 21 days for defendants who are not held in custody. For intimate partner violence cases in Allegheny County, the typical process is to hold defendants in custody.
Pretrial conference	This is a court event that occurs at the Court of Common Pleas for intimate partner violence cases that proceed to trial. At this event, scheduling and ground rules of a trial are set forth.
Protection from Abuse order	This order, known as a protective or restraining order in other jurisdictions, is meant to protect someone who is abused from someone who is abusive. In Allegheny County, these orders are issued in the family court division to people who are in romantic relationships, family members, and people who live together. These orders are not limited to intimate partner violence cases.
Repeat Batters Court	This court, also known as domestic violence court, follows a problem-solving court model and offers alternative judicial processing for people accused of domestic violence. This court is located in the criminal division of the Court of Common Pleas and seeks to reduce general recidivism and domestic violence recidivism among people charged with a domestic violence offense.
Victim versus survivor	The term “victim” typically refers to someone who has recently experienced violence; moreover, it is commonly used when discussing a crime or when referencing the criminal justice system. The term “survivor” often refers to a person who is going through or has gone through the recovery process; it is used when discussing the short- and long-term effects of violence. Some people identify as victims, whereas others identify as survivors or do not want to be labeled at all. We use the term survivor throughout the report with caution.

Executive Summary

Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, is one of the most populous counties in the United States,¹ and the sheer number of people who appear in courtrooms and need services there presents several challenges for responding to intimate partner violence (IPV). For example, in the Pittsburgh Municipal Court alone, 10,200 cases were filed in 2018, of which IPV cases constituted 16 percent (or 1,687 cases).² The same is true for the child welfare system and family court, where IPV is one of the many issues clients face.

To tackle this challenge, Allegheny County partners have made several notable strides in responding to IPV, including the following innovations:

- creating resource specialist positions in magisterial district judge (MDJ) courtrooms who now help divert aggressors into interventions and otherwise offer expedient connections to social services, which creates more options other than punishment
- becoming more trauma informed and family friendly at the family division of the Court of Common Pleas for survivors and families filing for Protection from Abuse (PFA) orders (figure 1 provides an example of a child-friendly playroom available to parents who come to the court to file a PFA order)
- initiating early screening for IPV at the Office of Children, Youth and Families and creating IPV specialist positions with the goal of helping families address IPV and reducing its negative impact on children without separating family members from one another

From June 2018 to December 2020, researchers from the Urban Institute conducted a systemwide assessment of Allegheny County's response to IPV. Based on a variety of data collection activities described in this report and in consultation with local partners, we developed the following three priority areas to improve interagency coordination and respond to IPV more effectively and efficiently:

1. Get the county's top leaders to prioritize IPV over a defined period. Attention to the issue from the top can help mobilize individual agencies, enable IPV experts to turn recommendations into policies and practice, and direct resources where they can make the most impact.
2. Shift the focus from case outcomes to people's experiences, especially during early encounters with formal services. Focusing on experiences can help overcome hesitancy and increase buy-in among aggressors and survivors. In turn, improved experiences can alleviate many survivors' reluctance to turn to authorities or aggressors' hesitancy to get help, through Battering Intervention Programs (BIPs).

3. Reinstitute and sustain IPV-focused fatality reviews and ensure they embrace a nonblaming culture. Moreover, identify the most critical system gaps and get assistance from leaders to implement the changes that the review team recommends.

FIGURE 1

Children's Playroom in the Protection from Abuse Order Office in the Family Division of The Court in Allegheny County



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Source: Photo courtesy of the Protection from Abuse office in the Court of Common Pleas, Family Division.

In addition to these interagency priorities, we also recommend that Allegheny County partners consider taking the following agency-specific steps:

- Establish a specialized IPV unit in the Allegheny County Public Defender office.
- Differentiate IPV from DV in the 911 system, in the PFA office, throughout the family division, and in all IPV-related cases coming through the child welfare system.

- Record survivors' information (including full names, date of birth, and other identifiers) consistently, and when possible ensure law enforcement and/or assistant district attorneys can safely and securely share survivors' information with criminal and family division actors, the probation office, the Department of Human Services, and BIP providers.
- Prioritize and improve referrals to BIPs and play an active role in encouraging participants to view them as help (not as admissions of guilt) and in monitoring and encouraging attendance.
- Create a mechanism to consistently track aggressors' and survivors' experiences at system entry points.

Advancing a Coordinated Response to Intimate Partner Violence

From June 2018 to December 2020, the Urban Institute conducted a systemwide assessment of the system response in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, to intimate partner violence (IPV) to better understand the system as a whole and operations of some key agencies. The three objectives for this assessment are to examine how IPV cases enter the justice and child welfare systems in Allegheny County and how the systems learn about aggressors, analyze agencies' processes for responding to IPV, and recommend ways the county can improve responses to IPV. The findings presented in this report were gleaned from data collected between June 2019 and November 2020 (box 1).

BOX 1

Data Collection Activities and Methods

We used the following activities and methods to collect data for this assessment:

- **Individual and small-group interviews with system stakeholders.** We interviewed 20 representatives from agencies in Allegheny County identified through their agency position and through snowball sampling (i.e., asking interviewees to recommend other stakeholders for interviews).
- **Observation of Repeat Batterers Court.** We observed Repeat Batterers Court proceedings in the criminal division of the Court of Common Pleas.
- **Observations of magisterial district judge (MDJ) courtrooms.** We observed three MDJ courtrooms from surrounding areas outside of Pittsburgh, which were identified through availability of IPV cases on their dockets on the day of observations.
- **Observations of the Protection from Abuse (PFA) office and family court processes.** We conducted semistructured interviews with a PFA office stakeholders, and we observed temporary PFA proceedings, survivors' interactions with victim advocates, and hearings in family division courtrooms.
- **Observations of Battering Intervention Program (BIP) classes and intake.** We observed four BIP classes and one intake session offered by Persad Center, Renewal Inc., Wesley Family Services, and the Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh.
- **A focus group with domestic violence (DV) survivors.** We recruited 11 DV survivors from the Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh who had experience with various systems, such as DV shelters, the family and criminal court divisions, and the child welfare system.

- **A focus group with people charged with IPV.** We recruited eight aggressors who had IPV-related charges but were not participating in BIPs.
- **A focus group with BIP participants.** We recruited 14 aggressors who were attending or had attended a BIP and also had IPV-related charges.
- **A focus group with DV-unit probation officers.** We held a focus group with four of the five DV-unit probation officers in the Allegheny County Adult Probation Office.
- **A focus group with probation officers not in the DV unit.** This focus group included eight other probation officers identified and recruited from the Allegheny County Adult Probation Office.
- **Review and analysis of administrative records.** We received deidentified case-level data from the Allegheny County Department of Human Services that included criminal court records from the [Pittsburgh Municipal Court](#) (PMC) and the Court of Common Pleas; BIP data; records from the Office of Children, Youth and Families (CYF); and limited behavioral health records that only included services covered by public insurance.

We begin this report by outlining three overarching areas that Allegheny County should prioritize to advance interagency coordination in the future; we identified these areas with local stakeholders based on the findings gleaned from the literature and from the above data collection activities. We then briefly describe the system as it is, the county's current systemwide response and agency-specific findings. We conclude by summarizing key recommendations based on the current system response.

The System as It Could Be: Three Priorities for Improving Allegheny County's Response to IPV

Allegheny County is one of the most populous counties in the United States,³ and the sheer number of people who appear in courtrooms and need services in the county presents several challenges for responding to IPV. For example, in the Pittsburgh Municipal Court alone, 10,200 cases were filed in 2018, of which IPV cases constituted 16 percent (or 1,687 cases).⁴ The same is true for the child welfare system and family court, where IPV is one of the many issues clients face.

To reduce incidents of intimate partner violence and promote healthy relationships for many of the county's residents, a more coordinated and sustained effort is necessary. Based on our interviews and consultation with stakeholders in Allegheny County, we identified three priority areas in which the county can improve its future IPV response and interagency coordination.⁵

Priority Area 1: Commitment from the Top

What makes IPV particularly challenging to address is the number of professionals that are typically involved from the moment a case is first reported to the moment survivors achieve safety or another desired outcome. This concept is true at the case level, and it is true for coordinating policy and system-level work. No agency can claim sole authority over or responsibility for IPV cases, leading to what is sometimes wrongfully perceived as a lack of leadership or strategic direction in jurisdictions. Allegheny County is no exception. With its rich resources, various support services for survivors, use of many best practices in its criminal justice system, and nationally recognized IPV expertise in research and practice, the county still struggles to coordinate across agencies and sustain their IPV initiatives.

Notable progress has been made in other large jurisdictions when respected leaders from key agencies have collaborated and announced IPV as a priority for a defined period. For example, New York City established the [Domestic Violence Task Force](#) in 2016, through which Mayor de Blasio asked key leaders to develop a comprehensive citywide strategy to address persistently high IPV rates. Since its inception, the task force has launched 32 initiatives and secured and dedicated \$11 million in city funding to IPV (ENDGBV 2018). Although representation from leaders and strategic priorities would look different in Allegheny County, New York City provides a useful example of how to get such an effort off the ground.

Allegheny County has an established Domestic Violence task force that meets formally once a year, with working groups meeting more often. The task force primarily convenes victim services providers and staff from the Allegheny County District Attorney's Office. However, the task force has a limited authority and cannot set priorities for the whole county. The task force certainly lays the foundation for future progress, but rethinking its composition and meeting structure and ensuring it includes representation from the county's top leadership could bring a new wave of energy and direction to it.

BOX 2

A Note on Language

It is difficult to decide how to refer to someone who might use violence and someone who might suffer from violence, and we use the terms “aggressor” and “survivor” with caution. In this report, when an incident of violence has prompted engagement with the justice or child welfare systems, the person who may have suffered from violence is referred to as the survivor, and the person who may have used violence is referred to as the aggressor. We recognize their roles may be described differently throughout the life of their case in the system, and as such we may refer to aggressors as defendants or as participants in BIP classes, and to survivors as victims or as plaintiffs in civil cases.

These choices reflect our attempt to differentiate the dynamics between intimate partners and should not be interpreted as a determination of someone's guilt or innocence. Finally, we think about each incident as episodic rather than labeling partners as incapable of resolution or change.

Priority Area 2: People's Experiences First, Case Outcomes Second

Any staff person who assists families struggling with IPV in a professional capacity faces an uphill task. Reaching out for help and opening doors into private matters is difficult. Many survivors and aggressors experience trauma that can make them particularly reluctant to seek help and engage with formal supports, such as those in the criminal justice system (Duane and Vasquez-Noriega 2018). But well-equipped and trauma-informed professionals have an incredible opportunity to reverse this reluctance, especially during initial encounters.

Although engaging people will always remain challenging to some degree, system actors who are deliberate in prioritizing people's experiences may be able to overcome these challenges (Malangone 2016). Far too often, professionals' success is measured by, for instance, how fast a conviction comes in an IPV case or by how fast a child and mother are brought to safety in the child welfare system. But another important benchmark of success should be how well equipped a professional is for improving the experience of people throughout the process.

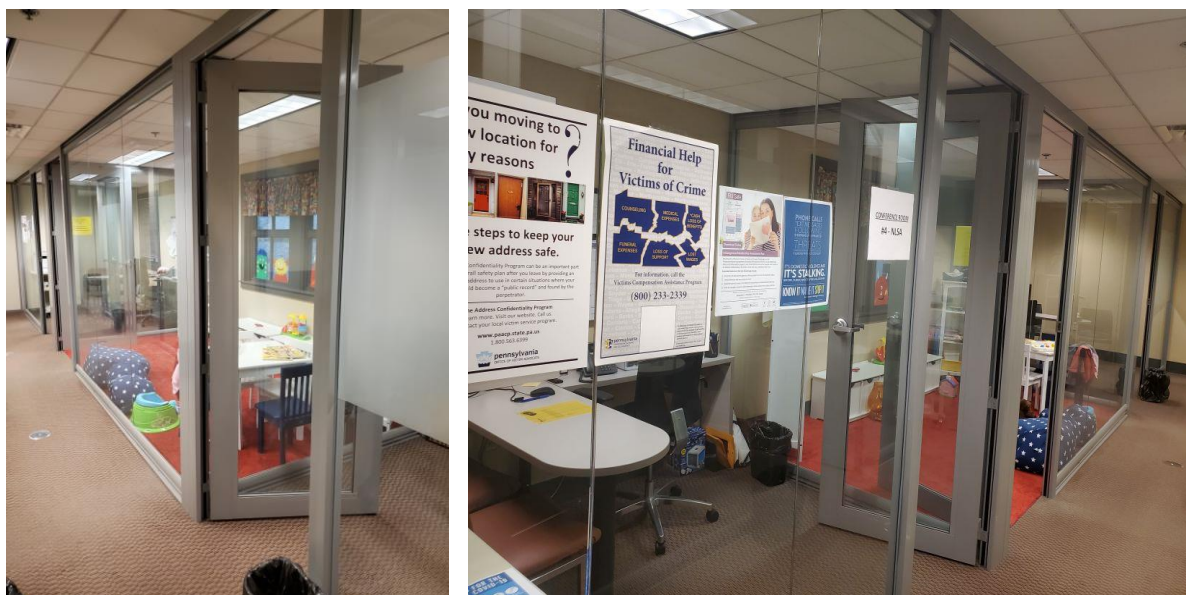
We suggest focusing on the experiences of survivors *and* aggressors. While improving survivors' experiences may seem intuitive to some, the focus on aggressors in IPV cases requires some explanation. Treating aggressors with dignity is not only just and humane, evidence shows doing so can improve outcomes for survivors in the long term. Recent studies suggest that people are more likely to perceive court decisions as fair and legitimate when they feel heard and respected, a notion known in research as [procedural justice](#).⁶ First encounters such as interactions with police can be particularly important. The more positive first encounters are, the more likely people are to engage with and trust the system and perceive the process and eventual case outcomes as legitimate and fair. Some research in IPV cases specifically suggests that more positive initial interactions with aggressors lead to better compliance with the conditions of civil restraining orders and reductions in reassaults.⁷

Allegheny County stakeholders are well aware of these best practices and have already started focusing on people's experiences through initiatives, including the following:

- ensuring **defense representation** at preliminary arraignment hearings that occur at the PMC (the initial entry point into the criminal justice system), which improves defendants' experiences during first interactions with the justice system
- becoming one of the demonstration sites to identify interventions that help judges improve decisionmaking and reduce racial disparities at the pretrial stage through a randomized control trial study led by the Harvard Kennedy School to improve the experiences of Black defendants (Arnold, Dobbie, and Yang 2018)
- creating a friendly **children's playroom and private rooms** for survivors in the PFA office in the family court (figure 2), thereby making it welcoming and nonintimidating for survivors
- contracting with local victim services providers and national experts at **Futures Without Violence** to help child welfare staff ask about IPV sensibly and to do so frequently during visits through the **Family Advocacy and Support Tool**, a questionnaire designed to guide caseworkers' conversations with family members and identify their strengths and needs

FIGURE 2

The Protection from Abuse Office in the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas, Family Division



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Source: Photo courtesy of the Protection from Abuse office in the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas, Family Division.

Despite these achievements, work remains to improve people's experiences in Allegheny County. Notable suggestions from local stakeholders and other jurisdictions for how the county can improve its response to IPV include the following:

- Rethink how interactions with professionals impact aggressors' and survivors' perceptions of the legitimacy of the process and their case outcomes.
 - » Design practical solutions to collect information about survivors' and aggressors' experiences with professionals (e.g., court actors, child welfare case workers, advocates). Systematically measuring people's experiences can lay the foundation not only to help secure buy-in and trust, but also to address the gap in tracking IPV. Options for new or existing data collection may include using kiosks already installed in MDJ courtrooms, enhancing the local [United Way's 211](#) service,⁸ or otherwise targeting high-volume or high-impact entry points such as law enforcement agencies. The Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) has a designated team that focuses on client experiences, and we recommend using its expertise and work with agencies that already solicit input from IPV aggressors and survivors.
 - » Create space for all actors who interact with aggressors and survivors (e.g., police officers, judges, defense and prosecution attorneys, advocates, child welfare caseworkers) to reflect on assumptions of people's racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, and particularly how these assumptions affect what they as professionals interpret when survivors and aggressors present their stories. These assumptions may not be an indicator of actual danger level.
 - » Be aware that survivors and aggressors often have to share their story multiple times, which can be retraumatizing. Find system-level solutions to minimize the number of interactions people have to have, and/or share information within and across agencies efficiently. For example, to file a PFA petition and receive a final order, many survivors have to attend several appointments at the family court and potentially explain their story several times to different people. Allegheny County has already started addressing this issue by developing an online PFA petition at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Other considerations include extending the hours of operation for the PFA office to eliminate some need for emergency PFAs, providing user-friendly explanation of the PFA process on a website, and partnering with community providers that survivors already trust enough to answer their questions about PFAs.
 - » Provide training and technical assistance to judges in MDJ courtrooms and to staff in family and criminal divisions to engage aggressors and survivors and enhance their capacity to craft and explain conditions of sentences and release.
 - » Create simple "benchbooks" to provide information about conditions of release relevant specifically to IPV cases. Based on interviews and observations, we identified three priority

areas where clients lack clarity: violent and nonviolent contacts, provisions around coliving, and aggressors' role with children in the same household (see additional considerations in Ling and Crank [2015, 20]).

Building trust between professionals and people affected by IPV involves an intricate balance that in some instances might not be achieved and may not often be a linear process. But rethinking the definition of success and supporting staff who engage with aggressors and survivors would be a step in the right direction.

Priority Area 3: A Deliberate and Sustained Process That Can Help Professionals Learn from Mistakes

Certain industries where mistakes are costly, such as aviation and health care, have adopted formal and deliberate processes to help professionals learn from mistakes and improve outcomes. In social services and criminal justice, mistakes are sometimes just as costly but can be harder to detect. Tolerance for mistakes, in good faith from all participants, and acceptance to learn from what went wrong can help prevent future system failures. Criminal justice actors have started adopting these practices through a process called a [sentinel events review](#).

Intimate partner violence experts were some of the early embracers of sentinel events reviews. Since 2010, [fatality review teams](#) that focus on IPV have been proliferating across the country and, when they have worked well, have helped systems correct failures. In Allegheny County, IPV experts attempted to convene a fatality review board between 2014 and 2017, conducting two rounds of thorough reviews of two IPV fatalities in each round. Many key agencies were represented at these reviews. But sustaining this effort proved difficult. A renewed focus on IPV fatality reviews in the county with dedicated resources and established structure could help address gaps.

Allegheny County already has a well-functioning and broadly representative [review board in the child welfare system](#) and has conducted [criminal case reviews](#) that have led to transformational changes such as the “one judge, one defendant” policy and have tightened the permissiveness of postponements. Lessons learned from these processes could lay the foundation for creating and implementing an IPV-focused fatality review. Notably, reviews of child fatalities and near fatalities are mandated statewide through [Act 33](#),⁹ whereas reviews of IPV fatalities and near fatalities are not mandated statewide. That reviews of IPV fatalities are not required may be a reason the county has struggled to sustain IPV case reviews.

To create a sustained IPV fatality-review process, agencies in Allegheny County could consider taking [several steps](#), including the following:

- Formalize the purpose and philosophy of the review team. For example, in Texas, the [Dallas County](#) review team works to analyze data and report on demographic, criminogenic, and other factors. Review teams in [Coconino County](#), Arizona, have the specific goal of preventing future deaths.¹⁰
- Include stakeholders from all relevant areas and agencies, including victim services providers, criminal and family courts, police, child welfare, emergency rooms, and other health care areas. Identifying professionals to participate in fatality reviews could help them become IPV experts within their respective agencies and share knowledge. Sustaining representation from key agencies will be necessary to prepare well-rounded recommendations and next steps.
- Create a culture where no single professional or agency is blamed for any specific decision and instead focus on finding system gaps. Without a nonblaming culture, the reviews can stall open discussions in which people feel free to share the nuance of their actions, and can thus significantly limit opportunities to detect and correct errors (for more about the importance of creating a nonblaming culture, see page 36 of [this 2014 report](#) from the National Institute of Justice).
- Rely on data and analytics (the [infrastructure](#) for which is well established at the Allegheny County DHS) to select cases for review that could help identify the most prominent system gaps (e.g., choose a variety of cases, including cases that have led to a fatality or a near fatality and that represent diverse survivors and aggressors).
- Structure meetings and train staff to prepare cases and facilitate reviews (in [Denver](#), for example, fatality review integrates researchers into the process). In Allegheny County, the DHS could play the role of convener and researcher.
- Implement a mechanism to translate recommendations from fatality and near-fatality reviews into concrete changes in policy and practice, which would likely be achieved through committed leadership identified above under the first priority area.

As our Allegheny County partners rightfully point out, implementing these priorities will take time. For any other locality considering such a big undertaking, we caution that identifying goals—and more importantly, translating them into concrete strategies—will take time, and will most likely involve some trial and error. Allegheny County partners have already started taking some of the steps identified

above. The unwavering commitment they have shown to addressing IPV is key to taking this work to the next level and helping more of county's residents reduce violence occurring in their homes.

The System as It Is: The Current Response in Allegheny County

As Allegheny County has worked toward a more coordinated response to IPV, all relevant agencies that respond to IPV have also made significant strides in improving their processes and operations and in improving outcomes for survivors and aggressors over the past decade. For example, since 2010, IPV fatalities in the county have fallen by nearly half.¹¹ It is difficult to know what has caused this welcome decline, but one reason could be the dedication and adoption of best practices among many of the stakeholders with whom Urban partnered for this study. In this section, we summarize findings and describe major breakthroughs and work in progress.

For this study, we focused on the following three major “entry points” of IPV cases into the system of Allegheny County:

- IPV-related cases identified through **law enforcement** and processed in the criminal division of the county court system
- IPV-related cases identified and addressed through the **child welfare system** (the Office of Children, Youth and Families)
- **civil restraining orders** (known as PFA orders in Allegheny County) issued in the family division of the court system

This list is not exhaustive and other entry points—such as emergency rooms, law enforcement agencies other than the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police, or custody or dependency court hearings in the family division—would be critical for future assessment.

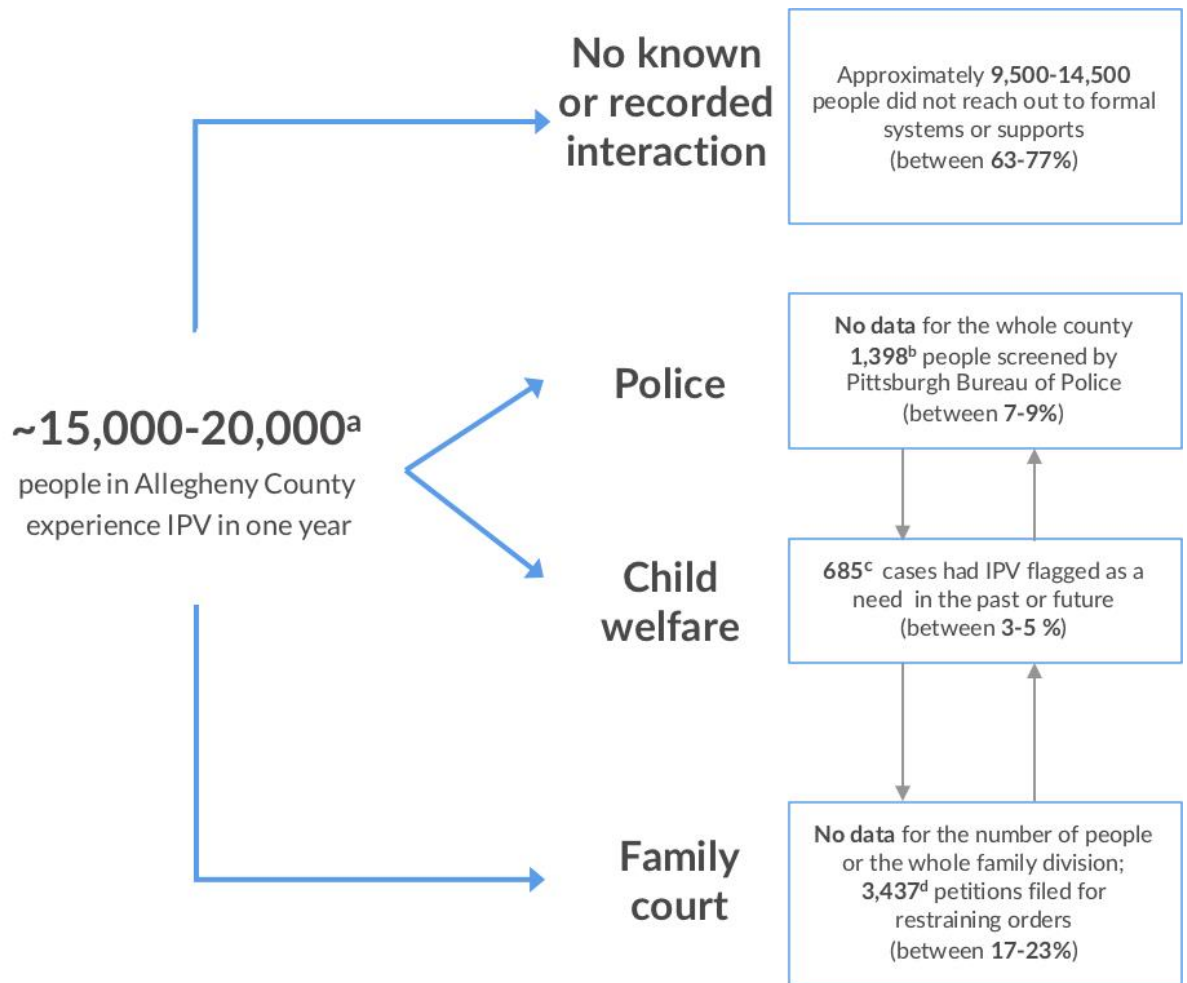
Based on our review of the available data, we attempted to estimate the number of people who experience IPV in Allegheny County a year and compared it with the number of people flowing through the above three entry points in 2018 (figure 3). We estimate that between approximately 15,000 and 20,000 adults in Allegheny County experience IPV a year and may reach out for help or services from different systems. We encountered several challenges that make our estimate imprecise. The estimate is likely conservative and was derived from data from two sources: an Allegheny County Health Department [survey](#) from 2016, and records of unduplicated clients served by all victim services

providers in 2018.¹² The survey included questions about IPV at the very end, so survey fatigue and attrition is likely. The number of people who reach all victim services providers is representative of those survivors who are willing to seek formal supports and are aware of providers, therefore making it likely that those survivors who rely on informal supports are undercounted. Another limitation to our estimates and our representation of the flow of people through county systems is that people identified through each entry point are not mutually exclusive, meaning some cases identified through one entry point could be also involved in other systems. Based on our analysis of administrative records, we found that of all cases opened in the Office of Children, Youth and Families with an IPV need identified since 2015, 34 cases (2 percent) had already had charges filed in the PMC, and 50 cases (3 percent) had charges filed in the PMC after their CYF case was opened by the end of 2019. These overlap rates are likely to be significantly underestimated. We only accessed IPV data from the PMC, which represents less than a third of all IPV cases in the county. Unfortunately, we could not identify the extent to which cases overlap among family court and other system entries because of gaps in the county's tracking of IPV. We recommend that the county invest in better tracking, particularly within high-impact, high-volume entries such as surrounding MDJ courtrooms and family court in the future.

With those limitations in mind, we present these estimates to help Allegheny County stakeholders identify high-impact entry points and explore ways to develop more precise estimates by better tracking IPV. Below, we summarize our key findings in processes and practice through each entry point.

FIGURE 3

Estimated Number of People Who Experienced IPV and Reached the Police, Child Welfare, and Family Court Systems in Allegheny County in 2018



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Notes: IPV = intimate partner violence.

^a The number of unduplicated clients served is aggregated using data provided to Urban by the Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh, Center for Victims, Alle-Kiski Area Hope Center, Crisis Center North, Pittsburgh Action Against Rape, Jewish Family and Community Services, and the Allegheny County Health Department.

^b The number of clients who entered through the police is aggregated using data provided to Urban by the Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh in fall 2020 from Lethality Assessment Program screens administered by the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police. Allegheny County has more than 120 law enforcement agencies, meaning this figure shows a small share of all IPV incidents.

^c The number of clients who entered through the child welfare system is aggregated from data provided by the Allegheny County Department of Human Services in fall 2020. The 685 cases that were opened in the Office of Children, Youth and Families in 2018 were identified to have experienced IPV at some point, not in 2018 specifically, and this number includes domestic violence cases in addition to IPV.

^d The number of clients who entered through the family court system is aggregated from data reported in the 2018 annual report by the Fifth Judicial District of Pennsylvania, County of Allegheny. The family division of the Allegheny County court system does

not report the number of people who enter the system through it, so we provided the number of temporary Protection from Abuse orders, which includes domestic violence cases and likely includes duplicated people.

Incidents Involving Intimate Partner Violence Reported to Law Enforcement and Processed in the Criminal Division of the Court System

Using the data provided by the DHS, we developed a case flow and estimated volume to illustrate how IPV cases proceed through Allegheny County's criminal justice system. Figure 4 shows the IPV incidents that the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police became involved with in 2015–2016, which proceed through the PMC based on charges filed in 2016 and to higher court (the Court of Common Pleas) or other community-based interventions through the end of 2018. We received limited information from the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police and conducted a few interviews with staff from the bureau, the largest law enforcement agency in the county. However, owing to significant gaps in the tracking of IPV data, figure 4 only represents a small share of cases in the county.

THE LAW ENFORCEMENT RESPONSE

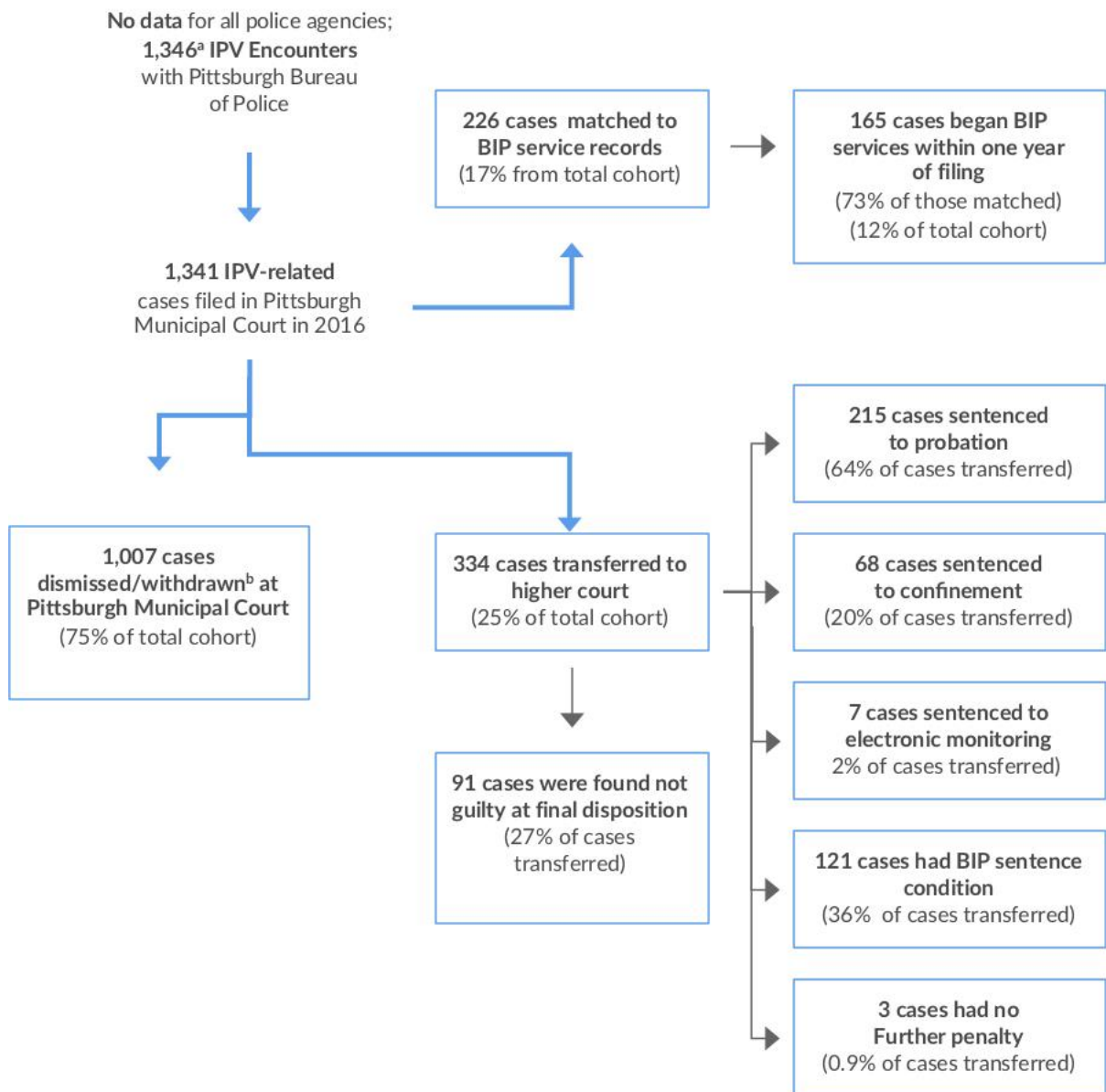
Data on IPV incidents are not available for law enforcement departments other than the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police, and there is no practicable way to identify IPV-related charges filed in surrounding MDJ courtrooms. There are more than 120 law enforcement agencies in Allegheny County, each with its own culture, policies, and protocols, leading to wide variation in responses to IPV incidents. We did not work with law enforcement agencies other than the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police and cannot provide information on how they process IPV incidents. Allegheny County stakeholders are aware of these issues, but without local mechanisms to track IPV through other law enforcement agencies and MDJs in the surrounding areas, any future attempts to estimate the flow of IPV cases and assess the system response will be challenging.

The Pittsburgh Bureau of Police has implemented several IPV best practices. First, it has a designated domestic violence unit within its special victims unit to ensure survivors receive follow-up and timely connection to services. The bureau follows an established protocol that describes policies and operations for responding to IPV. Second, in 2013 it established a [Lethality Assessment Program](#) and made it *mandatory* for all officers to follow across all six zones in Pittsburgh, a milestone not yet achieved by other law enforcement agencies in the county. Third, the bureau's own analytics department, along with the analysts at the DHS, have been working to create a foundation for collecting IPV-related data and to use them for ad hoc and real-time analyses in the future. These efforts indicate

the commitment from bureau and DHS leadership to IPV, which can in turn translate to a better operational response on the ground.

FIGURE 4

IPV Cases in the Allegheny County Criminal Justice System from 2016 through 2018



URBAN INSTITUTE

Sources: Deidentified case-level data were provided by the Allegheny County Department of Human Services in spring 2020; aggregate data on IPV encounters with the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police from Lethality Assessment Program screens were provided to Urban by the Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh in fall 2020.

Notes: IPV = intimate partner violence.

^a Urban developed a yearly average of Lethality Assessment Program screens conducted by the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police in 2015 and 2016.

^b A subset of the 1,007 dismissed/withdrawn cases may have received Battering Intervention Programming, but we were not able to confirm the share of such cases through available data.

Pittsburgh Bureau of Police officer responses to IPV calls look slightly different from responses to incidents of other types of crime. When a call goes through to the 911 service, the 911 dispatcher may classify the incident as domestic violence, which can involve people not in romantic relationships, such as family members, friends, or people sharing homes. Because of this broader definition, Pittsburgh Bureau of Police officers have to determine whether the incident involves romantic partners. Two officers are usually sent to the scene, and in most cases supervisors are in contact with responding officers to ensure appropriate action is taken based on the information coming in. Regardless of how the 911 operator classifies the incident, officers ask and investigate whether the incident can be classified as an incident of IPV. According to the protocol, in all instances with “yes” as an answer, the officers are required to fill out a Lethality Assessment Program screen if they have probable cause of an IPV-related crime or a PFA violation, if it is a repeat call to the same household, if the officer believes the victim will be assaulted or in danger once the officer leaves, or if the officer feels a screen should be conducted. We were unable to examine whether such screens are filled out on all IPV-related calls in practice. The screen includes [11 standardized questions](#) available through an application on officers’ phones or their computers at police stations. The Pittsburgh Bureau of Police DV unit follows up with all survivors screened as being in high danger.

The extent to which responding officers follow the Lethality Assessment Program with fidelity and the manner in which all questions are asked are unclear. Urban researchers did not have an opportunity to interview responding officers or observe their responses to the IPV incidents. Based on Lethality Assessment Program data provided to Urban by the Women’s Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh (the victim services provider that partners with the bureau in implementing this program), and as reported to the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence (which manages the statewide data collection of the program data in Pennsylvania), Lethality Assessment Program screens are done by the bureau only for a very small share of all calls for service. For example, in 2018, these screens were conducted for less than 1 percent of all calls for services in 2018 (or 1,398 out of 249,913).¹³ The reason why these screens are done for so few calls is unclear; among other reasons, it could indicate the true volume of calls survivors are willing to make to police, or it could be a function of officers’ effectiveness in handling IPV. Overall, similar to the trends with declining violent crime in Pittsburgh,¹⁴ the number of Lethality Assessment Program screens conducted by the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police has declined since 2014, but notably, the percentage of screens deemed as high danger has remained mostly the same

(roughly 65 percent on average) across all six years (table 1 and figure 5). However, the percentage of victims who screened as high danger who ended up speaking to a Women’s Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh hotline also declined during that period (table 1). The reasons for the decline in outreach are unclear and should be explored with law enforcement.

TABLE 1

Lethality Assessment Program Screens Conducted by the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police, 2014–2019

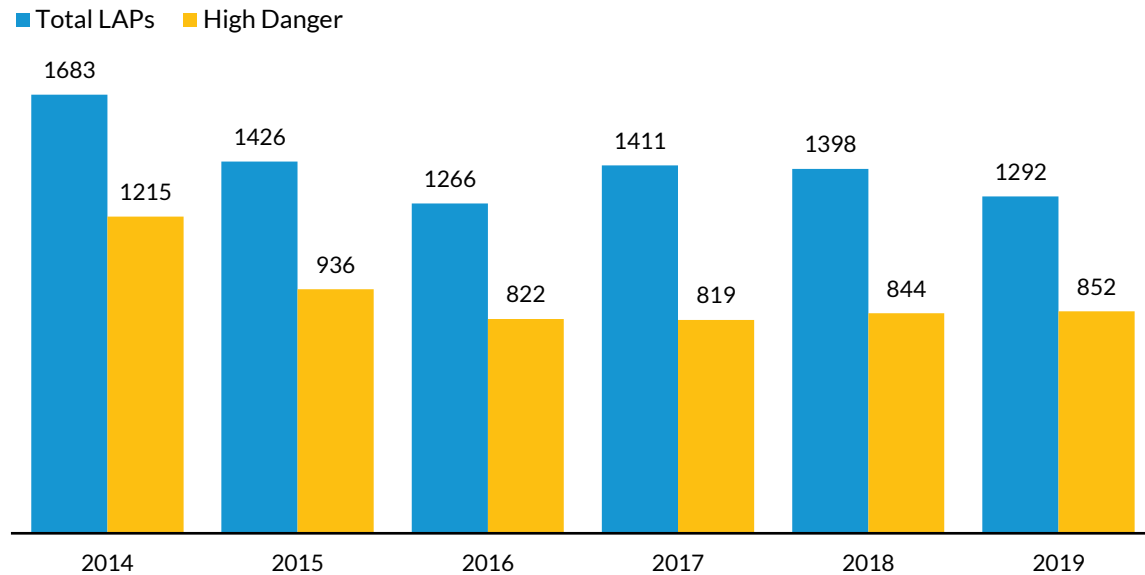
	Total screens conducted	Victims screened as high danger	Share of victims screened as high danger	High-danger victims who spoke to hotline	Share of high-danger victims who spoke to hotline
Period reporting					
2014	1,683	1,215	72%	817	67%
2015	1,426	936	66%	521	56%
2016	1,266	822	65%	397	48%
2017	1,411	819	58%	396	48%
2018	1,398	844	60%	322	38%
2019	1,292	852	66%	254	30%

Source: Aggregate data provided by the Women’s Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh in fall 2020 and as reported through the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence’s Lethality Assessment Dashboard.

Officers work with survivors and aggressors on a case-by-case basis. For cases scored as “high danger” through the Lethality Assessment Program, officers assist survivors in connecting with the Women’s Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh’s hotline representative. In responding to aggressors, officers more typically arrest an aggressor for most IPV-related incidents. However, we could not obtain data or confirm whether or to what extent arrests are a common response to IPV incidents. If an arrest is made, officers bring the alleged aggressor for booking to the county jail, at which point pretrial investigators conduct an assessment and prepare a pretrial risk assessment report for the judges within approximately six hours after booking.

FIGURE 5

Number of Lethality Assessment Program Screens Conducted by the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police and Number Scored as High Danger, 2014–2019



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Aggregate data provided by the Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh in fall 2020 and as reported through the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence's Lethality Assessment Dashboard.

Note: LAPs = Lethality Assessment Program screens.

COURT PROCEEDINGS

The role of pretrial investigators is to compile a pretrial report that includes a pretrial risk assessment score, relevant defendant information, and a verified criminal history. The court uses the information in this report to make decisions about setting bond, competency assessments, and conditions of pretrial release. Pretrial investigators handle IPV supervision cases as they do all other types of crime and do not conduct IPV-specific risk assessments. However, the Pretrial Services Office is considering an IPV-specific risk assessment, to be used prior to preliminary arraignment, to provide more relevant IPV information to the court. For defendants held in custody after the preliminary arraignment, the preliminary hearing is scheduled within 14 days. For defendants released after the arraignment the preliminary hearing is scheduled within 21 days, although such instances are not a standard practice in Allegheny County as nearly all defendants with IPV charges are held in custody prior to preliminary hearings.

At the time of the preliminary hearing, the case is either resolved at an MDJ courtroom or is reviewed to determine whether it should proceed to criminal court. To proceed to criminal court, the

burden of proof at a preliminary hearing is known as a prima facie case, where the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania needs to present evidence that the crime was committed and the defendant is the person who committed the crime. If a prima facie case is proven, the case proceeds to the Court of Common Pleas. If it is not proven, for reasons such as a lack of evidence or a lack of cooperation from the survivor, the case may be resolved at this stage by dismissal or reduction of charges if a BIP is successfully completed.¹⁵ In our review of administrative court data, roughly 75 percent of IPV cases in the Pittsburgh Municipal Court got dismissed in 2018 or otherwise did not proceed to criminal court, but we could not obtain data on IPV cases from MDJs in surrounding areas.

Across the county, 46 MDJs hear preliminary hearings. Intimate partner violence cases can come up in no particular order with other cases, creating some challenges for the judges and court actors to respond with the nuance needed for IPV cases. The DHS has created resource specialist positions to connect defendants to BIPs (an intervention we describe in detail beginning on page 23) and other services listed as conditions of release. Victim advocates from various providers are also present in all MDJ courtrooms with the primary responsibility of assisting survivors. The sheer volume of cases and the varied and somewhat chaotic nature of court proceedings, however, can create gaps in victim advocates' and resource specialists' ability to provide timely information to the judges. Complicating matters, because IPV is not a statutory crime in Pennsylvania, IPV incidents are often categorized as person crimes, which limits how these incidents are tracked. It also makes it more difficult to gather a more comprehensive picture of an aggressor's or survivor's history.

Intimate partner violence is handled differently in the Pittsburgh Municipal Court, which operates 24/7 to hold preliminary arraignment hearings and sees the highest volume of cases in Allegheny County. The PMC schedules IPV cases to be heard twice a week in the same room. These cases, the arrests for which are made by the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police, are heard by 13 rotating judges. This arrangement has several benefits. First, the judges, attorneys, and legal advocates dedicate all of their time and resources to IPV incidents only during these dedicated sessions, making them better equipped to provide specialized attention to survivors and aggressors. Legal advocates offer in-person court accompaniment and support for survivors who appear as victim witnesses. Cases are prosecuted by attorneys from a specialized DV unit of the Allegheny County District Attorney's Office. Although the Allegheny County Public Defender does not have a specialized DV unit, its attorneys can represent clients better by virtue of their only having to cover IPV cases scheduled in the same room twice a week. Second, resource specialists do not have to sit on non-IPV cases, instead enabling them to spend their time linking aggressors to BIPs and other services as listed in the conditions of release. Finally,

concentrating all IPV cases in one room makes it possible to track IPV data, which we relied on for this assessment.

All MDJ courtrooms, including PMC, play a significant role in how IPV cases proceed throughout the criminal justice system and in what happens to aggressors. Many people circle through MDJ courtrooms after their encounters with police, which can be an opportunity not just to work cases through the criminal track but to divert aggressors into an intervention. Notably, based on our analysis of 1,341 IPV charges filed in the PMC in 2016, only 226 cases (17 percent) ended up in BIPs; only 12 percent started a BIP within a year from the filing date.¹⁶ Perhaps in some cases, such as low-risk first-time offenses or cases that indicate that use of violence is not a coercive pattern, dismissal without participation in a BIP may be appropriate. But for cases that are less certain or could be higher risk, BIP participation should be considered not only as an accountability measure but also to provide treatment and help.

If a case proceeds to the Court of Common Pleas, several steps occur in the criminal proceeding. First, formal arraignment is conducted 35 to 45 days after the preliminary hearing, during which the defendant is informed of his or her charges. For cases proceeding to trial from formal arraignment, a pretrial conference is typically scheduled before the disposition event, during which attorneys and staff confer about scheduling and discuss nuances of the case. At the disposition event, the final sentence is determined (table 2 provides information about case dispositions in 2018). Less than 10 percent of IPV cases go to trial.

TABLE 2
Intimate Partner Violence Case Dispositions in the Criminal Division at the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas, 2018

	Number of cases	Percentage
Case disposition		
Guilty plea	499	56
Charges dismissed by the prosecution	304	34
Trial	78	9
Charges dismissed by the court or received special conditions	16	2
Total	897^a	100

Source: Aggregate data provided to Urban by the Allegheny County District Attorney's Office in August 2020.

Notes: ^aThe total 897 number includes all cases which charges were originally filed in any of the 46 MDJ courtrooms. Below in this report, we only analyze the flow of cases that originated in the Pittsburgh Municipal Court. In 2016, 334 cases were filed in the Pittsburgh Municipal Court, so we assume that the remaining 463 (or 62 percent) came from magisterial district judges in areas outside of Pittsburgh.

There are 17 judges who preside in the Criminal Division of the Court of Common Pleas, thus creating significant variation in how IPV cases are handled from courtroom to courtroom. Assistant district attorneys from the DV unit handle all IPV cases in the Court of Common Pleas, whereas IPV cases are assigned to all attorneys in the Allegheny County Public Defender office. In the future, creating a DV unit within this office may help improve not only outcomes but aggressors' experiences.

In analyzing available administrative data on IPV cases that originated in PMC, we found that in Allegheny County, most defendants that proceed to the Court of Common Pleas end up with charges that do not lead to custody but are instead offered community-based interventions, namely probation as the most prominent sentence type as shown in Table 3. An effort is made to refer defendants to BIPs but based on our interviews and focus groups, some defendants remain reluctant to accept BIP. A significant number of IPV cases also have a drug and alcohol evaluation attached as release of condition or probation sentence.

TABLE 3

IPV-Related Charges Originally Filed at the Pittsburgh Municipal Court Starting in 2016 and Corresponding Sentences at the Court of Common Pleas by End of 2018

	Number of cases	Percentage
Case disposition		
Probation	215	64
Not Guilty	91	27
Confinement	68	20
Dismissed by the Court or Special Conditions	7	2
No Further Penalty*	3	1
Missing	3	1
TOTAL:	334^a	100^b

Source: Deidentified administrative records were provided by the Allegheny County Department of Human Services in spring 2020; these records included charges filed in the Pittsburgh Municipal Court only and excluded any charges filed in magisterial district judge courtrooms in surrounding areas.

Notes: ^aFor cases with no further penalty, defendants did not have a sentence and were only required to pay court costs. ^bThe total number of cases does not add up to 334 or to 100 percent because some cases had more than one outcome.

Allegheny County also operates what is known as Repeat Batterers Court in the Court of Common Pleas. The cases are heard by one judge once a week in a designated courtroom. The purpose is to provide more focused attention to cases involving repeat offenses against the same victim. If the offense is repeated but against multiple victims, the cases may not always end up in this specialized court, as there is limited capacity to identify or track such cases. Cases in Repeat Batterers Court represent a small share of all IPV cases heard in the criminal division. For example, out of 897 IPV cases prosecuted by assistant district attorneys in the DV unit and closed in the criminal division in 2018, 200 (or 22 percent) were heard in Repeat Batterers Court.¹⁷ The advantage of this court is ongoing and

frequent communication on each case among court actors, including an experienced judge, an attorney from the public defender office, and an experienced assistant district attorney from the DV unit, as well as probation officers who only hold IPV caseloads.

To enhance people's experiences in court, judges (i.e., MDJs or judges in the Court of Common Pleas), defense and prosecution attorneys, and anyone else who frequently communicates with aggressors or survivors should be mindful of how their interactions can impact people's views and whether they buy in to the system. Considerations for court actors include the following:

- Prioritize the nonmonetary conditions of release for aggressors at pretrial with an eye toward balancing safety with the reality that many intimate partners are likely to be in touch because they have children, are bound by economic conditions, and/or desire to work on their relationship. An important caveat is to always consider the least punitive measures in accordance with the seriousness of a case, but as discussed above, Allegheny County already defaults to nonincarceration options even in cases that end up in the Court of Common Pleas.
- Enhance judges' capacity to craft sentence conditions and explain those conditions to aggressors. Consider prioritizing consistency of sentence conditions for IPV cases (e.g., violent and nonviolent contact, aggressors' roles with partners with whom they have children in common, physical versus nonphysical contact with survivors and children, aggressors' responsibility to follow through with drug and alcohol assessment and treatment) and ensure that judges explain those conditions to defendants consistently.

The system can help by helping [my partner]. My husband needs mental help. I'm not going to sit and [say] I don't love my husband. We have children together. He's been incarcerated since he was 13.

—Survivor focus group participant

- Take stock of how well equipped all court actors are to hear survivors' and aggressors' stories, including affirming their circumstances and respecting the fact that discussing IPV incidents is difficult for many aggressors and survivors who are involved with multiple systems. This recommendation is not a suggestion to shut down conversations, because our review of administrative records indicated significant gaps in individual case-level data (e.g., lack of

information about multiple victims, lack of identification of victims' names, gaps in incident reports), which can be addressed through more informed conversations with intimate partners. Instead, we suggest providing tools and preparing court actors to have such difficult conversations.

- » Continue prioritizing BIP participation over any other intervention to prevent future reassaults and to signal to aggressors that the system is also interested in their success and healing. Destigmatizing BIP participation should not be viewed as a function only of the DHS or providers. In fact, the justice system agencies making the referrals arguably play a bigger role in helping aggressors to view BIPs as helpful. Based on our observations and focus groups with aggressors, we found that as in other localities, aggressors are often initially reluctant to attend BIPs because they are stigmatized, but once they connect with facilitators and other participants, they find the sessions and community they build in them helpful. Survivors also emphasized treatment over punishment during focus group discussions.

My son's father needs to be on medication. He doesn't just beat up women, he beats up men. He has mental health issues. He needs something so this doesn't happen to the next woman.
—Survivor focus group participant

- Use caution in interpreting an aggressor's having previously completed or not completed a BIP as a failure of the aggressor or provider if the aggressor returns to the justice system. First, more than half of aggressors in Allegheny County complete BIPs successfully, and a relatively small share of aggressors have several attempts with BIPs. Based on our review of BIP data provided by the DHS, from 2018 to 2019, roughly 18 percent of aggressors (407 of 2,294) had multiple BIP enrollments. Second, many factors, such as class schedules, facilitators' approaches, participants' employment status, and life factors, can impact people's engagement in BIPs. Giving aggressors another chance when appropriate, offering support from probation officers for aggressors sentenced to probation, and giving a choice of BIP classes (which providers and the DHS offer a variety of) are all more likely to put aggressors on a path to success to change their abusive attitudes and behaviors and stop reassaulting in the future.

BATTERING INTERVENTION PROGRAMS

Battering Intervention Programs are the most common IPV-specific treatment available to aggressors who come through the criminal justice track in Allegheny County. The county's criminal justice system remains the largest source of referrals to BIPs, with more than 80 percent of clients being referred from criminal justice agencies (table 4). In 2013 and 2014, Allegheny County went through a large undertaking to standardize BIPs across the county. The DHS funds and provides oversight of four BIP providers in the community, and the county does the same for one BIP provider at the Allegheny County Jail. People ordered to BIPs are expected to pay fees, but the DHS has implemented a sliding fee scale based on income to make access more equitable. Programming is offered in 25 sessions: 1 intake session and 24 sessions of classes held once or twice a week depending on the provider. Classes are held in different locations and at different hours to provide flexibility to participants. All providers attempt to adhere to the best practice of male-female cofacilitation. Since a countywide revamp of BIPs in 2013, the new providers have gotten better at therapeutic techniques that can provide mental health support to participants while holding them accountable and helping them take responsibility for their actions.¹⁸

TABLE 4

Sources of Referrals to Battering Intervention Programs for Clients Who Started Classes in 2018

	Clients served	Percentage of all clients served
Referral source		
Magisterial district judge courtrooms	556	59
Probation	179	19
Office of Children, Youth and Families	56	6
Criminal courts	36	4
Self	24	3
Jail	21	2
Provider	20	2
Other ^a	31	5
Total	943	100

Source: Deidentified administrative records were provided by the Allegheny County Department of Human Services in spring 2020.

Note: ^a Other includes categories such as pretrial, and unknown.

The Allegheny County DHS supports BIP providers in several ways. The DHS created the position of BIP program manager to regularly support providers and facilitate quarterly convenings of all BIP providers, victim services agencies, and representatives from referring agencies from the courts (such as MDJs or the DV unit's assistant district attorneys). The DHS also collects electronic data on BIP attendance entered daily by providers. Its efforts with BIPs have allowed for a more standardized approach to treatment and made services more uniform no matter where aggressors live in the county.

In spring 2020, we held a focus group discussion with 12 aggressors who attended BIP sessions to learn about their experiences directly from them. Most participants expressed that they thought highly of the program, although they were not always initially enthusiastic about having to participate. They shared that classes and facilitators prompted them to self-reflect and even reexamine their attitudes in some instances.

I definitely challenged a lot of what [facilitators] were saying, but they explained their reasoning and it definitely makes sense. Because of the little things I've learned, I rarely get into arguments and handle situations positively.

—Aggressor focus group participant

In the past few years, the demand for BIPs in Allegheny County has grown, leading to extended waiting periods between referral and intake. Another challenge is continued reluctance among some participants to attend the full cycle of BIPs. For example, of 1,283 aggressors who enrolled in BIPs in 2018, 693 (54 percent) successfully completed all 24 sessions.¹⁹ There are many reasons for such reluctance among aggressors and professionals, including the perception that participation in BIPs can be viewed as admitting guilt. Changing this stigma and helping aggressors view it as helpful and as an intervention should be a priority not only for the DHS and providers, but for all referring agencies and court actors. Despite these challenges, the progress the county has made to standardize and improve its BIPs can be considered a national model for such a populous county.

I like it [the BIP]. It made me reflect on myself and the situation that got me there.

—Aggressor focus group participant

PROBATION

Although probation for IPV aggressors is not treatment per se, the Allegheny County Adult Probation Department strives to offer supportive services to its clients, in addition to monitoring their compliance

with court conditions. For IPV cases specifically, the Allegheny County Adult Probation Office offers a few best practices, including the following:

- **A specialized IPV unit** consists of five experienced and IPV-trained probation officers. Each officer holds a caseload of 60 to 70 cases, and they follow best practice to offer intensive supervision and support for higher-risk people and people who experience homelessness while providing less supervision to people who are not high risk.
- **Electronic records** allow probation staff to refer clients to BIPs and other programming electronically and check on their attendance in real time. If a client does not attend a BIP they are enrolled in, their probation officer can alert the judge in a timely fashion. This particular online data exchange is advanced and still unavailable for many jurisdictions.
- **Probation officers' access** to their supervisees' records from phones, available at any time, allows probation officers to supervise their clients more effectively in the community and have easy access to the case files.
- **Representation in Repeat Batterers Court** allows probation officers to interact with all other relevant agencies on high-risk cases.

These innovations allow for more specialized supervision of IPV aggressors. However, a few challenges still remain, which the probation office is actively working to fix. Most people who are supervised by the specialized IPV unit have been referred to BIPs. Aggressors who are returning to the community from incarceration or are involved with the court but have not been referred to BIPs might be assigned to other probation officers who have not received IPV training. Furthermore, like many other probation departments in the country, the Allegheny County Adult Probation Office does not engage with survivors. In fact, in many cases probation officers do not even have any information about survivors. Although obstacles exist to doing so, attempting to engage survivors directly and gauge their perceptions of safety or what would be helpful in their partners' treatment could provide a more well-rounded picture for probation officers to create a supervision plan. Therefore, the Court of Common Pleas could consider how to feasibly and safely provide survivors' contact information directly to probation officers to help officers conduct outreach to survivors.

IPV-Related Cases Identified and Addressed through the Child Welfare System

Violence-free homes not only make for more stable environments where children thrive better than in any congregate care, but they can also prevent some of worst outcomes for children. Allegheny

County's Office of Children, Youth and Families can be considered a national model for advancing a jurisdiction's work toward violence-free homes. It is difficult to estimate the prevalence of IPV in CYF cases because of differences in IPV definitions, case workers' ability or inability to identify IPV, or clients' readiness to disclose IPV.

Based on our interviews and review of administrative data, we estimate that IPV is a prominent need among families served by the CYF. For example, out of all 1,868 cases opened in the CYF in 2018, 685 (37 percent) had IPV indicated either before or after the date that the case was opened.²⁰ In more serious child welfare cases, IPV is even more prevalent. For example, in a 2017 analysis of child fatalities and near fatalities, approximately 75 percent of perpetrators who caused a child's death had a history of IPV as an aggressor or survivor (Dalton et al. 2018). Given the prevalence of IPV as a risk factor in child fatalities and near fatalities and in all cases, it comes as no surprise that the CYF has been invested in better identifying and responding to IPV.

One of the biggest challenges for caseworkers is how to engage in conversations with adult caretakers about IPV. On the one hand, adults who experience violence can be reluctant to engage with the CYF because of fears that the system will take their child away. On the other hand, caseworkers also have biases and apprehension about engaging with a person who is using violence toward their partner. Allegheny County has made an intentional effort to equip caseworkers to overcome such distrust and to be consistent throughout the life of the case. Allegheny County has taken the following important steps to support this effort:

- Required questions about IPV have been included in a separate module that has been incorporated into the [Family Advocacy and Support Tool](#), helping caseworkers ask questions about IPV in a sensible way, early upon acceptance for service, and regularly at least every six months throughout the life of the case.
- Caseworkers and supervisors have undergone several rounds of training from [Futures Without Violence](#) on how to identify and ask about IPV, including using the Family Advocacy and Support Tool prompts, and do so regularly throughout the life of a case.
- The CYF created clinical manager positions in each regional office and an IPV manager position to direct IPV policy within the CYF, and created a contracted IPV specialist manager who works for a major victim services provider and supervises up to five IPV specialists. These resources are available to all caseworkers and supervisors to navigate difficult circumstances and seek consultation on individual cases.

- The Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh has created an assessment and one-on-one sessions as a tailored intervention for aggressors who come through the CYF. Typically, aggressors complete 8 to 10 sessions with IPV specialists.

Although progress is more incremental than the aspirations of many capable staff in the CYF, their continuous effort is commendable. The CYF goes a step further in identifying IPV than the state-level requirements, which still classify IPV more broadly as domestic violence. Both at intake and during the life of the case, CYF staff should continue making an effort to identify and record IPV more narrowly than as domestic violence, which would help Allegheny County tailor appropriate IPV interventions, such as BIPs.

To assist caseworkers and supervisors with IPV issues, the CYF partners with victim services providers in several ways. First, the IPV specialist manager position through the Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh has been in place for nearly 17 years to help provide a supportive and empowering psychoeducational environment that enables families to identify, create, and maintain protective capacities related to IPV. Second, in the past two years the CYF has created five internal IPV specialist positions whose role is to expand supports provided by the IPV specialist manager and to ensure linkages to appropriate IPV services throughout the county. Of note is the position filled by a male whose role is predominantly focused on helping fathers to engage with children, build healthier relationships with intimate partners, and connect with appropriate services. Third, the CEO of the Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh and other IPV experts are represented on the Act 33 Child Fatality and Near-Fatality Review Team, which helps the CYF identify systemwide gaps through case reviews.

Along with such noteworthy progress, challenges involving identifying and addressing IPV in the CYF remain. Our interviews and review of data showed information about adult caretakers' relationships with one another and the presence of IPV is recorded inconsistently, because the office's primary focus remains on adult caretakers' relationships with children. In addition, several interviewees noted that early identification is still a significant challenge. Owing either to distrust from survivors or gaps in caseworkers' ability to engage with them, CYF staff are sometimes left in a position of being reactive when IPV escalates and endangers children rather than being proactive and preventing escalations by asking about IPV earlier in the life of the case. Third, beyond simple electronic referrals to BIPs, caseworkers should continue increasing their capacity to engage in conversations with aggressors and eliminating racial and ethnic bias. The CYF has already started addressing systemic racism, but work remains to ensure equitable access to services and engagement among fathers of

color. Finally, the CYF partners with other systems in many ways but cooperation with the PFA office to exchange IPV information in a timely fashion is limited.

Civil Protection from Abuse Orders Issued in the Family Division of the Courts System

Protection from Abuse orders are issued to survivors of IPV and domestic violence in Allegheny County. Among other provisions, PFA orders can mandate that aggressors leave shared residences, prohibit them from going to survivors' workplaces, and limit contact with their children. The conditions requested in the orders are case specific and informed by conversations between survivors, legal advocates, and court staff.

In Allegheny County, the process for issuing PFA orders is similar to processes in other jurisdictions. To file a PFA petition, a survivor must present at the family court's PFA office, which operates five days a week with entry hours between 8:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. Survivors have to present to the PFA office for petition filing between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m., but cases are processed throughout the day and into the afternoon. If a survivor needs to file a PFA petition outside these core hours, they can do so by obtaining an [emergency PFA](#) order from any MDJ in the county after 11:00 a.m. or in the Pittsburgh Municipal Court after hours or on weekends and holidays. This flexibility can be beneficial but it creates an additional step and can cause confusion for survivors interacting with the system because any survivor who files for an emergency PFA order has to repeat the same steps to obtain temporary and final PFA orders in the family court.

After filing the petition and receiving assistance about filing from legal advocates, survivors receive a *temporary* PFA order that is typically effective for 10 business days or until the date of the final PFA hearing. To receive a *final* PFA order, survivors need to present in family court again. The duration and conditions of the final PFA are at judicial discretion and dependent on the nuance of the case, but can be granted for up to three years. Judges in Allegheny County's family court follow a best practice known as "[one judge, one family](#)," whereby one judge sees the same family no matter what type of case is initiated in the family court. One of the challenges in Allegheny County family court is high volume and resulting limited availability of judges to preside over PFA hearings. During our interviews and observations, we noted uneven distribution of PFA hearings among family court judges. We also noted that a significant number of survivors do not see a judge during hearings for final PFA orders. Another challenge is that only a few judges have IPV-specific background and training, so not all judges may be properly equipped to hear these cases.

TABLE 5

Types of Protection from Abuse Orders in Allegheny County

PFA order type	Issuance location and hours	PFA order duration
Emergency PFA order	Any MDJ in the county after 11:00 a.m. or at Pittsburgh Municipal Court during afterhours on weekdays or weekends	Through the night or through the weekend
Temporary PFA order	To file at PFA office in family court between 8:00 and 11:00 a.m. on weekdays	10 days
Final PFA order	To be heard at PFA office in family court	Up to three years

Source: Urban's analysis of publicly available websites and notes from interviews and observations in Allegheny County.

Note: PFA = Protection from Abuse. MDJ = magisterial district judge.

As described earlier, Allegheny County's PFA office has made significant strides in enhancing the system experiences of survivors, aggressors, and their families. Notable developments in this area include the following:

- The PFA office has implemented recommendations from a trauma audit conducted by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges to improve survivors' privacy and security. These include
 - » establishing separate check-in areas and waiting rooms for survivors and aggressors, creating alarm buttons, and designating private space for survivors while they work with attorneys and staff; and
 - » creating a private secure playroom for children while their parents or guardians are at the PFA office.
- Skilled attorneys and legal advocates handle many cases but still provide various kinds of case management support and attention to survivors, including non-English speakers.
- At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, staff at the PFA office made efforts to connect with survivors by phone, and an electronic form for submitting initial PFA petitions is being developed that could be used postpandemic. Importantly, survivors still have to present in person for PFA hearings after filling out the electronic petition.

To some extent, PFA orders will remain a last resort for many survivors in Allegheny County. Research shows that such orders are only pursued by survivors who are willing to take action (Kothari et al. 2012). To reduce barriers to access and continue enhancing survivors' experience, Allegheny County IPV experts and leadership in the courts are already implementing several initiatives, and we offer the following additional considerations for the county:

- Consider providing specialized training and technical assistance in IPV for family court judges, which can be added to regular required training and continued education.
- Revisit case assignment and alleviate barriers for judges to preside over PFA hearings. Research from drug courts showed that when judges spent three or more minutes per hearing with participants, the outcomes and compliance improved.²¹ The same logic can be helpful for PFA hearings. An opportunity for survivors to see a judge during all hearings (including initial filing) and better yet, to engage in meaningful conversations with them, can help survivors believe that their case is taken seriously and could therefore improve survivors' perceptions of the legitimacy of court processes.
- Develop "benchbooks," simple tools that describe the conditions of PFA orders, and continue encouraging judges to play an active role in explaining PFA conditions to involved parties (e.g., aggressors' or survivors' roles or conditions with children, what constitutes violent or nonviolent contact, and physical versus nonphysical contact with survivors).

Once a PFA order is granted, law enforcement agencies work with the PFA office and survivors to serve the order to the aggressor. In some cases, the PFA office can share the order electronically directly with the involved law enforcement agency. But owing to technical limitations and laps in the entering and exchanging of information in the statewide electronic system ([the Protection from Abuse Database](#)), some survivors in our focus group still reported that they were asked to bring a paper copy of their PFA order to their local law enforcement agency. Continued effort to eliminate this step would reduce the significant burdens survivors already face.

As in many other jurisdictions, enforcement of PFA violations is a challenge in Allegheny County. In 2018, out of 3,457 final PFA orders granted, 587 (approximately 17 percent) were violated. Enforcement is dependent on reliable recording of PFA orders electronically and the ability of local law enforcement officials to search for standing PFA orders during police calls. Some stakeholders noted that searching for standing PFAs still remains a limitation, with challenges such as delays in granted PFAs becoming available online, which can occur because of challenges with the website. If the aggressor is arrested with a standing PFA order, they are typically arraigned in the PMC during night hours, although arraignment can happen at any other MDJ courtroom in the county. Once bond is set, a hearing in family court is scheduled within 10 days. The DV unit of the Assistant District Attorney's Office appoints a prosecutor to oversee violation hearings, known as Indirect Criminal Contempt (ICC) cases, in the family division. The maximum penalty for an ICC case is six months of incarceration, probation, or house arrest.

The PFA office prepares background on ICC cases, which are reviewed by the appointed assistant district attorney once a week. As shown in table 6, almost half of all ICC cases (47 percent) in 2018 were withdrawn or dismissed to respect survivors' wishes or because of nonappearance. Roughly one-third of ICC cases resulted in continuance of an ICC charge as a "probationary" period. More typically, continuance of a PFA order is issued with a condition to attend drug and alcohol or mental health counseling. A BIP is offered very rarely because a defendant's incentive to participate is minimal. Although cooperation between the criminal and family divisions is commendable to help ensure survivors' safety, challenges still remain in holding aggressors who violate PFA orders accountable and/or helping them get into appropriate treatment.

TABLE 6

Case Dispositions for Indirect Criminal Contempt Cases in Allegheny County in 2018

	Number	Percentage
ICC case resolution type		
Dismissed owing to nonappearance of survivor	185	32
Generally continuing the ICC and extending the PFA order for six-month "probationary" period	166	28
Withdrawn by DV survivor ^a	86	15
Continued because of related criminal charges	42	7
Dispositions unclear from database entries	44	7
Guilty plea agreements	23	4
Scheduled as hearings in family division without representation of the Allegheny County District Attorney's Office	19	3
General pleas	11	2
Not guilty of ICC	8	1
BIP participation in exchange for withdrawal of ICC charge	2	0
Bench warrant being issued due to the non-appearance of the defendant	1	0
Total	587	100

Source: Aggregate data provided to Urban by the Allegheny County District Attorney's Office in August 2020.

Notes: BIP = Battering Intervention Program. DV = domestic violence. ICC = Indirect Criminal Contempt. IPV = intimate partner violence. ^a Aggregate data provided to Urban included survivors not only of IPV but also of DV. In Allegheny County, Indirect Criminal Contempt cases are filed after conditions of Protection from Abuse orders are violated.

Conclusion

Allegheny County has made notable achievements to advance its response to intimate partner violence. Standardizing treatment for aggressors, making services for survivors more trauma informed, and improving screening for IPV in the child welfare system are among its chief achievements over the past decade. Throughout this report, we have offered several recommendations that resulted from our systemwide assessment and highlighted three interagency priorities: secure commitment from county

leadership to continue improving experiences for people involved in IPV cases, prioritize people's experiences over case outcomes, and reestablish IPV-specific fatality reviews.

Moreover, we recommend that Allegheny County consider taking the following agency-specific steps:

- Establish a specialized IPV unit in the Allegheny County Public Defender office.
- Differentiate IPV from DV in the 911 system, in the PFA office, throughout the family division, and in all IPV-related cases coming through the child welfare system.
- Record survivors' information (including full names, date of birth, and other identifiers) consistently, and when possible ensure law enforcement and/or assistant district attorneys can safely and securely share survivors' information with criminal and family division actors, the probation office, the Department of Human Services, and BIP providers.
- Prioritize and improve referrals to BIPs and play an active role in encouraging participants to view them as help (not as admissions of guilt) and in monitoring and encouraging attendance.
- Create a mechanism to consistently track aggressors' and survivors' experiences at system entry points.

Although the IPV field has advanced and long recognized the need for a coordinated community response, few localities engage with researchers to conduct systemwide assessments. All partners in Allegheny County welcomed Urban researchers, stayed engaged and open to our recommendations, and remained committed to the continued improvement of the county's IPV response. We are thankful to them for their numerous contributions, but particularly for creating connections for us to engage directly with survivors and aggressors through focus groups and observations. We centered our findings and recommendations around their voices.

Notes

- ¹ “US County Populations 2021,” World Population Review, accessed April 29, 2021, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-counties>.
- ² Aggregate data were provided to Urban by the Allegheny County Department of Human Services in winter 2021. This number represents only a fraction of the total cases in the county. In the Pittsburgh Municipal Court, 13 of the 46 magisterial district judges rotate to preside over the cases. Other magisterial district judges are spread out in different neighborhoods throughout the county.
- ³ “US County Populations 2021,” World Population Review.
- ⁴ Aggregate data were provided to Urban by the Allegheny County Department of Human Services in winter 2021. This number represents only a fraction of the total cases in the county. In the Pittsburgh Municipal Court, 13 of the 46 magisterial district judges rotate to preside over the cases. Other MDJs are spread out in different neighborhoods throughout the county.
- ⁵ Throughout the study we debriefed stakeholders on the findings and discussed agency-specific steps.
- ⁶ Sarah Bennett, Lorelei Hine, and Lorraine Mazerolle, “Procedural Justice,” Oxford Bibliographies, last updated April 26, 2018, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195396607/obo-9780195396607-0241.xml>.
- ⁷ For example, see [this guide](#) from the Center for Court Innovation.
- ⁸ The 211 service is part of the national 211 call centers initiative that seeks to provide an easy-to-remember telephone number and web resource for finding health and human services.
- ⁹ P.L. 236, no. 33, 2008 Gen. Assemb. (Pa. 2008).
- ¹⁰ An interim report from the Dallas County Adult Intimate Violence Fatality Review Team is available here: <https://ndvfri.org/download/dallas-county-texas-ipvfri-report-2015/?wpdmdl=1559>. A 2014 report from the Coconino County Domestic Violence Fatality Review Team is available here: <https://ndvfri.org/download/2014-annual-report-draft-final-pdf/?wpdmdl=465>.
- ¹¹ Homicide dashboard, Pennsylvania Coalition of Domestic Violence, accessed April 29, 2021, <https://idashboard.hbg.psu.edu/idashboards/view?guestuser=pgcidb&dashID=384&c=0&dashId=384>. This dashboard does not show long-term trends; rather, it presents data by county and year.
- ¹² “2015–2016 Allegheny County Health Survey,” Allegheny County, accessed April 29, 2021, <https://www.alleghenycounty.us/Health-Department/Resources/Data-and-Reporting/Chronic-Disease-Epidemiology/Behavioral-Risk-Factors-Surveillance-System.aspx>. The unduplicated records on clients were provided to Urban by the Women’s Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh, Center for Victims, Alle-Kiski Area Hope Center, Crisis Center North, Pittsburgh Action Against Rape, and Jewish Family and Community Services.
- ¹³ The 1,398 number was provided to Urban by the Women’s Center and & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh in fall 2020 and was reported through the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence’s Lethality Assessment Dashboard. The 249,913 number comes from page 33 of this Pittsburgh Bureau of Police 2018 report: https://apps.pittsburghpa.gov/redtail/images/6371_2018_Annual_Report_Draft_-_Final.pdf.
- ¹⁴ “Crime in the City of Pittsburgh Categorized for Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR), 2010 through March 2021,” City of Pittsburgh, last updated March 3, 2021, https://tableau.alleghenycounty.us/t/PublicSite/views/CJ_UCR_PGH_8-22-17_v3/Home_1?:iid=1&isGuestRedirectFromVizportal=y&embed=y.

- ¹⁵ For more information about criminal proceedings in Pennsylvania, see <https://www.pittsburghcriminalattorney.com/pittsburgh-pennsylvania-criminal-process/>.
- ¹⁶ Urban did not have access to IPV-specific cases from surrounding MDJ courtrooms that are spread out through the county because to our understanding no tracking mechanisms exist to identify IPV-only cases. Therefore, we cannot report their referral rates to BIPs.
- ¹⁷ Data were shared with Urban by the DV unit at the Allegheny County District Attorney's Office, and criminal court aggregate data were shared by the Allegheny County Department of Human Services.
- ¹⁸ This finding is based on Urban's observations of BIP classes and stakeholder interviews.
- ¹⁹ Data were provided to Urban by the DHS in summer 2020. Enrollments include aggressors who started BIPs several times. Two categories provided by the DHS were excluded in the analysis: "Successful Completion Per Referral Source" was excluded because the length of participation varied for these aggressors, and "Transferred to Another Provider" was excluded so that incomplete participation with the original provider did not count as not completed for a particular aggressor.
- ²⁰ Intimate partner violence was identified through one of four pathways: the Family Advocacy and Support Tool, a "domestic violence" referral allegation (although this number may include nonintimate partners), IPV service receipt, and home removal (although this number may include nonintimate partners).
- ²¹ "Seven Program Design Features: Adult Drug Court Principles, Research, and Practice," Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, accessed April 30, 2021, <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/248701.pdf>.

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