

# Office on Violence Against Women

## Plan for Evidence-based and Evidence-building Grantmaking

*This document describes a plan that the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) will implement over the next several years to further develop and make maximum use of the evidence base for approaches to combatting domestic and dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking. By fulfilling this plan, OVW expects that it can focus its resources on strategies that hold the greatest potential for helping victims and holding offenders accountable. Furthermore, communities that benefit from Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) funding will be better equipped to align their work with practices that are known to be effective, and they will be more capable of generating knowledge on the efficacy of new and promising ways of doing things. OVW has very limited funds to support research and evaluation, and must focus those dollars on topics for which a stronger evidence base would help OVW grantees use federal funds most effectively.*

### Background

Since 1995, OVW has awarded more than \$6 billion in grants through its funding streams authorized under VAWA. Furthermore, OVW provides federal leadership in developing the nation's capacity to combat domestic and dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking; administer justice in these cases, and strengthen services for victims.

By statute, up to three percent of funds appropriated for most VAWA grant programs<sup>1</sup> can be used for research and evaluation. Historically, a portion of those funds have been used to support: a) the Measuring Effectiveness Initiative at the University of Southern Maine, which maintains grantee-reported data from all VAWA programs; and b) evaluations of OVW's demonstration initiatives, meaning special projects for which new or otherwise innovative practices are piloted (e.g., the Domestic Violence Homicide Reduction Initiative and the Sexual Assault Justice Initiative, most recently). For demonstration initiatives, OVW transfers funds to the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), the research arm of the Department of Justice (DOJ), to competitively select an evaluator and manage the evaluation award. NIJ also receives approximately \$3 million from OVW's appropriation each year to fund research on violence and victimization related to the crimes addressed in VAWA.

To ensure that funds are administered in a way that targets resources to the areas of most urgent need and the practices that hold the greatest promise of having a good impact, OVW has established a plan to enhance how it determines the effectiveness of work funded through its grant programs. The first phase of this plan, completed between October 2012 and December 2015, is summarized below, and the remainder of this document describes the approach OVW will take here forth to measure what VAWA funding accomplishes and assess its impact.

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<sup>1</sup> Several programs' statutes (e.g., the Sexual Assault Services Program) specify that less than three percent of funds can be used for research and evaluation.

## How This Plan Was Developed

In October of 2012, OVW launched the first phase of its Research and Evaluation Initiative, which included a partnership with two scholars at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro to establish a comprehensive understanding of what we know about the effectiveness of VAWA-funded interventions<sup>2</sup>, and determine which practices demand a closer look and further study. This process involved several steps:

- 1) An analysis of statutory purpose areas for OVW grant programs and identification of cross-cutting activities;
- 2) A review of the literature on VAWA-funded interventions and assessment of where there are gaps in empirical knowledge; and
- 3) Interviews with more than 75 expert researchers and practitioners about what they see as the most urgent priorities for research and evaluation.

The materials produced during the first phase were synthesized with concepts and recommendations from recently-published government documents that have implications for OVW's research and evaluation priorities, including the following:

- [Twenty Years of the Violence Against Women Act: Dispatches from the Field](#) (Forthcoming). *An OVW report, which will be released in March of 2016, summarizes themes that emerged during the VAWA 20-Year Anniversary Tour, in which OVW leadership and staff met with grant-funded communities across the nation to discuss the impact of VAWA funding on their efforts to keep victims safe and hold offenders accountable.*
- [Identifying and Preventing Gender Bias in Law Enforcement Response to Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence](#) (2015). *This DOJ guidance provides a set of basic principles to prevent gender bias, either explicit or implicit, from undermining law enforcement efforts to keep victims safe and hold offenders accountable.*
- [Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Policing](#) (2015). *Report from the task force charged with identifying best practices in policing and offering recommendations for reducing crime while building public trust.*
- [2014 Biennial Report to Congress on the Effectiveness of VAWA Programs](#). *In response to a statutory requirement, the Attorney General must report biennially on the effectiveness of activities carried out with grant funds, including the number of persons served and the number of persons seeking services who could not be served.*

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<sup>2</sup> The term "VAWA-funded intervention" refers to any activity undertaken by an OVW grantee in an effort to address domestic and dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking. It is not feasible to evaluate the effectiveness of individual OVW grant programs, since most of them include a wide range of activities, and grantees employ different strategies and interventions based on the specific needs of their communities. Therefore, OVW is interested in studying the effectiveness of interventions that cut across multiple grant programs.

- [National Institute of Justice, Crime, Violence, and Victimization Research Division's Compendium of Research on Violence Against Women, 1993-2014.](#) Lists and briefly describes all projects funded under NIJ's Violence Against Women and Family Violence Programs.
- [Not Alone: The First Report of the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault](#) (2014). This report is the first set of action steps and recommendations released by the White House regarding sexual assault on campus.
- [1 is 2 Many: Twenty Years Fighting Violence against Women and Girls](#) (2014). This White House report summarizes how VAWA has helped to change the nation by increasing accountability for domestic and sexual violence and improving access to services.

## What We Know

Statistics, research, and anecdotal evidence make it clear that domestic and sexual violence are a threat to community safety and a significant public health crisis. Current estimates indicate that in the United States, 19.3% of women and 1.7% of men have been raped, and 22.3% of women and 14% of men experience severe physical violence by an intimate partner at some point in their lives.<sup>3</sup> We also know that violence has a disproportionate impact on some populations, in terms of incidence and prevalence of victimization, the ways victimization disrupts a person's life, and ability to access the justice system and victim services. We know that domestic and sexual violence are vastly



underreported, for a host of reasons related to the shame and stigma associated with them, reluctance to involve anyone else in what is often seen as a private matter, and because disclosure can sometimes jeopardize a victim's safety and efforts to survive.

We know that when someone discloses that they are a victim of domestic or sexual violence, the response from the person to whom they disclose affects what they do next, and who, if anyone else, they tell. Skepticism and victim-blaming attitudes dissuade victims from seeking help and result in further trauma to victims, prematurely-

<sup>3</sup> Breiding, M. J., Smith, S. G., Basile, K. C., Walters, K. C., Chen, J., & Merrick, M. T. (2014). Prevalence and characteristics of sexual violence, stalking, and intimate partner violence victimization — National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, United States, 2011. *Surveillance Summaries*, 63(8); 1-18.

closed investigations, declinations to prosecute, and other decisions that leave offenders free to commit more crimes.

Much of what we know about effective ways of responding to violence is particular to domestic violence and, to a lesser extent, sexual assault. Teen dating violence and stalking are comparatively under-researched. We know that it helps to have hotlines that can connect a victim with resources and crisis intervention. We know that shelters help victims and their children escape violence in their homes. Civil protection orders can improve a victim's sense of safety and can deter further abuse in the short term, especially if they include removal of firearms, though less is known about the long-range impact of protection orders. Similarly positive short-term findings can hold true for police intervention in domestic violence incidents, including making an arrest, which has been found to increase victim safety and deter further abuse. However, there is also evidence that police intervention can escalate danger for some victims, result in victims being arrested, and potentially lead to adverse long-term outcomes for victims.

Research has consistently demonstrated that when people work across professions to address domestic and sexual violence, the results are often better for it. Multidisciplinary response teams involve victim services, law enforcement, prosecution, healthcare, the judiciary, parole and probation, and other agencies in a community working together to try to respond more effectively to violence and abuse. Some models for this type of collaborative approach have been studied and shown to be correlated with reduced risk of further abuse, improved access to services for victims, a stronger justice system response (including increases in arrests, prosecutions, number of charges filed, convictions, and stricter sentences), and—in sexual assault cases—improved quality of care for sexual assault patients that seek treatment at a Sexual Assault Forensic Examiner (SAFE) Program after an assault, and improved quality of forensic evidence.

Having an attorney to represent domestic violence victims in civil matters, particularly if the attorney has expertise on domestic violence, corresponds to better outcomes in court, including safer custody and visitation arrangements. A lot of what we know about the features of domestic violence and the people who perpetrate it has been formulated into tools that can be used to assess lethality, which can in turn be used in victim services or in the justice system to shape the response to a particular case and connect the victim with appropriate services. While these tools are evidence-based, they need to be studied further to validate their effectiveness, especially for marginalized communities, and identify any limits to their applicability.

We know that long-standing practices like advocacy and counseling help victims navigate the aftermath of violence, whether or not they choose to involve the justice system. But we need to learn more about which particular elements of those services—and which specific approaches to providing them—are most beneficial for victims. That deeper knowledge has implications for program design and service delivery, as well as training. The need for further evaluation in areas that have been studied to some extent goes beyond victim services, as research to date is inconclusive on the effectiveness of

interventions designed to prevent offenders from re-offending, such as batterer intervention programs (BIPs).

One of the most significant gaps in research, which cuts across victim services and the justice system, is how mainstream responses to violence do and do not lead to safety and justice for victims from underserved populations. We know relatively little about how victims' experiences with reporting, seeking services, and requesting help from the justice system differ when their affiliation with a marginalized population is accounted for; but we do know that some strategies that are successful in mainstream contexts can have unintended negative consequences for people of color, lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) people, and other marginalized groups. Furthermore, we have less formally-documented knowledge about how unique factors related to culture and identity serve a protective role in victims' lives, and how those factors influence the ways in which victims survive violence and abuse.

## **What We Need to Know More About**

### *Areas of Study*

The review of literature and interviews with experts helped distinguish gaps in knowledge about effective ways of addressing domestic and sexual violence. OVW then identified the following six areas of study, which will guide its work on research and evaluation from this point forward:

1. **Victims' needs.** How victimization and its aftermath affect people's lives, especially people who are marginalized (including but not limited to victims who are: people of color, immigrants, male, Deaf or hard of hearing, lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT); people with disabilities; elderly; members of cultural, linguistic, and/or religious minority groups; incarcerated or formerly incarcerated; and/or living in poverty); and what they need to cope, heal, and achieve safety and justice
2. **Cultures, disparities, and access.** Ways in which cultural differences and social inequalities matter in terms of where and to whom people go for help, and whether people are able to access justice and get services that are useful to them
3. **Justice.** Ways the justice system can effectively pursue and achieve justice in cases involving domestic/dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking; with justice broadly understood to include autonomy for victims, accountability for offenders, procedural fairness for all, and restorative justice
4. **Impact.** Short- and long-term impact of the justice system's response, victim services, and other VAWA-funded interventions on victim safety and offender accountability
5. **Indicators of success.** What success looks like and how to measure it—for victims pursuing safety and justice, for offenders being held accountable for their violence, and for people who work with victims and offenders

## 6. Reducing recidivism. How to prevent violence from recurring

To ensure that these areas of study are not so broad as to be vague, examples of ways of contributing knowledge to them are provided below.

- A study of sex crimes investigators' caseloads as it relates to the thoroughness of investigation addresses OVW's interest in **justice** for victims of sexual violence, **indicators of success** that look beyond crime rates and arrests, and **reducing recidivism**, since better investigations ostensibly lead to more serial offenders being identified and stopped from committing more crimes.
- An evaluation of a tribal peacemaking court model for domestic violence cases could contribute to all six areas of study, especially accounting for **cultures, disparities, and access** in pursuing **justice**, and the **impact** of the justice system's response on victim safety and offender accountability.
- A comparison of outcomes for residents of several shelter programs that use different models for providing trauma-informed, voluntary services would build knowledge about **victims' needs**, the **impact** of VAWA-funded interventions, and **indicators of success** for victims who use shelter services and staff who work in shelters.
- A longitudinal study following domestic violence victims who decide to stay with their abusers could examine health outcomes, service usage, protective factors, and any changes in the manner and severity of violence and abuse over time; contributing to what we know about **victims' needs; cultures, disparities, and access**; and the **impact** of VAWA-funded interventions.
- A descriptive study of several peer support group models specifically designed for African American survivors of domestic or sexual violence would build knowledge about **victims' needs** and **cultures, disparities, and access**.

These examples are provided merely to illustrate the ways research could build knowledge in the six areas of study; they are not instructive in terms of the research and evaluation OVW intends to support.

### *Evaluation Priorities*

The topics listed below are priorities for OVW-funded research and evaluation over the next several years. Funding research on these topics will generate evidence in the six areas of study described above.

- Impact of VAWA-funded interventions on victims who are: people of color, immigrants, male, Deaf or hard of hearing, lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT); people with disabilities; elderly; members of cultural, linguistic, and/or religious minority groups; incarcerated or formerly incarcerated; and/or living in poverty.
- Research on the intersection of firearms and domestic violence including the examination of: a) enforcement of firearm surrender and seizure laws related to

domestic violence and its relationship to domestic violence injury and homicide; b) enforcement of domestic violence protection orders requiring surrender of firearms; c) relationship between issuance of protective, restraining, custody, and/or visitation orders and firearm purchases; and d) return of weapons surrendered under a domestic violence protection order and its relationship to subsequent domestic violence injury and homicide.

- Culturally-specific victim services, such as descriptive research on what these services include and what distinguishes them from mainstream services, as well as research on the impact of specific interventions. This could include baseline data on practices that have not been studied at all, and further evaluation of interventions that have been evaluated, e.g., the promotora model).
- Effectiveness of transitional housing program models and related assistance.
- Strategies for improving sexual assault investigation and prosecution, irrespective of the existence of a rape kit and/or the status of rape kit analysis.<sup>4</sup>
  - Effectiveness of trauma-informed law enforcement victim interviewing practices (e.g., the Forensic Experiential Trauma Interview (FETI) model).
- Strategies for implementing Department of Justice authoritative guidance (e.g., the National *Protocol for Sexual Assault Medical Forensic Examinations – Adult/Adolescent*, and *Identifying and Preventing Gender Bias in Law Enforcement Response to Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence*), and effectiveness of those strategies.
- Impact of OVW-funded training on practice, including the effectiveness of specific delivery methods and curricula.
- Services designed for people with co-occurring victimization and substance abuse issues.
- Secondary analyses of existing data sets, for the purposes of identifying trends or studying variables not examined in the original analysis.
- Impact of specific coordinated community response models that have not been studied much or at all.
- Effectiveness of civil remedies for domestic/dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking victims.
- Testing and validation of instruments used to assess and respond to domestic/dating violence, sexual assault, and/or stalking.

Not appearing on the above list are some research topics that might be critical to addressing domestic and sexual violence, but for which other federal agencies have

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<sup>4</sup> OVW is interested in strategies designed to mitigate biases, as well as strategies focused on investigatory skills, community relations, and workforce factors, such as police supervision, leadership, organizational structure, and implementation of policies and protocols. OVW is not interested in evaluating the impact of sensitivity training, or any training designed mainly to make law enforcement officers feel compassion for crime victims.

resources to support (e.g., classroom-based violence prevention programs), and/or which are not closely linked to the activities many OVW grantees are funded to do. OVW has very limited funds to support research and evaluation, and must focus those dollars on topics for which a stronger evidence base would help OVW grantees use federal funds most effectively. Some topics that beg further study, but which are not a priority for OVW-funded research, can be addressed through collaboration with our partners in other areas of government and in the field.

## **Methods**

OVW will issue a solicitation in March of 2016 to competitively fund evaluations of VAWA-funded interventions, with an emphasis on enhancing knowledge and practice related to underserved and marginalized populations. Projects funded under that solicitation must adhere to the methodological principles listed below.

OVW encourages and will only support research methods that:

- Are well-matched to the purpose of the research and build on existing evidence;
- Uphold victim safety as the paramount objective, with the understanding that scientific progress is always subordinate to that objective;
- Are likely to yield findings that have practical utility for victim services providers and the justice system;
- Are developed collaboratively between researchers and practitioners;
- Place as minimal a burden as possible on crime victims, offenders, and systems;
- Operate from a cogent theoretical framework; and
- Have been approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) if they involve human subjects research.

OVW will neither encourage nor support research that:

- Prioritizes scientific rigor over practical value or ethics, ethics being broadly defined and not limited to published standards;
- Is minimally useful to practitioners and funders;
- Offers minimal cost benefit;
- Lacks a clear theoretical foundation; and/or
- Is designed to generate descriptive findings that emphasize vulnerabilities and neglect strengths of specific populations. (For instance, a study that examines risk-taking behavior among members of a certain population, without testing any strategies for serving the target population, is not of value to OVW.)

## How to Share What We Learn

Any research and evaluation project funded by OVW will be required to produce at least one scholarly product (e.g., a published, peer-reviewed journal article), at least one product written in layperson's terms (e.g., research brief) and intended for practitioners and/or the general public, and at least one interactive presentation delivered via webinar or conference.

Furthermore, OVW will publish its own research briefs and summaries periodically, and embed relevant findings in program solicitations to give applicants concrete examples of evidence-based practices.

## Strategic Goals

OVW has identified three strategic goals and corresponding objectives for evidence-based and evidence-building grant-making:

### **Goal 1: Further build, and make maximum use of, the evidence base for interventions funded under the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA).**

- *Objective A:* Broaden and maintain OVW's understanding of evidence<sup>5</sup> related to domestic and dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking.
- *Objective B:* Establish a yearly funding opportunity, administered directly by OVW, to support researcher-practitioner partnerships to evaluate VAWA-funded interventions, with an emphasis on enhancing knowledge and practice related to underserved and marginalized populations.
- *Objective C:* Set annual priorities for research and evaluation, related to the purposes of VAWA as well as its administration, and targeting the six areas of study identified in this document.
- *Objective D:* Practice evidence-based and evidence-building grantmaking through program development, solicitation development, monitoring, and training/technical assistance.

### **Goal 2: Enhance the utility, timeliness, and dissemination of information on VAWA-funded accomplishments.**

- *Objective A:* Revise OVW's semi-annual grantee reporting process to collect the information on OVW-funded work that is most salient for meeting statutory Congressional reporting requirements and monitoring grant-funded activities.

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<sup>5</sup> "Evidence", for the purposes of this plan, means information obtained through research (including evaluation), and statistical data collection.

- *Objective B:* Develop more impactful reports to Congress on the effectiveness of VAWA programs.

**Goal 3: Enhance collaborations with other federal agencies to combine expertise and resources where our priorities for research, evaluation, and statistics overlap.**

- *Objective A:* Collaborate with other governmental and non-governmental entities that collect data related to VAWA crimes.
- *Objective B:* More closely align performance measures—for OVW itself and for the fields VAWA funding supports—with authentic indicators of victim safety, justice, offender accountability, and effective administration of federal funds.
- *Objective C:* Regularly participate in discussions that might have implications for research, evaluation, or data related domestic and sexual violence.