

# IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME

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The first family justice center opened its doors to victim-survivors of intimate partner violence in 2002 in San Diego, California. The center co-locates staff from private and public agencies with the goal of making it easier for victim-survivors of intimate partner violence to access services. This family justice center model quickly rose in popularity, assisted by grants from the Department of Justice's Office of Violence Against Women, among other government institutions and private foundations. There are now hundreds of family justice centers across the United States, and the model is being exported to other countries as well. Alliance for Hope, an organization that supports family justice centers and is funded by the Office of Violence Against Women, reports that there are over 300 centers around the world and many in development. And yet a review of research across disciplines including law, sociology, psychology, and public health reveals few published studies of the effectiveness of this organizational model. To the contrary, several scholars have cautioned that the core values of the family justice center model include an emphasis on prosecution and offender accountability that runs counter to the interests of victim-survivors, particularly those from marginalized communities who may be more reticent to engage with the criminal legal system. This article explores the history of and conversation around family justice centers and posits that the rise of the model is another iteration of how the U.S. approach to addressing intimate partner violence centers around the criminal legal system.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The San Diego Family justice center, known as “Your Safe Place,” opened its doors to victim-survivors of family violence in 2002.<sup>1</sup> The center co-locates

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1. Claudia Boyd-Barrett, *A Model for Getting Domestic Violence Survivors Wraparound Support*, CAL. HEALTH REP. (Nov. 20, 2023), <https://www.calhealthreport.org/2023/11/20/a-model-for-getting-domestic-violence-survivors-wraparound-support/>.

staff from private and public agencies providing services to victim-survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV) along with representatives from the San Diego Police Department.<sup>2</sup> This “one-stop,” multi-agency center was the culmination of over a decade of planning by a group of law enforcement professionals led by then San Diego City Attorney, Casey Gwinn.<sup>3</sup> Your Safe Place “provides comprehensive, confidential services to anyone who has experienced domestic violence, family violence, older and dependent adult abuse, strangulation, sexual assault or sex trafficking...in a judgement-free manner that empowers clients to successfully become survivors and move forward with their lives.”<sup>4</sup> The services are available regardless of “age, gender, sexual orientation, income, zip code, and immigration status.”<sup>5</sup>

This family justice center (FJC) model of co-located services for intimate partner violence victim-survivors piloted by San Diego has since risen in popularity quite rapidly, assisted by grants from the Department of Justice’s (DOJ) Office of Violence Against Women (OVW), among other state institutions and private foundations.<sup>6</sup> Alliance for Hope, an organization that supports family justice centers and is funded by the Office of Violence Against Women, reports that as of September 2024 there are now 300 centers around the world,<sup>7</sup> including in Canada, Mexico, and Great Britain.<sup>8</sup>

The appeal of the family justice center model is understandable, and in some ways, it is not surprising that the idea has spread so precipitously. Ideally, the family justice center model provides “wraparound” services that are both coordinated and centralized,<sup>9</sup> so that victim-survivors can go to one place to “talk to an advocate to plan for safety, interview with a police officer, meet with a prosecutor, receive medical assistance, utilize forensic evidence collection capabilities, access social services, receive employment and career counseling, and gain

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2. *Id.*

3. *Id.*; see generally Casey Gwinn et al., *The Family Justice Center Collaborative Model*, 27 ST. LOUIS U. PUB. L. REV. 79, 92 (2007) (describing the extensive planning process and leadership role of Casey Gwinn in establishing the multi-agency center).

4. *Your Safe Place*, SAN DIEGO.GOV, <https://www.sandiego.gov/yoursafeplace> (last visited Oct. 4, 2025).

5. *See id.*

6. DEP’T OF JUST., 03-560, JUSTICE DEPARTMENT TO SPEARHEAD PRESIDENT’S FAMILY JUSTICE CENTER INITIATIVE TO BETTER SERVE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE VICTIMS (2003), [https://www.justice.gov/archive/opa/pr/2003/October/03\\_ojp\\_560.htm](https://www.justice.gov/archive/opa/pr/2003/October/03_ojp_560.htm).

7. Image posted by Alliance for HOPE International (Alliance for HOPE International), FACEBOOK, We now have 300 Family Justice Centers around the world and many in development. Ventura County, California just finished planning this week for their third Family Justice Center. We are honored to provide strategic planning support to most of the Centers developing in the United States! #hoperisingscience #ScienceOfHope #FamilyJusticeCenters (Sep. 6, 2024), <https://www.facebook.com/AllianceforHOPEInternational/photos/we-now-have-300-family-justice-centers-around-the-world-and-many-in-development-/838880981705058> (discussing in the caption of the post that there are now “300 Family Justice Centers around the world and many in development.”).

8. *Our History*, ALL. FOR HOPE INT’L, <https://www.allianceforhope.org/about-us/history> (last visited Oct. 4, 2025); Gwinn et al., *supra* note 3, at 92 (listing of countries).

9. *Family Justice Centers*, TENN. DEP’T OF FIN. & ADMIN. (June 30, 2025, at 10:04 ET), <https://www.tn.gov/finance/office-of-criminal-justice-programs/ocjp/fa-ocjp-best-practices/fa-ocjp-fjc.html>.

information on shelter and other safety services.”<sup>10</sup> The hope is that the victim-survivors can address all of their medical, legal, housing, and safety needs and become aware of and access a greater variety of services.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, advocates for the family justice center model state that it “seeks to put the victim and her children first by bringing as many professionals and services as possible under one roof.”<sup>12</sup> Such advocates contend that victim-survivors can avoid retelling their stories by consenting to shared case management and information sharing systems,<sup>13</sup> and that agencies at the center could benefit from sharing overhead expenses and from working more collaboratively with other agencies to coordinate services.<sup>14</sup> As stated by the Tennessee state government’s family justice center website, the model “benefits the broader community by allowing stakeholders to do more with less, and by reducing competition and redundancies among partner agencies.”<sup>15</sup> For those agencies that comprise law enforcement, “police and prosecutors are able to collect evidence and coordinate the investigation and prosecution of crimes.”<sup>16</sup>

And yet, a review of research across disciplines including law, sociology, psychology, and public health reveals few published studies of the effectiveness of this organizational model. To the contrary, more than a few scholars have cautioned that the core values of the family justice center model include an emphasis on prosecution and offender accountability that runs counter to the interests of victim-survivors who may be more reticent to engage with the criminal legal system.<sup>17</sup> Such victim-survivors include victim-survivors of color; immigrant victim-survivors, particularly those who are undocumented; LGBTQ+ victim-survivors; victim-survivors whose abusive partners are law enforcement, military, or veterans; victim-survivors who use illegal substances or struggle with addiction; and victim-survivors with outstanding warrants for arrest or who come from communities who have experienced police brutality.<sup>18</sup> Jane Stoever, for example,

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10. Jane K. Stoever, *Mirandizing Family Justice*, 39 HARV. J. L. & GENDER 189, 201 (2016).

11. *See id.*

12. Gwinn et al., *supra* note 3, at 98.

13. *Id.* at 90-91, 98.

14. Stoever, *supra* note 10, at 202.

15. *Family Justice Centers*, *supra* note 9.

16. Stoever, *supra* note 10, at 201-02, 202 n.57 (quoting Gwinn et al., *supra* note 3, at 107 (“Prosecutors sitting across the hall from detectives could see first-hand the work being done and soon, detectives and prosecutors started talking to each other about the cases and working on them together.”)).

17. *See id.* at 189; *see also* Gretchen Arnold, *The Impact of Social Ties on Coalition Strength and Effectiveness: The Case of the Battered Women’s Movement in St Louis*, 10 SOC. MOVEMENT STUD. 131, 131 (2011) (showing how coalitions that align too closely with state institutions risk weakening their ability to respond to the diverse needs of survivors); Michael R. Duke et al., *Workplace Dynamics in Affiliational Organizations: A Case Study of a One-Stop Agency Serving Victims of Intimate Partner Violence*, 30 J. WORKPLACE BEHAV. HEALTH 363, 370 (2015) (documenting how service providers within a co-located agency felt pressure to prioritize prosecution over victim-centered goals); Victoria Piehowski, *Under the Punitive Aegis: Dependency and the Family Justice Center Model*, 24 PUNISHMENT & SOCIETY 221, 222 (2022) (arguing that the family justice center model embeds punitive state logics that can limit survivor autonomy).

18. *See* Stoever, *supra* note 10, at 192; *see also* Duke et al., *supra* note 17, at 370 (noting that interviewees who worked at a center discussed that the Center’s intimidating entry could discourage victims from continuing to seek help, particularly those already distrustful of law enforcement, such

cautions that while family justice centers are typically advertised as confidential, they are staffed by agencies and persons that are required by mandatory reporting laws to disclose certain information to state authorities that can lead to criminal investigations as well as the loss of parental rights.<sup>19</sup>

Supporters of family justice centers often cite declines in intimate partner violence homicide rates in cities with such centers as proof of their success. There is no empirical evidence, however, of a causal relationship between the establishment of family justice centers and declines in intimate partner violence homicide rates, as detailed in Part IV of this article. By contrast, extensive research supports the effectiveness of social services, including housing and case management, civil legal services, and community-based programs in reducing intimate partner violence rates.<sup>20</sup>

In this respect, the rise of the family justice center model is another iteration of how U.S. law and policy on intimate partner violence has been centered around the criminal legal system. Leigh Goodmark has skillfully chronicled how “the United States has relied primarily on one tool to combat intimate partner violence—the criminal legal system.”<sup>21</sup> Goodmark’s book, *Decriminalizing Domestic Violence*, provides a detailed history of how the United States came to rely on criminalization over other policy approaches, including how the majority of funding through the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) is increasingly focused on criminal legal interventions, and exposes the lack of empirical evidence for criminalization with respect to metrics such as rates of intimate partner violence.<sup>22</sup> A significant aspect of this history is how anti-violence advocates and

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as undocumented immigrants or survivors with criminal records that victims with criminal-legal vulnerabilities, such as substance use or criminal records); Pichowski, *supra* note 17, at 222 (arguing that the family justice center model reinforces punitive frameworks that disproportionately burden already marginalized survivors).

19. Stoeber, *supra* note 10, at 204.

20. See generally Memorandum from Carolyn Copps Hartley & Lynette M. Renner to the U.S. Dep’t of Just., *The Longer-Term Influence of Civil Litigation on Battered Women*, (May 2016) (on file with National Criminal Justice Reference Service), <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/249879.pdf> (finding that the availability of civil legal services was significantly related to declines in domestic violence rates in the 1990s); Lisa B. Klein et al., *Housing Interventions for Intimate Partner Violence Survivors: A Systematic Review*, 22 TRAUMA, VIOLENCE & ABUSE 249 (2021) (reviewing various housing interventions and their effectiveness in promoting safety and well-being among intimate partner violence survivors); David Ponka et al., *The Effectiveness of Case Management Interventions for the Homeless, Vulnerably Housed, and Persons with Lived Experience: A Systematic Review*, PLOS ONE (Apr. 9, 2020) (evaluating the impact of case management interventions on housing stability and health outcomes, and highlighting their role in supporting intimate partner violence survivors); Jennifer S. Rosenberg & Denise Grab, *Supporting Survivors: The Economic Benefits of Providing Civil Legal Assistance to Survivors of Domestic Violence*, INST. FOR POL’Y INTEGRITY (July 2015), <https://policyintegrity.org/documents/SupportingSurvivors.pdf> (discussing how civil legal assistance aids survivors in achieving safety and contributes to economic stability, thereby reducing the incidence of intimate partner violence).

21. See generally LEIGH GOODMARK, *DECRIMINALIZING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: A BALANCED POLICY APPROACH TO INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE I* (Claire M. Renzetti ed., 2018) (describing in detail how funding structures have shifted anti-violence efforts toward criminalization at the expense of community-based supports).

22. See generally *id.* at 3–4 (discussing how funding structures have shifted anti-violence efforts toward criminalization at the expense of community-based support).

organizations have been coopted by the criminal legal system through funding incentives, and how the impact has been an underfunding of the social services, civil legal services, and community-based programs that, in contrast to criminalization, have been shown to be effective in driving down intimate partner violence rates.<sup>23</sup> The rise of family justice centers echoes this broader narrative in several key ways: a lack of research-driven policy, a persistent imbalance in funding that disproportionately favors the criminal legal system over holistic, survivor-centered approaches—such as social services, housing, civil legal assistance, and community-based programs—and the cooptation of anti-violence advocates and organizations in service of the criminal legal system.

The movie “Field of Dreams” epitomizes the notion that merely building something can catalyze miraculous outcomes.<sup>24</sup> Kevin Costner’s character constructs a baseball field, and the legendary ghosts of the sport’s past appear, as if by magic, to play.<sup>25</sup> This idea of “if you build it, he will come”<sup>26</sup> is reflected in the hopeful yet somewhat simplistic faith that simply constructing a family justice center will resolve the complex challenges faced by survivors of intimate partner violence. Reality, as is often the case, is sadly far more intricate. Effectively supporting survivors requires more than just a centralized location for services.

Part II of this Article provides a comprehensive history of family justice centers and their rise as a prominent aspect of intimate partner violence law and policy. Part III details the critiques of family justice centers made by scholars across various disciplinary fields. Part IV questions the oft-made assertion that family justice centers reduce intimate partner violence homicide rates. Part V situates the history of family justice centers within the larger context of U.S. policy addressing intimate partner violence. Part VI concludes.

## II. HISTORY OF FAMILY JUSTICE CENTERS

Casey Gwinn, often credited as the “visionary” behind the family justice center movement grew up on the Mt. Hermon Christian Conference Center, a 600-acre estate nestled among the towering redwoods in the Santa Cruz mountains about eight miles from the coastline of the Monterey Bay in California.<sup>27</sup> His father was a congregational minister and the director of the center,<sup>28</sup> which was founded in 1906 on the site of California’s first water-powered sawmill.<sup>29</sup> The center advertises itself as “a special place, where the barriers between you and God are

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23. *See id.* at 4.

24. *See* FIELD OF DREAMS, Blu-ray (Gordon Company 1989).

25. *Id.* at 04:26.

26. *Id.*

27. Ky Plaskon, *City Attorney Casey Gwinn Campaigns Against Pornography and Domestic Violence*, S.D. READER (Sep. 2. 1999), <https://www.sandiegoreader.com/news/1999/sep/02/god-gay-s-and-casey-gwinn/?page=2>.

28. *Id.*

29. *One Hundredth Post: Five Things I Didn’t Know About Mount Hermon*, CHURCH & STATES (July 20, 2015), <https://deanandmindygotochurch.blogspot.com/2015/07/one-hundredth-post-five-things-i-didnt.html>.

reduced.”<sup>30</sup> Gwinn attended the 800-student San Lorenzo Valley High School two miles away, across the snaking California State Route Nine, graduating in 1978.<sup>31</sup> In high school, Gwinn was involved in student government.<sup>32</sup> Upon graduation, he attended Stanford, graduating with a political science degree, and continued onto law school at UCLA.<sup>33</sup>

Gwinn’s first job out of law school was at the San Diego City Attorney’s office.<sup>34</sup> He eventually led a unit specializing in child abuse and intimate partner violence.<sup>35</sup> In his first six weeks as head of the unit he won nineteen out of twenty-one cases.<sup>36</sup> Gwinn emphasized that misdemeanor domestic violence incidents should never be dismissed as minor, calling them warning signs of potential homicide and pressing for aggressive prosecution to prevent escalation.<sup>37</sup> Gwinn also advocated against pornography, based on what he perceived as “a very strong link between pornography and child abuse and sexual assault as a prosecutor.”<sup>38</sup> In 1999, *American Lawyer* magazine declared Gwinn one of the top forty-five legal advisors in the United States.<sup>39</sup>

In 1988, San Diego City Attorney John Witt and Deputy City Attorney Casey Gwinn conceived of a “one-stop shop,” reasoning that victim-survivors would have an “easier time receiving needed services if they only had to go to one place to get all the necessary help.”<sup>40</sup> The proposal was initially rejected by the San Diego County District Attorney’s office.<sup>41</sup> The City Attorney’s office remained

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30. *Our Mission*, MOUNT HERMON, <https://www.mounthermon.org/about/> (last visited Oct. 4, 2025).

31. Plaskon, *supra* note 27.

32. *Id.*

33. *Id.*

34. *Id.*

35. *Id.*

36. *Id.*

37. Deanna Bellandi, *New Guidelines Treat Domestic Violence Like Any Other Crime*, LA TIMES (Aug. 29, 1990, at 00:00 PT), <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-08-29-me-53-story.html>. During Gwinn’s tenure, San Diego received considerable attention for its evidence-based prosecution policy, which relied on alternative forms of evidence rather than depending solely on victim testimony to determine how a case would proceed. Barbara E. Smith & Robert C. Davis, *An Evaluation of Efforts to Implement No-Drop Policies: Two Central Values in Conflict*, U.S. DEP’T OF JUSTICE: OFF. OF JUST. PROGRAMS, III-4-3 (2004), <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/199719.pdf>. Policies like evidence-based and mandatory prosecution have been widely criticized for removing decisions from victims’ hands and thereby diminishing their agency. *See generally* Leigh S. Goodmark, *Autonomy Feminism: An Anti-Essentialist Critique of Mandatory Interventions in Domestic Violence Cases*, 37 FLA. ST. U. L. REV. 1 (2009) (arguing that mandatory criminal justice interventions in domestic violence cases, adopted widely in the United States, undermine survivor autonomy and may cause harm); Kelly Alison Behre, *Ensuring Choice and Voice for Campus Sexual Assault Victims: A Call for Victims’ Attorneys*, 65 DRAKE L. REV. 293 (2016) (contending that mandatory reporting and institutional responses often remove survivor control, calling for legal representation to protect autonomy); Aya Gruber, *Victims as Instruments*, 91 WASH. L. REV. 329 (2016) (examining how criminal justice reforms across jurisdictions use victims to advance prosecutorial goals, limiting their agency and decision-making power).

38. Plaskon, *supra* note 27.

39. *Id.*

40. Gwinn et al., *supra* note 3, at 83.

41. *Id.*

“determined to move forward” with a family justice center.<sup>42</sup> Gwinn invited San Diego’s YWCA and Center for Community Solutions to be on-site partners inside the City Attorney’s Child Abuse and Domestic Violence Unit and sought grant funding to expand the services provided to victim-survivors.<sup>43</sup> After being elected City Attorney in 1996, Gwinn created a family justice center planning team in partnership with Police Chief David Bejarano.<sup>44</sup> Comprising members of the San Diego City Attorney and Police Department, the team conducted community forums, focus groups, and a feasibility study.<sup>45</sup> Over time, they secured the support of over forty community organizations, the county’s congressional and state legislative delegations, as well as a \$500,000 Challenge Grant from the California Endowment.<sup>46</sup> By 2002, San Diego Mayor Dick Murphy, the City Council, and the City Manager voted in favor of opening a family justice center in downtown San Diego that would house the San Diego Police Department’s forty-officer Domestic Violence Unit, the thirty-five attorneys that comprised the City Attorney’s Domestic Violence Unit, and twenty other public and private agencies addressing domestic violence, child abuse, and sexual assault.<sup>47</sup> The San Diego Family justice center opened its doors on October 10, 2002, and as of 2010, it included twenty-seven agencies.<sup>48</sup>

Gwinn and his colleagues actively promoted the family justice center concept through public media campaigns and presentations before the White House and various federal agencies.<sup>49</sup> Gwinn appeared on the Oprah Winfrey show in January 2003.<sup>50</sup> Shortly thereafter, Gwinn attended an April 2003 Roundtable on Family Violence organized by Lifetime Television at the White House, at which Attorney General John Ashcroft and the Department of Justice’s Office on Violence Against Women Director Diane Stuart were also present.<sup>51</sup> On October 8, 2003, President George Bush announced the creation of the President’s Family Justice Center Initiative awarding grants to U.S. communities to develop family justice centers based on the San Diego model as well as another center in Indianapolis.<sup>52</sup> A related

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42. *Id.*

43. *Id.* at 83-84.

44. *Id.* at 84.

45. *Id.*

46. *Id.* at 85; *Our Story*, THE CAL. ENDOWMENT, <https://www.calendow.org/our-story/> (last visited Oct. 4, 2025) (displaying that The California Endowment is a private non-profit foundation created in 1996 when Blue Cross of California acquired WellPoint Health Networks).

47. Gwinn et al., *supra* note 3, at 84-85.

48. *Id.* at 86.

49. *Id.* at 87-88.

50. ALL. FOR HOPE INT’L, *Casey Gwinn of the San Diego Family Justice Center on Oprah – January 2003* (YouTube, May 15, 2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mvwxzpqogwu> [<https://web.archive.org/web/20210128130538/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MvWxzPQogWU&gl=US&hl=en>].

51. Press Release, U.S. Dep’t of Just., Attorney General Participates in White House Roundtable on Violence Against Women (Mar. 3, 2003) (on file with author), [https://www.justice.gov/archive/opa/pr/2003/March/03\\_ag\\_137.htm](https://www.justice.gov/archive/opa/pr/2003/March/03_ag_137.htm).

52. DEP’T OF JUST., 03-560, JUSTICE DEPARTMENT TO SPEARHEAD PRESIDENT’S FAMILY JUSTICE CENTER INITIATIVE TO BETTER SERVE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE VICTIMS (2003), [https://www.justice.gov/archive/opa/pr/2003/October/03\\_ojp\\_560.htm](https://www.justice.gov/archive/opa/pr/2003/October/03_ojp_560.htm).

press release stated that “[t]he faith-based component of the Family Justice Center Initiative is critical to its overall success...[f]aith-based institutions are often the first place a domestic violence victim turns to for support and guidance.”<sup>53</sup>

Nine months later, Attorney General John Ashcroft announced that the Department of Justice would be providing \$20 million to fifteen communities chosen through the initiative.<sup>54</sup> The San Diego Family Justice Center, the City of Indianapolis, and the National Network to End Domestic Violence were designated as technical assistance providers to the grantees, and awarded \$1,606,950, \$143,125, and \$125,000, respectively.<sup>55</sup> When the Violence Against Women Act was reauthorized in 2005, Congress identified family justice centers as a “purpose area,” a designation used to describe things that are prioritized for funding, resources, and focus within the framework of VAWA.<sup>56</sup> Some communities also opened family justice centers without federal funding from the OVW.<sup>57</sup> In 2006, Gwinn and others launched the National Family Justice Center Alliance as a program of the San Diego Family Justice Center Foundation to provide technical assistance to family justice centers.<sup>58</sup> This organization eventually branched off from the San Diego Family Justice Center to form a separate entity, and after a few organizational iterations eventually changed its name to Alliance for Hope International.<sup>59</sup>

In many ways, the history of the family justice center movement is inseparable from the support it has received from the Office on Violence Against Women and the Department of Justice. Mary Beth Buchanan served as Acting Director of the Office on Violence Against Women from November 2006 to December 2007 and was appointed to that role by President George W. Bush.<sup>60</sup> Prior to that, Buchanan had an extensive career as a prosecutor.<sup>61</sup> Originally

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53. *Id.*

54. DEP’T OF JUST., 04-499, ATTORNEY GENERAL ASHCROFT ANNOUNCES \$20 MILLION FOR COMMUNITIES THROUGH PRESIDENT BUSH’S FAMILY JUSTICE CENTER INITIATIVE (2004), [https://www.justice.gov/archive/opa/pr/2004/July/04\\_opa\\_499.htm](https://www.justice.gov/archive/opa/pr/2004/July/04_opa_499.htm).

55. *Id.*

56. *The President’s Family Justice Center Initiative Best Practices*, DEP’T OF JUST., 1 (Feb. 2007), [https://www.justice.gov/archive/ovw/docs/family\\_justice\\_center\\_overview\\_12\\_07.pdf](https://www.justice.gov/archive/ovw/docs/family_justice_center_overview_12_07.pdf).

57. See Gwinn et al., *supra* note 3, at 90-92 (showing that family justice centers opened in Riverside, California and Tacoma/Pierce County, Washington without federal funding).

58. See *Our History*, *supra* note 8 (explaining that The Family Justice Center Alliance (FJCA) provides technical assistance to family justice centers both within and outside of the United States and has been doing so since 2006).

59. *Id.* (showing that in January 2008, the National Family Justice Center Alliance was launched as a new and separate non-profit organization. In 2015, the Family Justice Center Alliance changed its name to Alliance for HOPE International).

60. *Minutes of the National Advisory Committee on Violence Against Woman Final Meeting*, U.S. DEP’T OF JUST. 2 (Dec. 3-4, 2007), <https://www.justice.gov/archive/ovw/docs/nac-minutes-12-07.pdf>; Letter from Mary Beth Buchanan, Dir. of the Off. of Violence Against Women, to author (Mar. 20, 2013) (on file with author) <https://www.justice.gov/archive/ovw/docs/m-buchanan-farewell-mssg.pdf>.

61. *Hon. Mary Beth Buchanan*, THE FEDERALIST SOC’Y, <https://fedsoc.org/contributors/mary-beth-buchanan> (last visited Oct. 4, 2025); see generally *Celebrating the Achievements of Women Attorneys: A Conversation with Mary Beth Buchanan*, BUCHANAN INGERSOLL & ROONEY PC (Apr. 12, 2023), <https://www.bipc.com/celebrating-the-achievements-of-women-attorneys-a-conversation>



appointed by President Bush as U.S. Attorney for the Western District of Pennsylvania, she gained recognition for her focus on using obscenity laws to prosecute pornography.<sup>62</sup> During her tenure at OVW, Buchanan supported initiatives that included partnerships with faith-based organizations in addressing domestic violence and related issues.<sup>63</sup> This was part of President Bush's Faith-Based and Community Initiative, which aimed to expand the role of faith-based organizations in providing social services by removing barriers that prevented these organizations from competing for federal funding and ensuring they were integral partners in addressing social issues, including domestic violence.<sup>64</sup> Buchanan visited the San Diego Family Justice Center in January 2007.<sup>65</sup> In her farewell message, she described the establishment of the New Orleans Family Justice Center in August 2007 as the "culmination of the Family Justice Center concept."<sup>66</sup> Since Buchanan's tenure, the Family Justice Center Alliance has continued to work closely with the Office on Violence Against Women, recognizing its important role in supporting and funding initiatives that aid domestic violence survivors, including the development and expansion of the family justice center model.<sup>67</sup> On April 13, 2016, Lynn Rosenthal, the first White House Advisor on Violence Against Women, received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Family Justice Center Alliance during the Sixteenth Annual Family Justice Center Conference.<sup>68</sup>

In 2007, the Office of Violence Against Women circulated ten best practices identified through "subsequent evaluations, focus groups, client feedback surveys, and national promising practices conferences."<sup>69</sup> The best practices identified were:

1. Co-located, Multi-disciplinary Services for Victims of Family Violence and their Children Increases Safety and Support;
2. Pro-arrest/Mandatory Arrest Policies in Family Justice Center Communities Increases Accountability for Offenders;

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-with-mary-beth-buchanan-recording (where Buchanan discusses her career as a prosecutor and in the Department of Justice).

62. Neil A. Lewis, *A Prosecution Tests the Definition of Obscenity*, N.Y. TIMES (Sep. 28, 2007), [https://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/28/us/28obscene.html?\\_r=2&ref=us&oref=slogin&oref=slogin](https://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/28/us/28obscene.html?_r=2&ref=us&oref=slogin&oref=slogin).

63. *Celebrating the Achievements of Women Attorneys: A Conversation with Mary Beth Buchanan*, *supra* note 61.

64. See *Faith-Based and Community Initiative: Questions and Answers*, THE WHITE HOUSE (Jan. 29, 2004), <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/government/fbci/qr6.html>.

65. Gwinn et al., *supra* note 3, at 93.

66. Letter from Mary Beth Buchanan, *supra* note 60.

67. *Resources*, FAM. JUST. CTR. ALL., <https://www.allianceforhope.org/family-justice-center-alliance/resources> (last visited Oct. 4, 2025) (stating that "[i]n partnership with the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW), the Family Justice Center Alliance offers national technical assistance to support seasoned and developing centers through a wide range of resources partially-funded by OVW.").

68. *National Domestic Violence Advocate Wins Lifetime Achievement Award: A Lifetime of Work Recognized by Domestic Violence Professionals*, FAM. JUST. CTR. ALL. (Apr. 13, 2016), <https://www.familyjusticecenter.org/lynn-rosenthal-lifetime-achievement-award/>.

69. *The President's Family Justice Center Initiative Best Practices*, *supra* note 56, at 2.

3. Policies Incidental to Arrest/Enforcement Reduces Re-victimization of Victims;
4. Victim Safety/Advocacy Must Be the Highest Priority in the Family Justice Center Service Delivery Model;
5. Victim Confidentiality Must Be a Priority;
6. Offenders Must Be Prohibited From On-site Services at Centers;
7. Community History of Domestic Violence Specialization Increases the Success of Collaboration in the Family Justice Center Model;
8. Strong Support from Local Elected Officials and Other Local and State Government Policymakers Increases the Effectiveness and Sustainability of Family Justice Centers;
9. Strategic Planning is Critical to Short-term and Long-term Success in the Family Justice Center Service Delivery Model; and
10. Strong/Diverse Community Support Increases Resources for Victims and their Children.<sup>70</sup>

While the best practices emphasize victim-centered and community-based services, even going so far as to warn that such family justice centers are not appropriate for communities that lack existing collaboration between law enforcement and community, the document also demonstrates the model's emphasis on law enforcement and pro-arrest policies, as well as faith-based initiatives.<sup>71</sup> The first best practice regarding co-location specifies that law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and probation officers should be present along with "community-based victim advocates; civil attorneys; medical professionals; and staff members from diverse community-based organizations."<sup>72</sup> It also states that "[o]ther partners, such as a Chaplain's Program, are strongly encouraged."<sup>73</sup> Among "documented and published outcomes" the document lists the following: "reduced recantation and minimization by victims when wrapped in services and support; increased efficiency in collaborative services to victims among service providers; increased prosecution of offenders."<sup>74</sup> For support for this statement, the document cites a book published in 2006 written by Casey Gwinn and Gael Strack entitled *Hope for Hurting Families: Creating Family Justice Centers Across America*.<sup>75</sup> Regarding pro-arrest and mandatory arrest policies, under the second best practice, the OVW explains that the presence of police and prosecutorial agencies

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70. *Id.* at 2-4.

71. *See id.* at 2 ("The family justice center model is not considered appropriate in communities where various government and law enforcement agencies have no history of collaboration and specialization in addressing family violence matters. It is not recommended where law enforcement agencies do not prioritize thorough investigations, early intervention prosecution strategies, increased offender accountability, and heightened victim safety in partnership with community-based domestic violence organizations.").

72. *Id.*

73. *Id.*

74. *Id.* at 1 (the other outcomes listed are "reduced homicides; increased victim safety; increased autonomy and empowerment for victims; reduced fear and anxiety for victims and their children; and dramatically increased community support for services to victims and their children.").

75. *Id.* at 2 (citing Casey Gwinn & Gael Strack, *HOPE FOR HURTING FAMILIES: CREATING FAMILY JUSTICE CENTERS ACROSS AMERICA* (Volcano Press 2006)).

emphasizes “the importance of arrest, prosecution, and long-term accountability for domestic violence offenders.”<sup>76</sup>

Family justice centers come in different shapes and sizes. Most involve law enforcement entities in some form. Some family justice centers feature law enforcement in the same building,<sup>77</sup> while others are positioned next to the local police department.<sup>78</sup> A minority do not include the presence of law enforcement at all.<sup>79</sup> The \$13.6 million,<sup>80</sup> 75,000 square feet, three story Rose Andom center in Denver, Colorado, which opened in 2016, lists the Denver Police Department, Denver City Attorney’s office, and Denver District Attorney’s office as on-site partners.<sup>81</sup> Whereas the Nashville Family Safety Center is located next door to the Metro Nashville Police Department.<sup>82</sup>

Origin stories for family justice centers also vary, though they can be grouped into three categories.<sup>83</sup> The first is the hero model, where a specific person with authority, such as a city or district attorney, is responsible for most of the planning and implementation of the family justice center. The Nashville Family Safety Center is one such example, where Diane Lance, as the founding director of the Office of Family Safety and a former Assistant District Attorney, took the lead in planning, developing, and implementing the center from its inception.<sup>84</sup> The

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76. *Id.*

77. See Pichowski, *supra* note 17, at 235 (showing the Brooklyn family justice center floorplan).

78. Nashville’s family justice center is positioned next to the police department. *Metro Nashville Police Headquarters and Family Safety Center*, TMP, <https://tmpartners.com/work/metro-nashville-police-headquarters-and-family-safety-center/> (last visited Oct. 4, 2025).

79. ABT ASSOCS., ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN OF FAMILY JUSTICE CENTERS, FINAL REPORT 58 (2018), <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/251561.pdf> (stating that the scan reviewed 117 centers and found that only 12 did not “have a criminal justice or district attorney partner on-site.”).

80. Andrew Kenney, *Colorado’s First “Family Justice Center” Opens in Denver Tomorrow*, DENVERITE (June 28, 2016, at 08:41 MT), <https://denverite.com/2016/06/28/rose-andom-center-family-justice-center-denver/> (“The project’s overall budget was \$13.6 million, with \$3.5 million coming from the city of Denver, the Denver Post reported, and much of the rest raised privately.” “It’s named for Rose Andom, a successful business owner who also is a survivor of domestic violence herself; she gave \$1.5 million, leading the fundraising campaign for the project.”); *Denver Opens the First Family Justice Center in Colorado*, FAM. JUST. CTR. ALL. (June 29, 2016), <https://www.familyjusticecenter.org/denver-opens-first-family-justice-center-colorado/> (showing that other notable donors include the Anschutz Foundation, Daniels Fund, Colorado Office of the Attorney General, Denver Broncos Charities, Boettcher Foundation, El Pomar Foundation, Gates Family Foundation, the Barton Family Foundation, Leprino Foundation, and the William H. Donner Foundation, among many others).

81. *Support for Survivors of Domestic Violence*, ROSE ANDOM CTR., <https://roseandomcenter.org/domestic-violence-survivor-services/> (last visited Oct. 4, 2025).

82. *Metro Nashville Police Headquarters and Family Safety Center*, TMP, <https://tmpartners.com/work/metro-nashville-police-headquarters-and-family-safety-center/> (last visited Oct. 4, 2025).

83. These categories are based on the author’s unstructured conversations with various people involved with Family Justice Centers.

84. See Steven Hale, *Nashville’s Family Safety Center Embodies Progress and Challenges That Remain for Addressing Domestic Violence*, NASH. BANNER (Aug. 22, 2024), <https://nashvillebanner.com/2024/08/22/nashville-family-safety-center/> (describing how Lance, a former assistant district attorney who has been the director of the Office of Family Safety since its inception in 2014, spent upwards of twenty years working around domestic violence and was integral in the founding and creation of the center).

second model, or pilot model, is where an existing organization, such as a domestic violence social services organization, creates a family justice center as a pilot.<sup>85</sup> Heather Melton discusses such a center that was started by a domestic violence shelter in her 2019 article.<sup>86</sup> The third model is where a new organization is formed through the collaboration of a group of agencies. The family justice center in Contra Costa County of California is an example of this model, as it involved the creation of a new non-profit entity led by a former Managing Attorney at Bay Area Legal Aid who left her position to become the Executive Director of the center.<sup>87</sup> It is difficult, however, to draw clear distinctions between these categories. For example, the San Diego Family Justice Center could be characterized as an example of the hero model or the pilot model, but it also eventually became a separate entity from the San Diego City Attorney's office.<sup>88</sup> The Contra Costa Family Justice Center could also be characterized as a hybrid model, as it grew out of the Zero Tolerance Against DV Initiative.<sup>89</sup>

There are now family justice centers operating in forty states.<sup>90</sup> There are twenty-six centers in California alone, supported by the California Blue Shield Foundation as well the California Legislature.<sup>91</sup> In 2009, the Blue Shield of California Foundation funded the development of the first fifteen centers in the state as part of the California Family Justice Center Initiative.<sup>92</sup> The California Legislature has also played a critical role, adding family justice centers to state law in California Penal Code Section 13750 in 2013, and authorizing \$10 million from the California Office of Emergency Services in 2025.<sup>93</sup> The California Family Justice Center Network, the membership organization that provides training,

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85. See Heather Melton, *Victims' Experiences and Satisfaction with a Family Justice Center*, 11 J. AGGRESSION, CONFLICT AND PEACE RSCH. 241, 241-42 (2019).

86. See *id.* at 243.

87. Press Release, Fam. Just. Ctr.: Contra Costa, *Susun Kim Named Executive Director of West Contra Costa Family Justice Center* (Feb. 20, 2014) (on file with author), <https://www.cocofamilyjustice.org/press-release-susun-kim-named-executive-director-of-west-contra-costa-family-justice-center/>.

88. See Gwinn et al., *supra* note 3, at 83-87 (describing the history of the center).

89. *East Bay Leadership Council: Honoring Those Who Give Back*, FAM. JUST. CTR.: CONTRA COSTA, [www.cocofamilyjustice.org/east-bay-leadership-council-honoring-those-who-give-back/](http://www.cocofamilyjustice.org/east-bay-leadership-council-honoring-those-who-give-back/) (last visited Oct. 4, 2025) (explaining that among the Zero Tolerance countywide initiatives, is creating Family Justice Centers for providing services to survivors of domestic violence in one location; see also *Contra Costa Alliance to End Abuse*, CONTRA COSTA CNTY. EMP. & HUM. SERVS., <https://ehsd.org/overview/cc-alliance/> (last visited Oct. 4, 2025) (explaining that the alliance promotes the creation of family justice centers that provide support to victims of domestic violence).

90. OFF. FOR VICTIMS OF CRIME, *Casey Gwinn - 2018 National Crime Victims' Service Awards Tribute Video*, at 01:53 (YouTube, Apr. 13, 2018), <https://ovc.ojp.gov/media/video/74031> (on file with author).

91. *Who We Are*, CAL. FAM. JUST. NETWORK, <https://www.cafamilyjusticenetwork.org/about/who-we-are.php> (last visited Oct. 4, 2025); *History*, CAL. FAM. JUST. NETWORK, <https://www.cafamilyjusticenetwork.org/about/history.php> (last visited Oct. 4, 2025).

92. *History*, *supra* note 91.

93. *Id.*; see Victoria Franco, 'Recover and Live Quality Lives': California Family Justice Centers Get Big Boost, RECORDNET.COM: STOCKTON REC. (July 7, 2025, at 10:55 PT), <https://eu.recordnet.com/story/news/local/2025/07/07/family-justice-centers-get-10m-in-california-budget-rhodesia-ransom/84475236007/>; CAL. PENAL CODE § 13750 (West 2012).

statewide coordination and evaluation for affiliated family justice centers, is affiliated with Alliance for Hope.<sup>94</sup> Tennessee has sought to replicate California's commitment to the family justice center model, launching a statewide initiative and funding centers in part through state grants.<sup>95</sup> Tennessee's Office of Criminal Justice Programs was tasked with expanding the number of family justice centers in 2012.<sup>96</sup> Since then, Tennessee has received over \$15 million in federal funding, resulting in thirteen family justice centers as of 2021.<sup>97</sup>

As indicated by its name, Alliance for Hope International has also expanded globally. In 2010, Gwinn wrote that the "Family Justice Center movement is also spreading around the world with similar centers now operating in Canada, Mexico, and Great Britain with plans for additional centers in Africa, Europe, and the Middle East."<sup>98</sup> Gwinn's organization has helped launch the European Family Justice Center Alliance and is involved in developing family justice centers in at least twenty-five countries.<sup>99</sup> Along with Gael Strack, Alliance for Hope's Chief Executive Officer, Gwinn has written five books on the family justice center movement, including the *Guide to Co-Located Service in the Middle East and in Mexico*.<sup>100</sup>

Alliance for Hope International has also expanded to include a variety of programs that both overlap with and are separate from the family justice center model.<sup>101</sup> This includes the VOICES Survivors Advocacy Network and an associated leadership and training institute to enlist the support of survivors in advocating on behalf of the family justice center movement.<sup>102</sup> It also includes the Justice Legal Network, which grew out of an "incubator" program for new attorneys in coordination with Thomas Jefferson Law School, and involves a commitment of annual pro bono hours to represent domestic violence and sexual

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94. See *History*, *supra* note 91.

95. See *Family Justice Centers*, *supra* note 9.

96. See TENN. OFF. OF CRIM. JUST. PROGRAMS, DEP'T OF FIN. & ADMIN., ANNUAL REPORT 2011-2012 (2012).

97. *Family Justice Centers*, *supra* note 9.

98. Gwinn et al., *supra* note 3, at 92; see also Gael Strack, *Esq.*, ALL. FOR HOPE INT'L, <https://www.allianceforhope.org/about-us/team-board/gael-strack> (last visited Oct. 4, 2025) (this is the same year that U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder awarded Alliance for Hope Executive Director Gael Strack with the National Crime Victim Service Award for Professional Innovation in Victim Services (2010). Strack, like Gwinn, is also a former San Diego Deputy City Attorney who directed the child abuse and domestic abuse unit, though it bears mentioning she also spent time as a deputy public defender and deputy county counsel).

99. *Conference Registration Now Open! Living a Legacy of HOPE*, CONTRA COSTA ALL. TO END ABUSE, <https://www.contracostaalliance.org/calendar/2020-family-justice-center-conference> (last visited Oct. 4, 2025).

100. Gael Strack, END VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN INT'L, <https://evawintl.org/creating-change/gael-strack-2/> (last visited Oct. 4, 2025).

101. See *VOICES Survivor Advocacy Network*, ALL. FOR HOPE INT'L: VOICES SURVIVOR ADVOC. NETWORK, <https://www.allianceforhope.org/voices> (last visited Oct. 4, 2025).

102. See *id.* (stating that Voices members "[v]olunteer their time to celebrate their strength and survival; [u]se their voices to help others through advocacy, education, and empowerment; [s]upport each other as well as incoming Family Justice Center clients; [o]ffer a unique perspective on Family Justice Center programming and services to help better meet survivors' needs; and [a]dvocate on behalf of their local Family Justice Center and for its success in their community.").

assault victim-survivors.<sup>103</sup> Camp HOPE, a camping and mentoring program for children exposed to domestic violence, is another project.<sup>104</sup>

### III. CRITIQUES OF THE FAMILY JUSTICE CENTER MODEL

A review of the literature on family justice centers reveals that surprisingly little has been written about the model across a variety of relevant scholarly disciplines, including law, sociology, criminology, and psychology. What has been published, aside from articles published by Gwinn and others at Alliance for Hope, is more critical than one would expect given the wholehearted embrace of the model by the Department of Justice. Critiques in the existing literature can be grouped into five categories: confidentiality, the challenges faced by marginalized victim-survivors, lack of proven effectiveness, organizational and funding challenges, and an overemphasis on criminal legal solutions at the expense of addressing victims' needs.

#### A. Confidentiality

Jane Stoever has written perhaps most comprehensively on family justice centers, at least with respect to legal scholarship. Her 2016 article, *Mirandizing Family Justice*, focuses on the confidentiality issues posed by such centers.<sup>105</sup> Stoever notes that while family justice centers are commonly advertised as confidential, victim-survivors are most likely not aware of the legal limits to the confidentiality that providers at such centers can provide.<sup>106</sup> Many of the service providers present at family justice centers, including the police, prosecutors, medical care providers, and even domestic violence advocates are subject to mandatory reporting laws that can trigger criminal or child protective services investigations.<sup>107</sup> Stoever cautions that as a result of mandatory reporting requirements, as well as how "state agents and professionals often substitute their judgment for that of abuse survivors," a victim-survivor who comes to a family justice center for help could find herself subject to unwanted state involvement in the form of the criminal justice or child welfare system as a condition of receiving such resources.<sup>108</sup> She warns that low-income women and women of color may be particularly vulnerable to such unwanted state involvement in that they have a greater need for the resources provided by family justice centers, are

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103. *TJSL Launches Solo Practice Incubator Program*, T. JEFFERSON SCH. OF L. (Nov. 1, 2012), <https://www.tjssl.edu/news-and-events/tjssl-launches-solo-practice-incubator-program/>.

104. *A Brighter Future for Children and Teens Exposed to Domestic Violence*, ALL. FOR HOPE INT'L: CAMP HOPE AM., <https://www.allianceforhope.org/camp-hope> (last visited Oct. 4, 2025).

105. See Stoever, *supra* note 10, at 232-33.

106. *Id.* at 205 (displaying that family justice centers, staffed with mandatory reporters, function as state apparatuses, and individuals may not fully understand that providing information can lead to unintended criminal legal system or Child Protective Services involvement).

107. See *id.* (such mandatory reporting laws vary by state and may require reporting of injuries caused: (1) by weapons; (2) in violation of criminal laws, because of violence; or (3) through non-accidental means).

108. *Id.* at 207, 215.

disproportionately represented among people subject to abuse, and have been disproportionately impacted by “failure to protect laws.”<sup>109</sup>

While Stoever acknowledges this narrowing of victim-survivor agency exists outside of the family justice center context, the colocation of services and use of shared information systems can compound these problems.<sup>110</sup> She frames the issue as one that questions the role and approach of the state in addressing intimate partner violence. She explains that family justice centers function as “state apparatuses,”<sup>111</sup> because they were created by prosecutors, typically include prosecutors and police as core members, often operate as government entities, and, in some cases, are even housed within police departments. As a result, many victim-survivors may be hesitant to access a family justice center because of the presence of the criminal legal system, including those who are “undocumented immigrant victims; survivors whose abusive partners are law enforcement; victims who have outstanding warrants for their arrest; lesbian, gay, or transgender survivors who have had negative interactions with law enforcement; and other communities that have experienced police brutality.”<sup>112</sup> To this list, I would add victim-survivors whose abusive partners are military or veterans and victim-survivors who use illegal substances and/or struggle with addiction.

Stoever proposes a number of law and policy changes to mandatory reporting laws and family justice center structure to alleviate these issues.<sup>113</sup> These include ceasing to advertise a family justice center as “confidential,”<sup>114</sup> changing mandatory reporting laws so that those assisting victim-survivors at such centers are not required to involve the criminal legal or child welfare system,<sup>115</sup> and providing an attorney-navigator to each victim-survivor accessing such centers so as to provide the protection of attorney-client confidentiality.<sup>116</sup> In the absence of these fixes, Stoever suggests that the state be prohibited from using information obtained at a family justice center against the victim and the perpetrator.<sup>117</sup>

### B. *Marginalized Victim-Survivors*

Stoever’s article can be contrasted with Deseriee Kennedy’s earlier and more optimistic take on the promise of family justice centers in collocating agencies in

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109. *Id.* at 213-14 (detailing how historically, the termination of parent-child relationships prompted by a victim seeking the state’s help to end abuse has been carried out in troubling race- and class-based ways, with Latino and African American children being removed at higher rates than white children).

110. *Id.* at 207.

111. *Id.* at 191-92.

112. *Id.* at 192; *see also* Duke et al., *supra* note 17, at 370 (“Additionally, respondents believed the entry space might discourage populations already distrustful of the police (e.g., undocumented immigrants, victims of IPV with criminal records) from utilizing the Center’s resources.”).

113. Stoever, *supra* note 10, at 232.

114. *Id.* at 232-33.

115. *See id.* at 233-34.

116. *Id.* at 239-43.

117. *Id.* at 197.

the hopes of more effectively addressing family violence, written in 2013.<sup>118</sup> Kennedy focuses on guidelines developed by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges to address cases where intimate partner violence intersects with child abuse and/or neglect, officially titled *Effective Intervention in Domestic Violence & Child Maltreatment Cases: Guidelines for Policy and Practice*.<sup>119</sup> Widely known as the “Greenbook,” the guidelines set out principles and recommendations to reform child welfare, intimate partner violence, and judicial systems; improve outcomes for victim-survivors of intimate partner violence and their children; and increase the capacity of systems designed to hold those who perpetrate violence accountable.<sup>120</sup> To implement the Greenbook’s recommendations, Kennedy suggests that intimate partner violence agencies restructure themselves and receive federal funding to form family violence agencies that can address issues of adult-to-adult violence as well as child abuse and neglect.<sup>121</sup> Kennedy argues that such family violence agencies should serve as the primary point of contact for those families “in which the risk of violence has been determined by the state child protective agency to be low or moderate.”<sup>122</sup> Kennedy’s reasoning is that such agencies are more effective in “creating individualized responses to families and improving outcomes for families experiencing violence.”<sup>123</sup>

Kennedy also argues that family justice centers could advance the Greenbook’s goals including keeping children in the care of the non-offending parent; providing a community service system with many points of entry; and creating a differential response to families living with violence (as opposed to a rigid, one-size-fits-all approach).<sup>124</sup> Kennedy cautions, however, that “[w]hile the Family Justice Center may facilitate collaboration and communication between agencies, they do not, on their own, create a true model of a consolidated response to family violence.”<sup>125</sup> Kennedy notes that child welfare services have unfairly

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118. See generally Deseriee Kennedy, *From Collaboration to Consolidation: Developing a More Expansive Model for Responding to Family Violence*, 20 CARDOZO J.L. & GENDER 1, 4 (2013) (laying roadmap for an argument regarding increasing funding to the “consolidated family violence model”).

119. *Id.* at 2 (outlining best practices for coordinated responses among courts, child protection agencies, and domestic violence service providers). See generally SUSAN SCHECHTER & JEFFREY L. EDLESON, *EFFECTIVE INTERVENTION IN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE & CHILD MALTREATMENT CASES: GUIDELINES FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE* (1999) (presenting the “Greenbook” framework for improving system collaboration in cases involving co-occurring domestic violence and child maltreatment).

120. See Kennedy, *supra* note 118, at 2 (saying that *Effective Intervention in Domestic Violence & Child Maltreatment Cases: Guidelines for Policy and Practice* is often referred to as the “Greenbook”). See generally SCHECHTER & EDLESON, *supra* note 119 (providing guiding principles and recommendations focused on three primary systems, specifically the child protection system, the network of community-based domestic violence programs, and the juvenile or other trial courts with jurisdiction over child maltreatment cases, which are also relevant for many other systems—including law enforcement and family justice centers).

121. See Kennedy, *supra* note 118, at 21.

122. *Id.* at 4.

123. *Id.*

124. *Id.* at 15-16 (proposing that child protective interventions be focused on families where the risk to children’s safety is more significant).

125. *Id.* at 25.



targeted poor communities and families of color, and that children of color are overrepresented in the child welfare system.<sup>126</sup> The key to Kennedy's recommendation of adopting family justice centers to provide a consolidated approach to family violence is that the family violence agencies serving families at such centers would be community-based, rather than a government agency with the power to initiate proceedings to remove children from the family home.

Taken together, Kennedy and Stoever's articles provide robust and detailed recommendations for how to structure a family justice center so that it truly serves the needs of victim-survivors of intimate partner violence and their families. Put simply, both Kennedy and Stoever caution that co-locating agencies in one place may provide some benefits, but only if done with great care and attention to the fraught territory victim-survivors navigate as a result of "multiple issues of intersectionality or oppression related to their race, culture, sexual orientation, gender identity, income, religion, immigration status, language ability, physical or mental abilities, or other aspects of their identity."<sup>127</sup>

### C. Lack of Proven Effectiveness

Several scholars have noted that studies of the effectiveness of the family justice center model that are based on rigorous empirical investigation are limited.<sup>128</sup> As Social Work Professor Catherine Simmons and her Psychology Professor co-authors, Gayle Beck, Kathryn Howell, and Michael Duke, have noted, the literature to support the efficacy of the model tends to be "descriptive, conceptual, and/or based primarily on process evaluation data."<sup>129</sup> Simmons also notes that the most frequently cited pieces on family justice centers were written by Casey Gwinn and his colleagues at Alliance for Hope; and they caution that while they provide valuable insights on the history of family justice centers, "from an empirical standpoint, the support is developmentally neoteric[.]" relying "largely on anecdotal evidence and client testimony, rather than rigorous evaluation research design, to assess the FJC model's overall effectiveness."<sup>130</sup> In their 2014 article, Criminology Professor Carolyn Hoyle and Criminal Law Professor Nicola Palmer also noted that there have been "no academic peer-reviewed studies of American FJCs"<sup>131</sup> and recommended that future studies interview a larger sample of victim-survivors who access the family justice centers

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126. *Id.* at 27.

127. Stoever, *supra* note 10, at 206.

128. Catherine A. Simmons et al., *Enhancing the Impact of Family Justice Centers via Motivational Interviewing: An Integrated Review*, 17 TRAUMA, VIOLENCE & ABUSE 532, 533 (2016) (finding that existing evaluations of family justice centers are few in number and methodologically limited); Carolyn Hoyle & Nicola Palmer, *Family Justice Centres: A Model for Empowerment?*, 20 INT'L REV. OF VICTIMOLOGY 191, 194, 207 (2014) (reporting no peer-reviewed academic studies of American family justice centers and calling for more rigorous research to measure outcomes and examine the role of structural and individual variables); Piehowski, *supra* note 17, at 236 (suggesting that future localized case studies could explore how family justice centers operate in practice).

129. Simmons et al., *supra* note 128, at 533.

130. *Id.*

131. Hoyle & Palmer, *supra* note 128, at 194.

and engage in statistically rigorous analysis of further abuse as well as risk factors correlated with abuse.<sup>132</sup>

Simmons conducts a helpful assessment of existing evaluative studies and finds that either the sites studied were too recent for effective evaluation,<sup>133</sup> or used incomplete data sources about the client experience, such as interviews of agency staff and “client” surveys that were not “triangulated with qualitative interviews” of said “clients.”<sup>134</sup> Simmons found the most rigorous assessment to be a “mixed-method” evaluation for four family justice centers in California, that featured “client intake and survey data, qualitative interviews and focus groups, systematic observation and criminal justice outcome data.”<sup>135</sup> The four family justice centers evaluated included the founding center in San Diego as well as centers in Alameda County, Sonoma County, and Orange County.<sup>136</sup> Simmons notes that the studies limitations included two issues: “unduplicated counts of local survivors seeking services are not typically available, and the majority of IPV cases go unreported.”<sup>137</sup>

#### D. Organizational Challenges

The organizational and funding challenges of family justice centers have been the focus of other scholarship on the topic. Gretchen Arnold’s frames her discussion of the experience of coalitions addressing intimate partner violence in St. Louis, Missouri, in the context of scholarship on what factors contribute to the formation and endurance of social movement coalitions.<sup>138</sup> Arnold followed three different coalitions in the St. Louis community over a sixteen-year period, including a local convening of the state-wide Missouri Coalition Against Domestic Violence, a family violence council formed to foster greater collaboration between

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132. *Id.* at 207 (giving future recommendations for the study of FJCs).

133. Simmons et al., *supra* note 128, at 533 (“For this reason, Townsend, Hunt, and Rhodes (2005) took a different approach to examining the FJC model, focusing primarily on the conceptual, programmatic, and logistical challenges of assessing program effectiveness and client outcomes.”).

134. *See id.* at 534 (showing that Giacomazzi, Hannah, and Bostaph (2008) conducted a single location evaluation of the locally initiated FJC in Nampa, Idaho, from three data sources: telephone interviews with agency directors and frontline staff, demographic data from client intake forms, and a client exit survey).

135. *Id.* at 534-35 (citing EMT ASSOCS. INC., FINAL EVALUATION RESULTS: PHASE II CALIFORNIA FAMILY JUSTICE INITIATIVE STATEWIDE EVALUATION (2013), [http://issuu.com/familyjusticecenteralliance/docs/evaluation\\_\\_outcomes\\_\\_cfji\\_final\\_](http://issuu.com/familyjusticecenteralliance/docs/evaluation__outcomes__cfji_final_) [[https://web.archive.org/web/20230305101713/http://issuu.com/familyjusticecenteralliance/docs/evaluation\\_\\_outcomes\\_\\_cfji\\_final\\_](https://web.archive.org/web/20230305101713/http://issuu.com/familyjusticecenteralliance/docs/evaluation__outcomes__cfji_final_)]).

136. *Id.* at 534 (citing EMT ASSOCS. INC., FINAL EVALUATION RESULTS: PHASE II CALIFORNIA FAMILY JUSTICE INITIATIVE STATEWIDE EVALUATION (2013), [http://issuu.com/familyjusticecenteralliance/docs/evaluation\\_\\_outcomes\\_\\_cfji\\_final\\_](http://issuu.com/familyjusticecenteralliance/docs/evaluation__outcomes__cfji_final_) [[https://web.archive.org/web/20230305101713/http://issuu.com/familyjusticecenteralliance/docs/evaluation\\_\\_outcomes\\_\\_cfji\\_final\\_](https://web.archive.org/web/20230305101713/http://issuu.com/familyjusticecenteralliance/docs/evaluation__outcomes__cfji_final_)]).

137. *Id.* at 535.

138. *See* Arnold, *supra* note 17, at 132 (including such factors, among other things, external funding, agreements to pool resources, a clear target for coalition action, recognizable benefits for members).

private and public agencies addressing intimate partner violence, and a group formed to bring a family justice center to fruition.<sup>139</sup>

The St. Louis family justice center was one of the fifteen pilot projects funded by President Bush's 2003 Presidential Initiative to co-locate law enforcement and social services for intimate partner violence and was initially seen as beneficial to local officials as well as agencies addressing intimate partner violence.<sup>140</sup> This coalition, however, ended up being the weakest of the three that Arnold studied.<sup>141</sup> The family justice center was eventually established, but most of the organizations serving victim-survivors refused to locate staff at the center, and as a result few victim-survivors sought help there.<sup>142</sup> By the time Arnold's article was published the center had closed.<sup>143</sup> Arnold explains that the coalition ultimately fell apart due to strained relationships among its members, limited exchange of information, and poor systems for resolving disagreements.<sup>144</sup> These three factors are related, per Arnold's analysis.<sup>145</sup> While those in the initial coalition had long-standing relationships with domestic violence, that was not the case for members of the mayor's office, business and legal community, and representatives from OVW (the granting agency), who were brought in to implement the grant.<sup>146</sup> As a result, representatives of the agencies serving victim-survivors were not able to "convey to the Center's managers the type of thick information that would have prevented the Center's management team from making mistakes that undermined the coalition."<sup>147</sup> Additionally, conflict-resolution mechanisms were insufficient to allow for discussion and resolution of disputes, leading agencies serving victim-survivors to choose exit over voice.<sup>148</sup>

The organizational challenges Arnold documents have been noted by other scholars, such as Michael Duke. Duke and his co-authors interviewed staff at an unnamed family justice center, including agency representatives and navigators tasked with assisting clients navigate the various agencies and services present at the center.<sup>149</sup> Duke details various challenges to fostering organizational cohesiveness at such centers because most of the workers housed within them work for separate institutions, "each with its own goals, work styles, target populations, and organizational culture."<sup>150</sup> This is particularly challenging given the "cultural divide exist[ing] between community-based organizations and law enforce-

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139. *See id.* at 135.

140. *Id.* at 143.

141. *See id.* at 144.

142. *Id.*

143. *Id.*

144. *Id.* at 136-38 (explaining that weak personal relationships, coupled with the absence of any formal process for resolving disputes, left members reliant on informal back-channel communication that often deepened mistrust and ultimately harmed the coalition's overall health).

145. *Id.*

146. *Id.* at 144.

147. *Id.*

148. *See id.* at 133.

149. Duke et al., *supra* note 17, at 367.

150. *Id.* at 366.

ment.”<sup>151</sup> Duke elaborates that “the former considered social service delivery for victims to be the first priority, law enforcement’s primary focus was the arrest and prosecution of perpetrators.”<sup>152</sup> Another tension noted by both Arnold and Duke is economic, as the organizations present at a family justice center compete for grant funding and/or contracts, creating an additional challenge to working together.<sup>153</sup>

To be sure, the challenges outlined by both Arnold and Duke are not necessarily insurmountable. Arnold contrasts the family justice center coalition with another St. Louis coalition that was more enduring and successful.<sup>154</sup> Duke notes various tools that can be helpful to this effect, including monthly staff meetings, multi-agency case reviews, and shared lunch and learn sessions.<sup>155</sup> In the center Duke examined, staff said that informal contact with representatives from other agencies strengthened their working relationships and increased the likelihood that victim-survivors’ needs were addressed.<sup>156</sup> He also notes the key role the executive director of the center played in fostering positive relationships and maintaining a productive work environment.<sup>157</sup> Indeed, such strategies are vital given the fundamental nature of the challenges recounted by Arnold and Duke.

#### *E. Inadequate Attention to Victim Needs*

While family justice centers may intend to serve as comprehensive service hubs for survivors of intimate partner violence, such centers often face challenges in serving the needs of victim-survivors who are not already involved in the criminal legal system. These survivors may hesitate to seek assistance from family justice centers due to a variety of reasons. Many survivors of intimate partner violence may fear retaliation or escalation of violence if they report their abuser to law enforcement or engage with legal services.<sup>158</sup> This fear can deter them from accessing services at family justice centers, which are often closely associated with law enforcement agencies.<sup>159</sup> Survivors from marginalized communities, including marginalized individuals and immigrants, may face cultural or linguistic barriers that make them hesitant to seek help from formal institutions like family justice

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151. *Id.* at 372.

152. *Id.*

153. *Id.*; see Arnold, *supra* note 17, at 145.

154. See Arnold, *supra* note 17, at 131.

155. Duke et al., *supra* note 17, at 373.

156. *Id.* at 370.

157. *Id.* at 373.

158. Rebecca L. Heron & Maarten C. Eisma, *Barriers and Facilitators of Disclosing Domestic Violence to the Healthcare Service: A Systematic Review of Qualitative Research*, 29 HEALTH & SOC. CARE CMTY. 612, 617, 620 (2021), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/hsc.13282>.

159. See Stoevers, *supra* note 10, at 234 (explaining that Survivors of abuse have indicated that mandatory domestic violence reporting can be harmful, as they fear retaliation from the abusive partner and worry that criminal justice involvement could result in further harm, family separation, or other adverse outcomes); see also LISA GOODMAN & DEBORAH EPSTEIN, LISTENING TO BATTERED WOMEN: A SURVIVOR-CENTERED APPROACH TO ADVOCACY, MENTAL HEALTH, AND JUSTICE 76 (2008) (explaining that in addition to fearing retaliation, survivors may resist pursuing criminal charges against abusive partners for various reasons, such as not having the financial means to support themselves independently).

centers.<sup>160</sup> They may also fear immigration consequences or cultural stigma associated with reporting intimate partner violence.<sup>161</sup> Some survivors may not be aware of the services offered at family justice centers or may not understand how these centers operate.<sup>162</sup> This lack of awareness can prevent them from accessing potentially life-saving resources. Many survivors may prefer non-legal solutions or community-based support systems over engaging with the criminal justice system.<sup>163</sup> Family justice centers, which typically integrate legal and law enforcement services, may not appeal to these survivors.<sup>164</sup> Survivors who have had negative experiences with law enforcement or legal systems in the past may be reluctant to seek help from family justice centers due to concerns about re-traumatization or lack of supportive responses.<sup>165</sup>

In response to these challenges, advocates for intimate partner violence survivors emphasize the importance of building trust, providing culturally competent services, and offering alternatives to traditional legal approaches within family justice centers.<sup>166</sup> This includes expanding the range of services offered to encompass holistic support such as counseling, housing assistance, economic empowerment, and advocacy that does not necessarily involve law enforcement. Ultimately, addressing the needs of survivors who have never reported before requires a nuanced approach that prioritizes survivor safety, autonomy, and well-being. It involves community outreach, education, and a commitment to providing

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160. See Marsha E. Wolf et al., *Barriers to Seeking Police Help for Intimate Partner Violence*, 18 J. FAM. VIOLENCE 121, 125-27 (2003).

161. See Joanne Hulley et al., *Intimate Partner Violence and Barriers to Help-Seeking Among Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic and Immigrant Women: A Qualitative Metasynthesis of Global Research*, 24 TRAUMA, VIOLENCE, & ABUSE 1001, 1106-08 (2023).

162. Stoever, *supra* note 10, at 205 (explaining that those navigating a family justice center may not fully understand the potential outcomes of sharing information with the different state and community agencies).

163. See generally Kateryna M. Sylaska & Katie M. Edwards, *Disclosure of Intimate Partner Violence to Informal Social Support Network Members: A Review of the Literature*, 15 TRAUMA, VIOLENCE, & ABUSE 3 (2014) (discussing evidence that the majority of victims of IPV disclose to at least one informal support).

164. See Gerald T. Hotaling & Eve S. Buzawa, *Forgoing Criminal Justice Assistance: The Non-Reporting of New Incidents of Abuse in a Court Sample of Domestic Violence Victims*, NAT'L CRIM. JUST. REFERENCE SERV. 28 (Jan. 2003), <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/195667.pdf> (noting that individuals with negative past experiences with police are less likely to report intimate partner violence to law enforcement); see also Stoever, *supra* note 10, at 238 (highlighting that without proper information disclosures and counseling, survivors may unknowingly share information that could have unintended consequences, especially in settings like family justice centers that may give a false sense of security). See generally Christina Dejong et al., *Police Officer Perceptions of Intimate Partner Violence: An Analysis of Observational Data*, 23 VIOLENCE & VICTIMS 683 (2008) (noting that because police officers' problematic views of IPV often stem from entrenched patriarchal attitudes unlikely to change with training, IPV training should instead be carefully targeted to address more modifiable issues such as oversimplification, victim blaming, and assumptions of victim noncooperation).

165. Hotaling & Buzawa, *supra* note 164, at 7-8.

166. Stoever, *supra* note 10, at 238 (emphasizing the need for training all actors at family justice centers in client-driven safety planning, which prioritizes survivors' knowledge and experiences, acknowledges the diversity of safety needs, and considers ongoing connections between survivors and their abusers).

accessible and inclusive services that meet the diverse needs of all survivors of intimate partner violence.

*F. Centering Law Enforcement*

Victoria Piehowski analyzed “promotional materials” for family justice centers in a variety of written and visual formats, including Casey Gwinn’s appearance on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* in 2003 and a *Glamour* magazine article from 2011.<sup>167</sup> Piehowski categorizes such materials as intended for three separate audiences: the general public, practice-level stakeholders, and policy-level stakeholders.<sup>168</sup> The *Oprah* segment and *Glamour* piece are examples of media intended for the general public, while materials such as a client services toolkit developed by Alliance for Hope are intended for practice-level stakeholders.<sup>169</sup> Materials intended for policy-level stakeholders include a law journal article written by Casey Gwinn and U.S. Department of Justice press releases about the Office of Violence Against Women’s family justice center initiative.<sup>170</sup>

Piehowski details how the discourse woven throughout these pieces depicts victim-survivors of intimate partner violence as “passive” and “dependent” on swift state intervention, to “break the cycle.”<sup>171</sup> Piehowski argues that such materials advance a “particular agenda for punishment policy,” that centralizes law enforcement.<sup>172</sup> This discourse also “submerges” critiques of the family justice center model,<sup>173</sup> including the disparate impact of the criminal legal system on marginalized communities, and forecloses other policies critical to surviving intimate partner violence, such as “affordable housing, expansive healthcare, and robust welfare provision.”<sup>174</sup> While the discourse evokes the language of empowerment, Piehowski illustrates how this language serves to centralize the criminal legal system.<sup>175</sup> For example, in the *Oprah* segment, Sergeant Jim Arthur of the San Diego Police Department, displays photographs of a woman’s bruises from a frying pan while stating “one of the things we see is, the next day, they’re denying everything to my detectives.”<sup>176</sup> The implication is that, without the intervention of the state, the victim-survivor would not be empowered to survive the violence. Later in the *Oprah* segment, a woman speaks about how her abuser must stay away from her now, as she lifts up her shirt so that someone can take photographs of bruises on her back.<sup>177</sup> As Piehowski explains, such narration of “scenes of forensic evidence collection” along with the victim’s voiceover of

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167. Piehowski, *supra* note 17, at 224, 233.

168. *Id.* at 224.

169. *Id.*

170. *Id.* at 221.

171. *Id.* at 229.

172. *Id.* at 221.

173. *Id.* at 223.

174. *Id.* at 235.

175. *Id.* at 223.

176. *Id.* at 229 (citing ALL. FOR HOPE INT’L, *supra* note 50, at 03:34).

177. *Id.* at 230 (citing ALL. FOR HOPE INT’L, *supra* note 50, at 03:34).

“empowerment,” offers a clear “articulation” of the theme of “empowerment through prosecution.”<sup>178</sup> In sum, Piehowski’s analysis underscores how the portrayal of victim empowerment is tethered to reliance on the criminal legal system, to the detriment of a more holistic approach that includes alternative pathways to safety and recovery addressing systemic inequities and support survivor autonomy.

#### IV. INSUFFICIENT EVIDENCE OF A CAUSAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF FAMILY JUSTICE CENTERS AND INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE HOMICIDE RATES

One of the claims often made to argue in favor of family justice centers is that they reduce domestic violence homicides. The Alliance for Hope website states:

According to former San Diego City Attorney Casey Gwinn, a resource called the Family Justice Center is largely responsible for bringing down homicide rates from domestic violence in the city of San Diego. Gwinn was the founder of the Family Justice Center which provides legal help, medical assistance, therapy and other services under a single roof.<sup>179</sup>

Gwinn has also written that “[p]reliminary outcomes and evaluation results have included reduced domestic violence homicides.”<sup>180</sup> The U.S. Department of Justice also cited such claims as reasons to fund family justice centers.<sup>181</sup> A February 2007 Bush era best practices document states: “After a reduction of nearly 95% in domestic violence homicides over the last 15 years, the San Diego Family Justice Center is hailed as a national and international model of a comprehensive victim service and support center.”<sup>182</sup>

These claims of a connection between the establishment of Family justice centers and a decline in domestic violence homicide rates, however, do not seem to be supported by any empirical evidence. In other words, within the available research on domestic violence homicide rates there are no empirical studies establishing a correlation between a decline in homicide rates and the establishment of family justice centers.

Moreover, publicly available data from domestic violence homicide data from the counties in California that have established family justice centers does not support this claim. While such data shows that there has been a downward trend in domestic violence homicide rates in counties where family justice centers have been established in California, that reduction correlates more clearly with the

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178. *Id.* at 231.

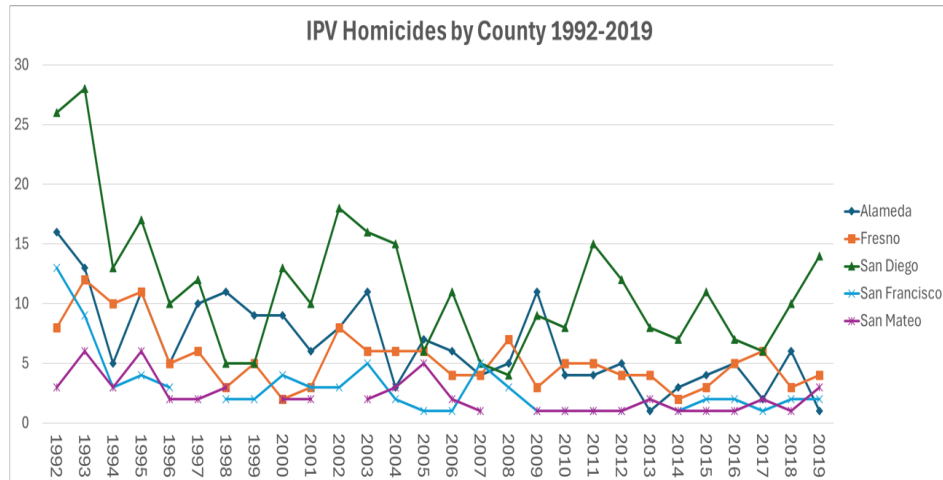
179. *San Diego Leads the Way in Reducing Domestic Violence Related Deaths*, ALL. FOR HOPE INT’L (Dec. 19, 2018), <https://www.allianceforhope.com/san-diego-leads-the-way-in-reducing-domestic-violence-related-deaths/>.

180. Gwinn et al., *supra* note 3, at 90.

181. See, e.g., *The President’s Family Justice Center Initiative Best Practices*, *supra* note 56, at 2.

182. *Id.* at 1.

establishment of the Violence Against Women Act in 1994.<sup>183</sup> See the following Figure.



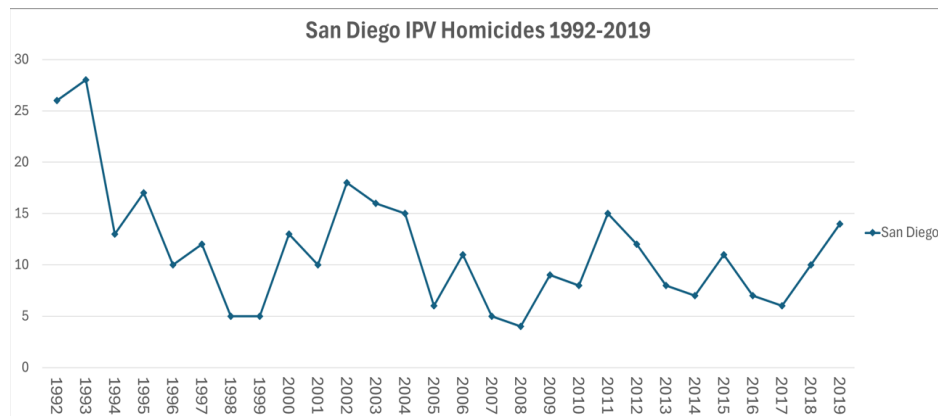
For example, with respect to intimate partner violence homicide data from San Diego, that trend does not correlate with the establishment of the family justice center in 2002.<sup>184</sup> Rather, the trend precedes the founding of the family justice center in San Diego and correlates more clearly with the establishment of the Violence Against Women Act in 1994. See the figure below. Moreover, Alameda County established its family justice center in 2005 while the city of San Jose established its center in 2011, the city of San Francisco did so in 2015, and Fresno County established its center in 2018.<sup>185</sup> Despite the different dates of establishment of their respective family justice centers, however, the declining intimate partner violence homicide rates correlate more noticeably with that of VAWA. In other words, it is noteworthy that the homicide data from California does not reflect claims made by family justice center advocates regarding correlation with intimate partner violence homicide rates, let alone causation.

183. *Data Portal*, OPEN JUST., <https://openjustice.doj.ca.gov/data> (last visited Oct. 4, 2025). According to the California DOJ's *Homicide File Context*, "Domestic Violence" was introduced as a separate homicide circumstance code (Code 62) in 1992, marking the first year such cases were systematically recorded as distinct from other homicide circumstances. *Homicide File Context*, CAL. DEP'T OF JUST., CRIM. JUST. STAT. CTR. 8 (June 2025), [https://data-openjustice.doj.ca.gov/sites/default/files/dataset/2025-07/Homicide%20Context\\_06162025.pdf](https://data-openjustice.doj.ca.gov/sites/default/files/dataset/2025-07/Homicide%20Context_06162025.pdf) (last visited Oct. 4, 2025).

184. *Data Portal*, *supra* note 183.

185. *Id.*





#### V. SITUATING FAMILY JUSTICE CENTERS WITHIN U.S. LAW & POLICY ON INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

Why is the Department of Justice's Office of Violence Against Women funding family justice centers despite the lack of rigorous empirical investigation on their effectiveness? How could it be that a concept that has been in existence since 2002 has not been sufficiently vetted by the leading federal financier of policies designed to prevent and deter violence against women? The answers lie in the broader narrative of U.S. law and policy on intimate partner violence, which heavily centers the criminal legal system—reflected in funding decisions that prioritize punitive responses, the cooptation of anti-violence advocates into carceral frameworks, and the persistent lack of empirical evidence to support such policy and funding choices.<sup>186</sup>

Leigh Goodmark has demonstrated how VAWA, a cornerstone in addressing gender-based violence, has disproportionately funneled resources into the criminal legal system over alternative support mechanisms.<sup>187</sup> Although VAWA funds essential services like rape crisis centers, legal aid for survivors, and transitional housing, the criminal legal system remains the primary beneficiary of its budget.<sup>188</sup> This skewed allocation has, over time, diminished the funds available for direct support services to victim-survivors, exacerbating the imbalance. Indeed, one study of victim advocates in California found that resource constraints were a

186. See generally GOODMARK, *supra* note 21, at 2-3, 15, 22, 24, 29-30 (arguing that U.S. domestic violence law and policy have been dominated by criminalization, which has funneled resources into punitive responses, drawn advocates into supporting carceral strategies, and neglected investment in alternative approaches despite the absence of strong empirical support for the effectiveness of criminal legal interventions).

187. *Id.* at 2-3 (noting that the 2013 reauthorization of VAWA allocated significantly fewer funds to social services compared to the original 1994 legislation, with the majority of funding directed to the criminal legal system rather than addressing critical needs like housing).

188. See *id.* (noting that in fiscal year 2017, despite housing being consistently identified as the most urgent need for abuse survivors, VAWA allocated only \$30 million to housing initiatives compared to the \$266 million provided to the criminal legal system by its two largest grant programs).

significant barrier to effectively fulfilling their roles. This study highlighted that while the California Victim Compensation Fund offered financial support for specific expenses, such as medical bills and home safety repairs, beyond the significant delays involved in accessing these funds, there were simply not enough resources to adequately meet the needs of all eligible survivors.<sup>189</sup>

Goodmark's analysis builds upon established critiques by prominent scholars and activists, such as Angela Davis. Davis has long argued that relying heavily on the criminal legal system to address intimate partner violence is inherently problematic because it fails to tackle the root causes of violence, mainly systemic inequality, poverty, and racial discrimination.<sup>190</sup> Davis's work has emphasized how race, gender, and class intersect within the criminal justice system and how it is used to address intimate partner violence.<sup>191</sup> Davis was one of the first to critique the overreliance on punitive measures, noting that these strategies often result in the disproportionate incarceration of people of color, further entrenching social injustices rather than resolving them. For example, in her 1998 essay "Masked Racism: Reflections on the Prison Industrial Complex," Davis discussed how the expansion of the prison system, driven by policies that criminalize social problems, disproportionately affects marginalized communities.<sup>192</sup> This critique extended to how intimate partner violence was being addressed, arguing that the criminal legal system's approach often exacerbates issues faced by survivors of color and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>193</sup> Moreover, Davis consistently highlighted how the criminalization of IPV fails to address the root causes of violence, such as economic inequality, lack of social services, and systemic racism.<sup>194</sup> Integral to her advocacy has been Davis's critique that some strands of feminism failed to take an intersectional approach that sufficiently acknowledged how racism and sexism are interconnected.<sup>195</sup>

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189. See Lisa De La Rue et al., *System-Based Victim Advocates Identify Resources and Barriers to Supporting Crime Victims*, 29 INT'L REV. VICTIMOLOGY 16, 21 (2023).

190. See Angela Davis, *Masked Racism: Reflections on the Prison Industrial Complex*, HIST. IS A WEAPON, <https://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/davisprison.html> (last visited Oct. 4, 2025) (critiquing the prison industrial complex for perpetuating systemic racism and class bias while failing to address root causes of social problems such as intimate partner violence, including poverty, inequality, and structural discrimination).

191. See generally Bernice McNair Barnett, *Angela Davis and Women, Race, & Class: A Pioneer in Integrative RGC Studies*, 10 RACE, GENDER & CLASS 9 (2003) (explaining how Davis has been instrumental in highlighting the interconnectedness of race, class, and gender in the oppression of women).

192. Davis, *supra* note 190.

193. See ANGELA Y. DAVIS ET AL., ABOLITION. FEMINISM. NOW (2022) (arguing that the criminal legal system, driven by systemic racism, often endangers survivors who are marginalized, rather than protecting them).

194. See generally *id.* (arguing that the anti-violence movements' reliance on the criminal legal system diverts attention and resources away from addressing structural conditions that produce gendered violence, including poverty, racism, and social disinvestment).

195. Simon Hattenstone, *Angela Davis on the Power of Protest: 'We Can't Do Anything Without Optimism'*, GUARDIAN (Mar. 5, 2022), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/mar/05/angela-davis-on-the-power-of-protest-we-cant-do-anything-without-optimism>.

Kimberle Crenshaw has also extensively explored how domestic violence affects marginalized communities, particularly women of color, through her concept of intersectionality.<sup>196</sup> In her 1991 essay, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” Crenshaw examines how race, gender, and class intersect to shape the experiences of women facing domestic violence.<sup>197</sup> She argues that traditional frameworks often overlook the unique challenges that women of color encounter, such as systemic barriers to legal and social services, cultural stigmas, and economic disadvantages.<sup>198</sup> Crenshaw critiqued the criminal law approach to intimate partner violence by highlighting how it allocates resources toward court-related services, despite the fact that women of color are less likely to see their cases pursued in the legal system.<sup>199</sup> She adds that funding agencies undervalue services that could ease the challenges faced by marginalized survivors in poverty, overestimating housing availability while underestimating the effort needed to connect survivors with essential resources, resulting in chronic underfunding of crucial support services.<sup>200</sup>

Similarly, Mimi Kim has written about what she terms the “carceral creep,” and how the mainstream anti-violence movement’s attention on criminalization marginalized alternative interventions could more effectively address the complexities of IPV, particularly in marginalized communities.<sup>201</sup> Kim describes how founder of the Duluth Model and the Family Violence Project, Ellen Pence, advocated for Coordinated Community Response systems, meaning an “advocate-led coordination between local advocates and law enforcement...[that] combined a service delivery model including shelter, support groups, and a soon to be internationally recognized batterer intervention program with law enforcement response.”<sup>202</sup> In Kim’s telling, the Coordinated Community Response model is an example of an attempt to provide community-driven, holistic alternatives to the criminal legal system that better serve the needs of victim-survivors and how that effort was ultimately coopted and undermined by the criminal legal system. In her words: “[r]ather, a reduced version of that model, that is, domestic violence advocates in coordination with law enforcement and, to a lesser extent, other community partners, left those implementing the model vulnerable to the power imbalances inherent in any community partnership with the criminal justice system.”<sup>203</sup>

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196. See generally Kimberle Crenshaw, *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color*, 43 STAN. L. REV. 1241 (1991) (discussing the intersection of intimate partner violence with race and gender).

197. *Id.* at 1245.

198. See *id.* at 1243-44.

199. *Id.* at 1251.

200. *Id.*

201. See generally MIMI KIM, *DANCING THE CARCERAL CREEP: THE ANTI-DOMESTIC VIOLENCE MOVEMENT AND THE PARADOXICAL PURSUIT OF CRIMINALIZATION, 1973-1986* (2015) (analyzing how the focus on criminal legal solutions in the anti-violence movement limited attention to community-based and noncarceral strategies, particularly for marginalized survivors).

202. *Id.* at 18.

203. *Id.* at 19.

In building upon the critiques of Davis and Kim, Goodmark's work calls for a reimagining of IPV policy that prioritizes a broad spectrum of support mechanisms over criminalization.<sup>204</sup> Like Davis and Kim, she advocates for policies that address the economic, social, and psychological dimensions of IPV, recognizing that true safety and justice for survivors require comprehensive and multifaceted approaches.<sup>205</sup> Goodmark argues that VAWA has channeled funding primarily towards law enforcement and prosecutorial efforts, while relegating non-criminal interventions such as housing, economic support, mental health services, and community-based programs.<sup>206</sup> In this way, VAWA inadvertently perpetuated a one-size-fits-all approach that often fails to meet the diverse needs of survivors, especially those from marginalized communities.<sup>207</sup> Goodmark highlights that this approach can have detrimental effects, such as discouraging survivors from seeking help due to fear of criminal repercussions for their partners or themselves, particularly in communities with fraught relationships with law enforcement.<sup>208</sup>

Family justice centers are a pertinent example of how VAWA's funding priorities manifest in practice. First, the implementation of family justice centers has been influenced by the broader funding trends set by VAWA. Given that the criminal legal system receives the lion's share of VAWA funding and the limited funding resources for holistic, non-criminal support services such as housing and economic stipends, family justice centers are likely to find themselves under-resourced in providing such holistic services.<sup>209</sup> This resource allocation can inadvertently prioritize the criminal aspects of intimate partner violence over the socio-economic and psychological support needs of survivors. And for the reasons spelled out in Section III of this article, this unbalanced resource allocation can have detrimental impacts on already marginalized communities. In other words, while family justice centers aim to offer a safe haven and comprehensive support, the limited funding for non-criminal interventions means that essential services like long-term housing, mental health care, and economic empowerment programs may not be adequately funded. This is why critics of family justice centers continue to emphasize the need for paying greater attention to the needs of victim-survivors from marginalized communities, including with respect to clearer communication and policies around confidentiality and mandatory reporting, as well as a more balanced approach that centers support services as an alternative to criminal responses.<sup>210</sup>

Family justice centers are also an example of the lack of research-driven policy often cited by critics of VAWA. For example, Goodmark highlights that the reduction in domestic violence since the 1994 Violence Against Women Act may

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204. GOODMARK, *supra* note 21, at 18-20.

205. *Id.* at 9-10.

206. *Id.* at 2-3.

207. *See id.* at 11.

208. *See id.* at 20-21.

209. *See id.* at 2-3.

210. *See generally* Stoevers, *supra* note 10 (regarding the problematic nature of existing communications regarding family justice centers as confidential spaces, particularly for marginalized communities); Kennedy, *supra* note 118 (regarding the impact of existing child protection service policies and procedures for victim-survivors, particularly those from marginalized communities).

not directly result from the Act but rather from a general decline in crime rates.<sup>211</sup> The same can be said for the creation of family justice centers given the absence of empirical evidence supporting their efficacy in reducing IPV. These centers aim to provide comprehensive services to IPV survivors, but their implementation appears to be based more on theoretical benefits rather than demonstrated outcomes.<sup>212</sup> Without rigorous data to support their success, these initiatives might not be addressing the root causes or effectively mitigating IPV.<sup>213</sup> Furthermore, the focus on theoretical benefits over empirical validation can lead to missed opportunities for improvement. For instance, if FJCs are not systematically assessed, they might continue operating with inherent flaws that could be corrected with data-driven insights. This gap in evaluation also means that the centers might not be utilizing the most effective strategies for intervention and prevention, potentially leaving survivors without the comprehensive support they need to escape abusive situations and rebuild their lives. Finally, family justice centers display how anti-violence advocates and organizations that support survivors have been coopted into the criminal legal system model using funding incentives.<sup>214</sup> Many anti-violence organizations depend on grants and other financial support tied to their cooperation with criminal justice agencies.<sup>215</sup> This financial dependency can compromise their autonomy and limit their ability to advocate for non-criminal interventions, which might be more appropriate or effective for certain survivors.<sup>216</sup> The growth of family justice centers reflects this account of cooptation in several aspects, as bringing anti-violence advocates and social service organizations within a family justice center can weaken their capacity to provide and advocate for non-criminal interventions. Instead of prioritizing diverse forms of support that include economic assistance, mental health services, and other critical resources, advocates may find themselves primarily facilitating survivors' interactions with the criminal legal system.<sup>217</sup> System-based advocates

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211. GOODMARK, *supra* note 21, at 3.

212. See Simmons et al., *supra* note 128, at 535 (stating that further research is needed to empirically link the family justice center model to client outcomes and community impact, assess the actual implementation of one-stop service provision, examine professional involvement, and ensure evaluations align with the goal of empowering clients to live safe, violence-free lives).

213. See *id.*

214. See GOODMARK, *supra* note 21, at 3, 15, 30, 76 (discussing how funding and policy structures channel anti-violence efforts into carceral frameworks, limiting alternatives to criminalization); see also KIM, *supra* note 201 (analyzing how the anti-domestic violence movement's emphasis on criminal legal responses coopted community-based advocates and constrained noncarceral interventions).

215. GOODMARK, *supra* note 21, at 30.

216. See *id.* at 76 (explaining how many community organizations rely on VAWA funding that requires collaboration with law enforcement, and thus they often function more as an extension of the state than as a genuine community-driven response); Stoeve, *supra* note 10, at 193, 197, 203 (asserting that the anti-violence movement has failed to critically examine the role of family justice centers, particularly their reliance on the criminal legal system and how this system can undermine victim autonomy and lead to consequences that contradict survivors' desires).

217. See Donna Coker, *Crime Control and Feminist Law Reform in Domestic Violence Law: A Critical Review*, 4 BUFF. CRIM. L. REV. 801, 804 (2001) (explaining that advocates for battered women spend a significant amount of their time monitoring how law enforcement and prosecutors handle domestic violence cases on behalf of their participants); De La Rue et al., *supra* note 189, at

employed by prosecutors' offices are of course already in a role of assisting survivors to navigate the criminal legal system as opposed to providing survivor-centered support.<sup>218</sup> But even community-based advocates employed by independent, non-governmental organizations may find that responding to criminal cases may take precedence over holistic advocacy because most referrals come from law enforcement, strict legal system deadlines create pressure to prioritize court preparation, and metrics for success often focus on criminal legal outcomes—such as survivor engagement with prosecution—rather than broader measures of well-being like securing stable housing.<sup>219</sup> As Mimi Kim has noted, when advocates coordinate more closely with law enforcement than with community partners, they become vulnerable to the inherent power imbalances that arise from working within the criminal justice system.<sup>220</sup>

## VI. CONCLUSION

The evolution of intimate partner violence law and policy in the United States is deeply embedded within a broader trend in policy-making, which Jonathan Simon coined “governing through crime.”<sup>221</sup> This approach arose in the 1960s, particularly under Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty, and then gained

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24 (highlighting that resource constraints, including high caseloads and insufficient staffing, hinder victim advocates’ ability to provide individualized support); *see also* Stoever, *supra* note 10, at 194 (explaining how criminal legal policy—the foundation of Family Justice Centers—has prioritized protective and punitive measures that often diverge from survivors’ wishes, while largely overlooking the importance of supporting and safeguarding their autonomy); *id.* at 197 (explaining how the majority of domestic abuse survivors lack legal representation and must independently navigate interactions with law enforcement and court proceedings, as prosecutors represent the interests of the state rather than necessarily the victim of the crime in question); *id.* at 205-07 (explaining how within Family Justice Center’s excessive focus on criminal justice priorities can overshadow survivors’ needs and lead to unintended consequences for those experiencing abuse).

218. *See generally* KIMBERLY A. LONSWAY ET AL., *BREAKING BARRIERS: THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY-BASED AND SYSTEM-BASED VICTIM ADVOCATES* 16-21 (2023) (explaining that while system-based advocates have the role of assisting victims in navigating the criminal justice system, often focusing on their participation in investigations and prosecutions, community-based advocates face fewer constraints in providing survivor-centered support, prioritizing the victim’s needs beyond legal proceedings, such as housing, mental health care, and economic assistance).

219. *See* Coker, *supra* note 217, at 813-14; *see also* SARAH WELLAND ET AL., *GOING ABOVE AND BEYOND: MAPPING THE PROVISION AND IMPACT OF VICTIM ADVOCACY IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM* 30-33 (2024) (explaining that co-location has benefits but can result in victim support services not being perceived as independent of statutory agencies, which may deter some victims from seeking help).

220. KIM, *supra* note 201, at 19.

221. *See* JONATHAN SIMON, *GOVERNING THROUGH CRIME: HOW THE WAR ON CRIME TRANSFORMED AMERICAN DEMOCRACY AND CREATED A CULTURE OF FEAR* 4 (2007) (exploring how crime control became central to American politics); *see also* Coker, *supra* note 217, at 804 (describing how IPV policy exemplifies Simon’s “governing through crime” schema by prioritizing surveillance, control, and punitive interventions; allocating millions to criminal justice responses while comparatively few resources support social services that reduce vulnerability; and requiring advocates to focus on monitoring police and prosecutors rather than addressing root causes).

prominence during the Nixon and Reagan eras.<sup>222</sup> It has significantly shaped how legislative responses to social issues, including domestic violence, have been formulated and implemented.<sup>223</sup> “Governing through crime” refers to a political strategy that prioritizes punitive measures and law enforcement interventions as primary solutions to social problems.<sup>224</sup> In the context of intimate partner violence, this paradigm has yielded policies that emphasize criminalization of offenders and increased reliance on the criminal justice system to address domestic violence incidents.<sup>225</sup> This approach is evident in the proliferation of mandatory arrest and no-drop prosecution laws and policies, mandatory sentencing guidelines, and the allocation of resources towards law enforcement agencies tasked with responding to domestic violence calls.<sup>226</sup>

Critics of “governing through crime” argue that while these policies aim to address safety concerns and hold perpetrators accountable, they often overlook the complex dynamics of societal problems such as intimate partner abuse and their impact on underserved populations.<sup>227</sup> They point out that such measures not only

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222. See generally SIMON, *supra* note 221 (examining how crime became central to governance starting in the 1960s, particularly under Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty and discussing how Richard Nixon and subsequent administrations, including Reagan’s, intensified the focus on crime as a way to justify state authority and reshape public policy).

223. See *id.* at 7-8.

224. See *id.* at 5 (Simon argues that *governing through crime* highlights a crucial shift in contemporary law and society, where crime has become a dominant framework for legitimizing interventions, influencing policy debates beyond criminal justice, and shaping institutional practices in areas like education and governance. For example, Simon highlights how laws criminalizing assaults on pregnant women that harm a fetus are framed as crime control measures but are largely shaped by the politics of abortion rights).

225. Coker, *supra* note 217, at 805 (emphasizing that policies focused primarily on crime control not only diverts attention from alternative and more effective strategies to combat intimate partner violence, but also increases state control over women, especially those who are economically disadvantaged).

226. *Id.* at 806-07 (describing how mandatory arrest policies disregard victim-survivor preferences on arrest and prosecution, limiting their autonomy while also expanding state control, particularly over women marginalized by race, class, immigration status, who are then perceived as deviant for failure to cooperate with authorities); *id.* at 838-39 (explaining that mandatory sentencing laws make it harder for women to present arguments related to their caregiving responsibilities or the coercion exerted by their abusive partners); *id.* at 859-60 (critiquing the prioritization of continued funding of crime control policies instead of economic justice for victim-survivors in the form of increased material support).

227. See Davis, *supra* note 190 (critiquing criminal justice responses for focusing on punishment rather than addressing the structural and socioeconomic factors that shape societal problems, which disproportionately affect marginalized communities); Crenshaw, *supra* note 196, at 1243 (highlighting how race, gender, and other intersecting identities influence experiences of intimate partner violence, and how this intersectional approach is lacking in traditional feminist discourse, particularly that discourse that centers the needs of white victim-survivors of intimate partner abuse and turns to the criminal legal system for solutions); KIM, *supra* note 201, at 2 (Kim’s introduction explains how her paper explores how certain feminist efforts, by centering the criminal legal system, inadvertently helped advance mass incarceration policies, ultimately sustaining the very social hierarchies of gender, race, class, and sexuality that the movement aimed to dismantle); Coker, *supra* note 217, at 805 (explaining how the focus on crime control not only sidelines alternative anti-domestic violence strategies but also increases state control over women, especially poor women, and how mandatory arrest policies are an example in how they limit the agency of victim-survivors).

risk discouraging victims from seeking help due to fear of legal repercussions for themselves or their partners but also shift resources away from social support toward punitive responses, disproportionately harming marginalized communities and reinforcing systemic inequalities.<sup>228</sup> As explained in Part V of this article, the evolution of family justice centers is part and parcel of this problematic approach to centralizing crime and criminal responses to social issues, such as intimate partner violence.

A common misconception of family justice centers is that if the building is constructed, and all the agencies serving survivors are brought under one roof, then all the needs of each victim who walks through that door will be met.<sup>229</sup> While this is, in many ways, a beautiful vision, it is but a dream given our current system. Simply finding a civil lawyer to handle an order of protection or a divorce or custody case from one's abuse is sometimes impossible for survivors. In Yuma, Arizona, for example, there is only one attorney available to provide full-scope representation for survivors with custody, divorce, housing, or immigration cases free of charge.<sup>230</sup> Unfortunately, survivors in Yuma are not alone in facing this scarcity.<sup>231</sup> This is equally true of social service providers for direly needed services we know work best to help victim-survivors find safety.

Critics point out that investing in a new building to collocate existing service providers does little to address the systemic underfunding of essential social services that many victim-survivors urgently need, particularly those from marginalized communities.<sup>232</sup> In fact, funding for a new building could divert resources away from holistic support services, much like how VAWA has

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228. See Davis, *supra* note 190 (arguing that diverting resources away from social welfare toward crime control entrenches racism within the economic and ideological foundations of U.S. society); Crenshaw, *supra* note 196, at 1262-1265 (describing the struggles of several women of color in engaging with the New York State Coalition Against Domestic Violence, particularly over language exclusion and other practices that marginalized their interests); KIM, *supra* note 201, at 24 (noting that the focus on criminalization diverted attention and resources from broader emancipatory goals of the anti-violence movement, ultimately subordinating actors in the movement into the priorities of the criminal justice system); Coker, *supra* note 217, at 805 (emphasizing that a focus on crime control not only shifts focus away from alternative approaches to addressing domestic violence but also expands the state's authority over women, especially those with fewer resources).

229. E.g., *What Does Your Safe Place Do?* THE S.D. FAM. JUST. CTR., <https://www.sandiego.gov/your-safe-place> (last visited Oct. 4, 2025) (describing its mission on its website "[t]o provide a safe space where each individual's needs are met, clients feel validated, families are protected, and survivors can reclaim their lives.").

230. A.B.A., 2023 PROFILE OF THE LEGAL PROFESSION 6 (2023), <https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/news/2023/potlp-2023.pdf>.

231. *Id.* at 7, 21 (showing that in Arizona, a state with over 15,000 lawyers, there are only 1.2 legal aid lawyers per 10,000 people living in poverty. In California, a state with over 170,000 lawyers, there are only 2.9 legal aid lawyers per 10,000 people living in poverty. Even in the states with more legal aid lawyers, like New York (where there are over 187,000 lawyers), there are only 7.2 legal aid attorneys per 10,000 people living in poverty. As a point of comparison, in Arizona the rate of attorneys per 10,000 people is 21.07, in California it is 43.8 per 10,000 people, and in New York, it is 95.72 per 10,000 people).

232. See, e.g., ABT ASSOCS., *supra* note 79, at 3 (citing concerns that survivors do not or cannot access services because the services do not exist, they are unaware of services that are available, and/or the services are not adequately provided).



increasingly prioritized funding for the criminal legal system over essential social services like housing.<sup>233</sup> While family justice centers may provide a streamlined experience for some survivors, particularly those who seek criminal remedies, they may not adequately serve those who are hesitant or unable to engage with law enforcement due to various reasons, including mistrust or fear of repercussions. Moreover, the model's emphasis on criminal legal system integration may overlook the broader community-based solutions that prioritize survivor agency and comprehensive social support.

Supporting survivors involves more than simply providing a centralized hub for services. It necessitates significant investment in the wider social safety net. It involves addressing the diverse needs of survivors beyond immediate crises. A comprehensive approach to justice is essential, encompassing legal aid and protection as well as mental health care, housing, job assistance, and other social services that enable survivors to regain stability and independence.

Moreover, what is needed is a deeper reckoning with the systemic failures of our current legal system, which often re-traumatizes survivors and fails to hold perpetrators adequately accountable in a manner that prevents future harm. In essence, while family justice centers offer a centralized point of access to various services, their success hinges on embedding them within a more comprehensive and inclusive framework of support and justice. Without this deeper commitment and systemic change, the promise of family justice centers remains akin to the magical thinking in "Field of Dreams"—inspiring, but ultimately fiction.

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233. See GOODMARK, *supra* note 21, at 2-3 (noting that over time, the allocation of funds under VAWA has shifted, with each subsequent reauthorization of the act directing significantly fewer resources to social services compared to the original 1994 legislation).