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## "We Could and Should be Doing More": Domestic Violence Advocates' Perceptions of Agency Training

Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio  
*University of Nevada, Las Vegas, solanopa@unlv.nevada.edu*

Shon M. Reed  
*University of Nevada, Las Vegas*

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## Abstract:

Domestic violence advocates are an under-represented part of the criminal justice system. Because of the role that advocates play in supporting diverse populations of victims/survivors, it is important that they be given the opportunity to express their needs regarding onboarding and supplemental trainings. The current study gathers qualitative data from domestic violence advocates around the United States and explores advocates’ recommendations for future trainings. Participants generally expressed the need for increased training regarding various victim sub-populations (e.g., LGBTQ+). Future policy implications and avenues of research will be presented.

## Introduction:

Domestic violence (DV) is a serious social issue impacting people around the globe. National estimates in the United States indicate that roughly 1 in 4 heterosexual women and 1 in 7 heterosexual men will experience DV (Smith et al., 2018). Rates for the LGBTQ+ population are even more pronounced with studies indicating that 1 in 3 lesbian women, 1 in 2 bisexual women, 1 in 6 gay men, and 1 in 2 transgender individuals will experience DV (James et al., 2016; Walters et al., 2013).



Domestic violence advocates, although not always formally employed by public agencies, are tasked with administering shelter-based and educational services to various sub-groups of domestic violence victims/survivors. It is therefore imperative that advocates receive training geared toward the specific needs of, for instance, LGBTQ+ survivors, or men who experience violence by intimate partners.

The current study aims to answer two research questions:

- 1) *What topics are included in the onboarding received by domestic violence advocates?*
- 2) *What are the shortcomings of these trainings as perceived by domestic violence advocates?*

## Methods:

Data for the current study consists of qualitative interviews with 12 current domestic violence advocates derived from six domestic violence service providers across the United States. Participants were asked about their experiences with training at their agencies both during the onboarding process, as well as through supplemental training offerings. Interviews were conducted via Zoom between September 2021 and November 2021 with saturation being reached at the tenth interview. Two more interviews were conducted to confirm data saturation. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours.

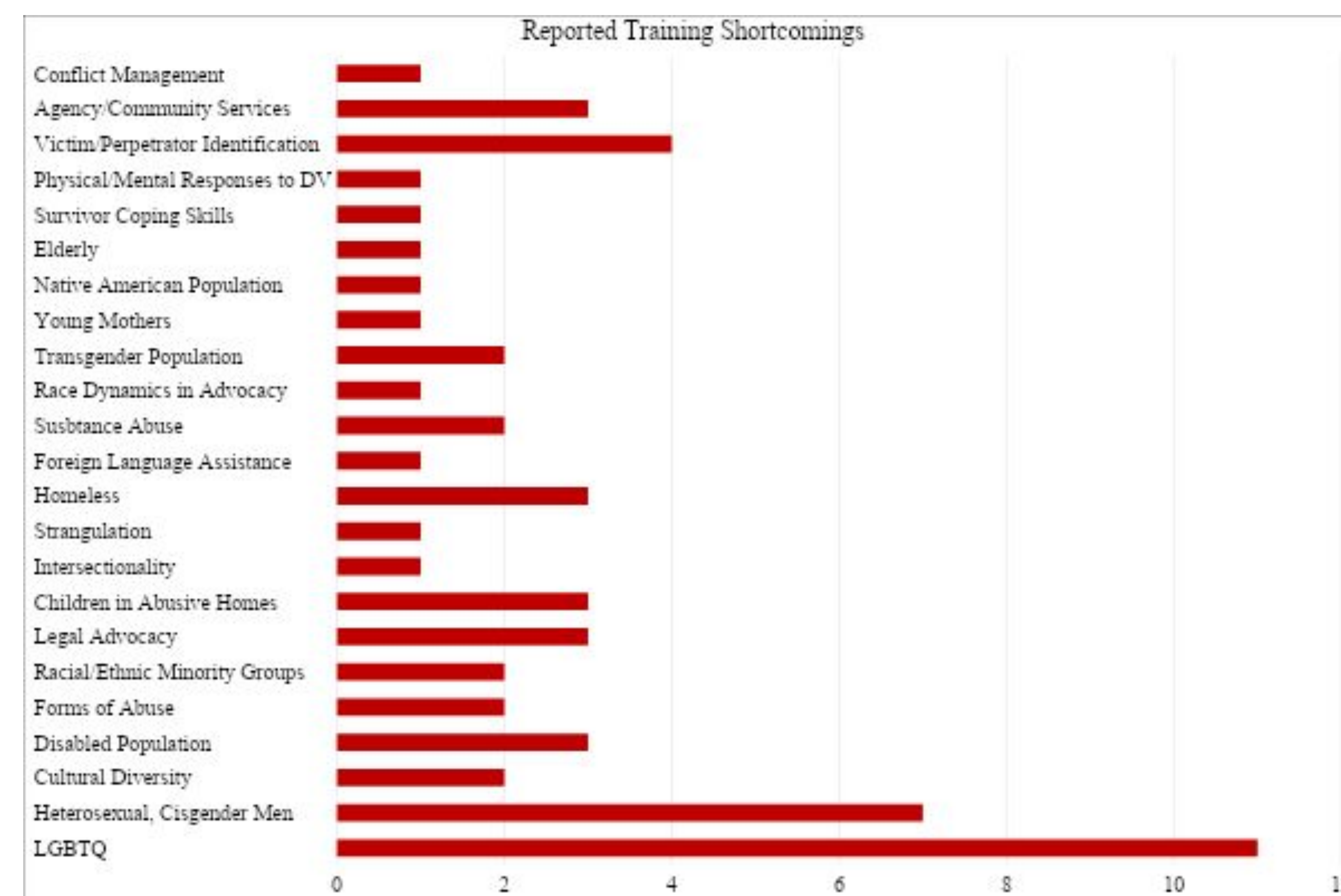
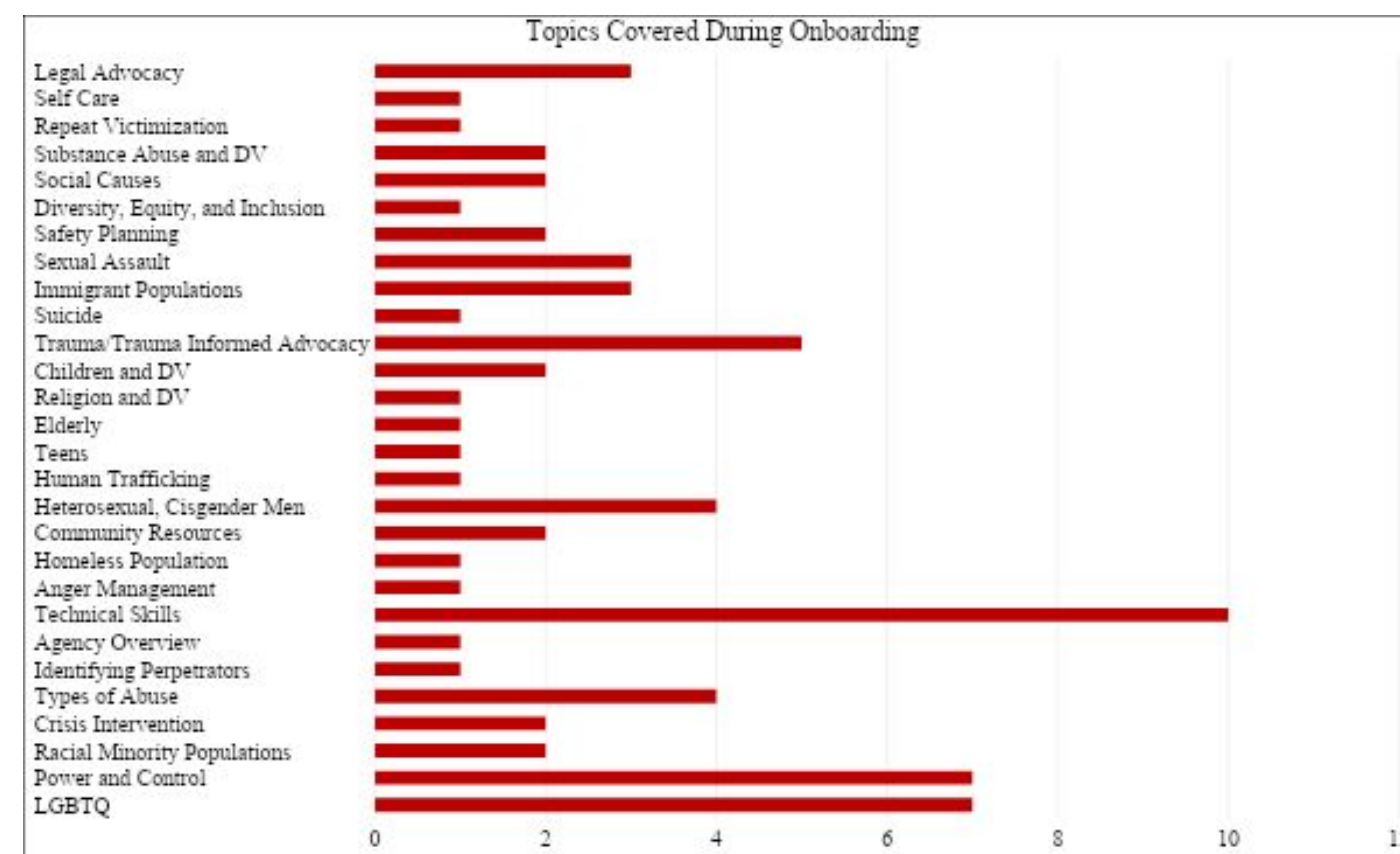
Participants had been employed/volunteering with their agencies for a wide range of years (~8 months to over 15 years). Participants’ ages also widely ranged (23 - 74 years). The majority of participants identified as being a white, heterosexual, cisgender female (n=9). Only two participants identified as male.

## Contact Information

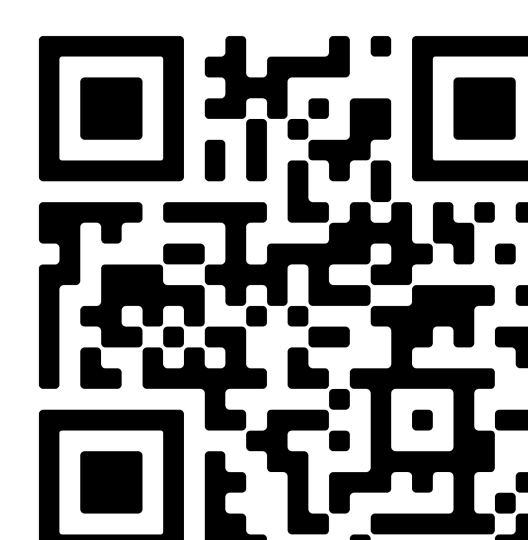
Elia del Carmen Solano-Patricio  
eliadelcarmen.solano-patricio@unlv.edu

Shon M. Reed, M.A.  
Shon.reed@unlv.edu

## Results:



## References



## Representative Quotes

*So, we have a mandatory LGBTQ training that's provided by a community partner every year, but I don't ever think that one a year is enough...I think we definitely should and could be doing more with the LGBTQ population. We've served within that community for well beyond myself. But in terms of training, that's really only come about in the last three years. (Kali, 34, Midwest)*

*I think there can always, in an area like ours, I think there can always be more. The hyper-visibility that needs to be given to marginalized groups is an ever-present drumbeat within our organization because there's such a view of everything here being white and heteronormative. (Aster, 38, West)*

*...I've had a lot of [transgender clients], for the percentage that they are in the world. I've had multiple transwomen clients...and then also I think I've had coworkers who have had transmen or non-binary clients...We weren't trained on that or what to do for shelter for those sorts of people, I mean make do I guess, but it's not really like trained on, which when it's such an obvious thing, with transpeople, with transwomen in particular, what do you do for shelter? It's the first, number one, problem. (Jack, 23, Northeast)*

## Discussion:

Advocates noted several limitations with the training they received during the onboarding process. While these training shortcomings encompassed numerous different social groups, as well as topics associated with DV, it was clear that training primarily focused on heterosexual, cisgender women who experience DV. Although over half of the participants (n=7) had received training on the LGBTQ+ population during their onboarding, almost all participants (n=11) noted that more training was needed on this population. Specifically, advocates noted that more information was needed on LGBTQ-specific forms of abuse, as well as how social marginalization influences abuse experiences. In addition, over half of the participants (n=7) noted that more training was needed on heterosexual, cisgender men who experience abuse.

The findings of this study indicate that the primary focus during the onboarding process was to provide information on heterosexual, cisgender women who experience abuse. Such findings were expected as, historically, victim service provisions in the United States have focused on this population (Gruber, 2020; Guadalupe-Diaz & Jasinski, 2017). That said, the disproportionate rate of abuse experienced by members of the LGBTQ+ population highlights the need for a greater focus on their experiences. As federal and state governments place a greater emphasis on nondiscrimination in victim service provision, agencies must consider how inclusivity can be fostered in all areas of their processes.

## Future Research:

Future research should explore the perceptions of a more diverse population of victim advocates. As mentioned, the majority of participants identified as being a white female (n=9). The lack of diversity in the sample may have influenced participants’ perceptions of the inclusivity and effectiveness of information provided during the onboarding process.

As indicated, training regarding diverse victim populations, particularly the LGBTQ+ population, was lacking. In order to understand why various victim subpopulations, receive less attention, interviews or focus groups should be conducted with training directors in order to better understand the decision-making process that occurs during the development of onboarding programming.

Further, all participants provided retrospective accounts of their training experiences. In order to bolster the validity of the findings of this study, it would be beneficial to conduct grounded theory studies of the included agencies. These studies would allow researchers to better understand the training process as well as the exact content that is covered throughout the onboarding process.

