MISSOURI APPLESEED

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Survivors' Justice Project
Story Banking Report

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Missouri Appleseed believes all Missouri families deserve the opportunity to thrive. Through research, advocacy, and education, Missouri Appleseed works to improve the systems and policies at the intersection of public health, criminal justice, and child welfare.

This report was authored by Missouri Appleseed Program Manager Rachel Sorensen and Executive Director Mary Quandt.

Missouri Appleseed extends sincere thanks to the Keyway Center for Diversion and Reentry, The Soulfisher Ministries, and A Home for Her for sharing their time, their space, and their coordinating efforts in support of this storytelling project.

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STORY BANKING REPORT

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I. INTRODUCTION

Missouri Appleseed's Survivor Justice Project uses research and advocacy to advance justice for criminalized survivors of domestic abuse.[1] Through generous funding from the NFL Foundation and in partnership with Alabama Appleseed and Oklahoma Appleseed, the Missouri Survivor's Justice Project (SJP) examines how domestic abuse and coercion are intertwined with criminal convictions in order to advocate for fairer sentencing for survivors. Under this grant, Missouri Appleseed has partnered with Saint Louis University's Center for Health Law Studies to survey currently incarcerated survivors of domestic abuse in the Missouri Department of Corrections. Our research project aims to examine the scope and size of individuals currently affected by incarceration resulting from their experienced abuse. Additionally, Missouri Appleseed is providing education to legislators in support of the Missouri Survivors' Justice Act.

To gain a better understanding of the depth of this issue for the qualitative survey and advocacy purposes, Missouri Appleseed collected stories from formerly incarcerated survivors living in St. Louis and the surrounding communities. Women from the Keyway Center for Diversion & Reentry, The Soulfisher Ministries, and A Home for Her contributed to Missouri Appleseed's story banking centered on exploring how domestic abuse can lead to criminal convictions. Through conversations and a series of questions, women shared their personal experiences with abuse, survival, and the circumstances that ultimately contributed to their involvement with the criminal legal system. These narratives help illuminate the ways in which domestic abuse can shape decision-making, survival strategies, and interactions with law enforcement and the courts. By documenting these lived experiences, this report seeks to highlight patterns in the abuse-to-prison pipeline and to inform policy solutions that better recognize and respond to the realities faced by survivors of abuse.

The survivors' ages ranged from 22 to 54 years old. Their time in prison also varied; one woman had experience with drug court, and another woman spent 25 years in prison. Additionally, the crimes these women were charged with were diverse, including forgery, drug possession, prostitution, and second-degree murder. All survivors were financially compensated for their time.

Each survivor's experience is different and often challenging to both share and understand. The eleven women who chose to share their stories with Missouri Appleseed each faced distinct circumstances, offering valuable perspectives on how experiences of abuse impact incarceration. Several recurring themes emerged across all narratives: survival strategies, coercion, distorted decision-making processes, abuse recognition, substance use, and betrayal by systems. This report will discuss each in turn. Although all stories hold equal value, select examples are included in the report for emphasis.

[1] Our operational definition of domestic abuse includes a pattern of coercive, controlling, threatening behaviors, and violence carried out by one individual against another. This applies to current or former intimate partners, family or household members, traffickers, or anyone seeking financial benefit.

A Note About This Report

Missouri Appleseed is a nonprofit that uses research, advocacy, and education to improve the systems and policies at the intersection of public health, criminal justice, and child welfare. We collaborate with reentry nonprofits throughout Missouri, and these relationships facilitated our ability to collect stories from women who have experienced abuse and incarceration. Names have been changed to protect privacy, and we performed no factchecking of stories, as people who experience abuse may choose to not tell anyone for fear of retaliation by their abuser.[2]

Keyway Center for Diversion and Reentry provides comprehensive services for women at every stage of the criminal justice system and offers transitional and recovery houses to prioritize housing stability for participants. The Soulfisher Ministries has educational services and transitional housing opportunities for men and women affected by incarceration, and A Home for Her provides support for domestic abuse survivors returning home from incarceration. With the assistance of Patty Berger, founder of the St. Louis chapter of All of Us or None, Missouri Appleseed's Program Manager, Rachel Sorensen, and former Director of Research, Laura LaGesse, we interviewed eleven women: nine women from the Keyway Center for Diversion & Reentry, two women from the Soulfisher Ministries, and one woman from A Home for Her.

The contributing women were given the chance to share their stories in whichever way they felt most comfortable, helping minimize the risk of re-traumatization during the collection process. Two formats of story collection were presented to the women: answering a series of questions, or informal conversation. Most women preferred to answer the questions, noting they were unsure of what should be shared. Although recounting their experiences often elicited emotional responses, many women mentioned that they had not discussed nor reflected on their trauma history for some time and described experiencing a sense of relief following the conversation.

We relied on our relationships with nonprofits in Missouri to develop appropriate questions and locate women whose experienced abuse led to their incarceration. The resulting questions examined women's experiences with abuse, coercion, incarceration, and child custody topics. We collected ten stories in person and one story via Zoom; the stories that were collected in person occurred at the nonprofits' locations. We received signed releases from all women and audio recorded all the conversations. Our analysis of the audio recordings was focused on exploring recurring themes and experiences.

This report is the first in a series resulting from Missouri Appleseed's Survivors' Justice Project. It provides a greater understanding of the intricacies of abuse and the viewpoint many criminalized survivors have surrounding their incarceration. Next, Missouri Appleseed will survey women incarcerated in the Missouri Department of Corrections to further learn about these topics and quantitatively analyze the state's criminalized survivor population.

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[2] Thompson, M., Sitterle, D., Clay, G. & Kingree, J. (2007). Reasons for not reporting victimizations to the police: Do they vary for physical and sexual incidents? Journal of American College Health, 55(5), 277-282. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17396400/

Missouri Appleseed thanks the Keyway Center for Diversion & Reentry, The Soulfisher Ministries, and A Home for Her for their support of our Survivors' Justice Project and policy advocacy work.

Most importantly, we sincerely thank the women who chose to share their stories.

II. RECURRING THEMES

A. *Survival Strategies*

Crime becomes a survival strategy. Women often described engaging in criminal acts during periods of extreme instability, including homelessness, addiction, or ongoing abuse. These actions were frequently framed as attempts to survive dangerous or desperate circumstances. One woman recounted a night when her safety was at risk and how that shaped her future decisions:

> The choices I made, it's not because I thought it was [going to] improve my life in any way. ... I just felt like it was something that needed to be done for my safety. ... I was scared for my life a lot of the time and... If I could make sure that he wasn't going to be mad at me or put me in a bad physical situation, I was [going to] do that thing, you know, if it meant that I was [going to] be safe for that day, for that hour, that he wasn't [going to] be mad at me then that was just... it felt like it was the only choice I had.

For these women, "safety" and "survival" were literal and not just figures of speech. Many women shared stories that illustrated that their fear for their lives was merited based on past near-death experiences. This same woman continued,

> I just wanted to make sure that I wasn't going to have to walk into a gas station with two black eyes or a split lip or end up in the hospital because of something he did to me. ... [One time] he had me on the floor and I was holding a pillow up so he couldn't get to me, but he was pushing me into [the furnace], burning my back, and he had a cast iron skillet. He was trying to get at me with it and just... I don't think I've ever experienced terror like that in my life. So, I think, especially after that... with some of the shoplifting, that's what it would put me back to is... if I am not able to do this to his satisfaction, like, is this [going to] happen again?

Another woman described the choices she faced while trying to escape an abusive situation:

> **Everyone should be held accountable for their choices. However, I think that it should be taken into consideration that, if it's between life and death, I'm going to choose life. And if that means that I have to make a few mistakes along the way to save my life, then I'm going to, and I did. And thank God, you know, I don't have to make those choices anymore. But it was. It was life or death.**

Others described committing criminal acts while trying to regain stability for themselves or their families, highlighting the difficult circumstances surrounding many of their convictions:

> Me and my son ended up at a really bad trap motel. Like, it was a really bad motel. And I walked outside one day and there was just a whole bunch of blue baggies. Like you could barely even see the asphalt. It was all covered in drug baggies. And I just lost it. I was like; [my son] should not be here. He can't be here. So, I called [the Department of Children and Families] … and asked them to come out cause I needed help. … They came back the next day and took my son. And then I kind of just changed, you know, without really me knowing. The drug use got worse, the abuse got worse with my ex, and he introduced me to somebody that was already in the forgery business, looking for someone to play roles for them … And all I could think about was, okay, cool, I could make enough money to get my son back and get us a house and, you know, create a life for everybody that's in my life that's not at this hotel.

This survivor, among others, saw crime as the only accessible option to escape her situation and highlighted how abusive relationships foster isolation and entrapment, which can lead to a narrowed focus on survival and restricted access to employment opportunities.

B. Coercion

Coercion is a commonly utilized strategy in abusive relationships. Many women described abusive partners who used manipulation, pressure, and control to influence their involvement in criminal acts. In several stories, survivors initially resisted but eventually complied after sustained persistent pressure, threats, or emotional dependence created within the abusive relationship. These circumstances commonly resulted in the women's perception of a limited degree of agency within situations. One woman described the gradual nature of coercion when she said, "I argued with him… I kept saying no, and I finally got tired of just arguing with him, and I just went along. I guess you could say it was long-term grooming, long-term coercion." Others explained

that the pressure often came in the form of emotional manipulation or threats related to basic survival needs. One woman shared that if she refused to participate in criminal activity, she was made to feel responsible for the consequences. She explained, "If I wasn't going to be the one to go in and get anything, then it would be my fault that we didn't have food to eat."

Another theme of coercion is women who take charges for their partners, not because they necessarily felt threatened to, but because they were put in positions where they felt they had to:

> **"He was abusive, but I had feelings, and I think that's what kind of tied me the most. I was willing to take charges for him, which I did. … he was saying, "Oh, well, it looks like I'm going back. It looks like I'm going back. Tell my son that its' all…" It was that moment of… he was manipulating my feelings.**

These accounts illustrate how abusive dynamics can shape decision-making and create circumstances in which survivors feel compelled to engage in criminal acts or unable to see an alternative to complying with the coercion.

C. Distorted Decision-Making Processes

Trauma shapes decision-making. Women frequently described the profound impact that prolonged abuse had on their mental health, self-worth, and decision-making. Many explained that experiences of violence and trauma affected their ability to make safe or stable choices in the years that followed. One woman reflected on the lasting effects of repeated physical violence when she noted, "When you're getting beat, and you're getting your head stomped on, and you're getting dragged across the house by your hair, and you're getting strangled … It messes you up." Another woman described the psychological toll of abuse from a partner when she commented, "Psychological warfare from somebody that you love… the damage done by that is indescribable." A third woman provided insight into the complex dynamics involved in abusive situations:

> **"Those types of things can become really mind-altering. They can affect the way that you see things, the way that you feel things. Sometimes these people could be people you care deeply about, and sometimes you don't have to care about them at all. But either way, it's [going to] affect the way that you think about things and how you handle certain situations.**

Overall, women emphasized that trauma often continued to influence their behavior long after the abusive relationship had ended. Nearly every woman said some version of this: "I'm not saying the abuse directly led to these charges, because I am an adult. I made those choices. But if I wasn't in that relationship, I don't think things would have escalated, even to where they are today for me."

D. Abuse Recognition

Many women do not recognize their own experienced abuse. In their stories, women recounted experiences that could be classified as emotional or even physical abuse, yet they spoke about these events as if such situations were normal for most people. Abuse recognition was especially left out when describing traumatic childhood memories. Numerous women reported being physically punished by spanking or slapping; although some acknowledged this practice wasn't considered abuse in earlier generations, others believed it was still a common experience for all children.

Additionally, instances of emotional abuse were far less recognized as abusive behavior, even in hindsight. When asked about whether she experienced any childhood abuse, one woman said:

> **"No, I was very lucky. Yeah, I was very lucky. My mom and my stepdad were both bad, bad alcoholics. ... I mean, occasionally they would get into drunken verbal altercations or fights. They got physical a couple of times, but other than that, like, I am very lucky. I was never abused or anything.**

Although many women recognized that they had experienced abuse as adults, some at first rejected the idea that their abuse was linked to their convictions; however, as their stories unfolded, it became apparent that the abuse did play a role in their convictions. One woman recognized that her misdemeanor charges stemmed from experienced abuse but felt that her felony assault charges did not. The facts she shared clearly show her partner manipulated her, took advantage of her weakened state, and provided her with illegal substances. This interviewee was hospitalized following a suicide attempt, exhibited signs of abuse, and her abuser gave her the same drugs she had overdosed on while she was still recovering in the hospital. The following conversation outlines the circumstances that led to her criminal charges:

Interviewer: Did you feel threatened and intimidated into taking [the drugs] he'd brought [to the hospital for] you?

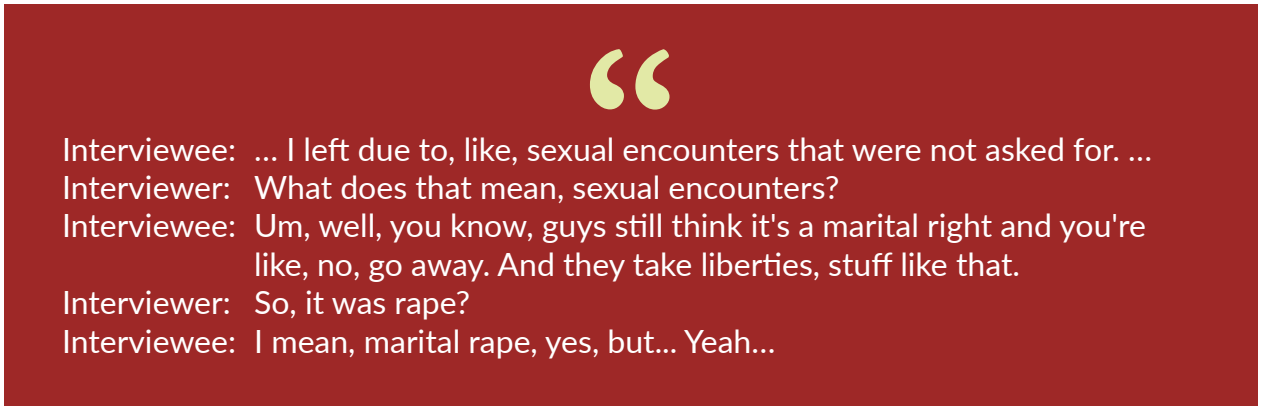
Interviewee: I think I felt more manipulated into it. You know... just kind of the same psychological... you know you're [going to] get sick without... and I don't know what his goal was. I don't know if he was trying to make me overdose, or he was trying to get me on his good side so I wouldn't say anything, or because... I don't remember feeling like I was in withdrawal at that point. I had maybe been awake for five or six hours.

Interviewer: And he didn't get any charges with any of that?

Interviewee: No. Like, after I took the drugs, I don't really remember anything, obviously. But I think he left pretty quickly. And then they barred him. Actually... they barred me from having any visitors at that point.

Interviewer: But then [the authorities] charged you with [felonies for] assaulting the nurses and the security guard? But nothing for him for bringing you the drugs?
Interviewee: Right.

Another woman experienced sexual abuse but did not believe it could be classified as such. The conversation below highlights the challenges that certain women face in identifying this abusive behavior:



Overwhelmingly, women shared stories of abuse and coercion they downplayed as "normal." Through these conversations, it became clear that when abuse is normalized, it becomes difficult for a survivor to recognize it as such, and so it is often left out of the story. As a result of unrecognized abuse and coercion, women have experienced substantial consequences by facing charges for crimes committed.

E. Substance Use

Substance use functions as a coping mechanism. Almost all the women described turned to drugs or alcohol to cope with the pain and trauma associated with abuse. For some, substance use began during abusive relationships; for others, it escalated afterward as a means of coping with unresolved trauma. One woman examined the connection directly when she explained, "I tried for a long time to self-medicate. That had to do with my drug addiction." Another woman said, "Anything to numb the pain," in reference to the role substances played in living with a physically abusive partner.

In several cases, substance use contributed to the criminal charges these women ultimately faced, including drug possession, theft, assault, prostitution, and other related offenses:

> **Maybe if [legislators and judges] were more aware of the manipulation and the scare tactics that they use because they definitely use drugs as a tool to gain that power. … Maybe if they were more aware of why we're in the situations that we're in because of our abusers or, you know, why we have drug addictions or why the problems have snowballed because of the one in power, the abuser. … I think a lot of times that the trauma and abuse definitely lead to, you know, drugging to maybe numb the pain or to make it not as bad when it happens.**

While not every woman had a drug conviction, nearly all of them had experience using drugs and multiple women reported their drug use was facilitated and even encouraged by their abusive partner. One woman stated her abusive partner prevented her from quitting drugs. She said, "If I wanted to stop, he was definitely not… not for that."

F. Betrayal by Systems

Abuse is often neglected by the criminal legal system, law enforcement, and mandated reporters. A common thread across the interviews was the perception that the criminal legal system rarely considered the survivors' experiences of domestic abuse and coercion when determining charges, plea agreements, or sentences. Several women reported that their histories of abuse were never meaningfully explored in court. While similarly stated by many, one woman reflected, "I just assumed that because I'm an adult and I made those choices, it didn't really matter why I made the choices." Another woman described feeling that the legal process prioritized efficiency over understanding the circumstances behind the charges. She said, "They just want to hurry up and knock that off their checklist." The women that shared their stories frequently expressed that if their experiences of abuse had been fully understood, the outcomes of their cases might have been different.

Additionally, women identified a gap between crisis response and sustained safety. While some survivors described calling law enforcement during incidents of violence, the response was often limited to immediate crisis management rather than long-term protection. One woman stated, "The cops got called a few times, and nothing would happen." Even when police intervened, outcomes such as release without consequences or delayed enforcement allowed abusive situations to persist, leaving many survivors to navigate ongoing abuse despite repeated attempts to access help. A woman who was eventually able to get a protective order commented on the difficulty and long process for protection. She said, "It was probably like three months later, he got arrested for [domestic abuse], and it was just a book and release."

Barriers to safety extended beyond interactions with the criminal legal system and law enforcement. A woman recounted being hospitalized after a suicide attempt, with visible injuries from abuse, but she was neither questioned nor offered support:

> **"I woke up after three days, but it took them about a week total from when I got there to when they were able to transfer me to the … Marian Center, the psych unit at the hospital, because they didn't have room, and then I stayed there for another two weeks. And nobody questioned it, and I wasn't really forthcoming with that information at that time. But I don't know how anybody didn't know.**

III. The Survivors' Stories

Survivors' stories offer valuable insight into the circumstances that shape convictions. The following examples show how criminal acts can seem simple in legal cases but may be more complex when viewed in the context of abuse and coercion. These stories emphasize the need for survivors to share their full stories and for these contexts to be thoughtfully considered within the criminal justice process. Names and identifying information have been changed or removed to protect privacy.

A. Shoplifting, Suicide, Assault

Sarah described how her life began to unravel after losing custody of her son, saying "my life just kind of spiraled." She entered a relationship with someone she knew from high school, Kody, who "introduced me to drugs… like, hard drugs," and within a short time, the relationship became "very, really abusive." The abuse was both physical and psychological. Sarah recalled, "He was beating on me… telling me… nobody wanted me around, and that I should just kill myself." During one particularly severe incident, after hours of violent abuse, she attempted suicide and was hospitalized, ultimately spending days in a coma.

Even in the hospital, the abuse continued to shape what happened next. Kody showed up and "brought me a shot of fentanyl," which she felt manipulated into using. She overdosed again in the hospital and assaulted two nurses and a security guard while they were trying to revive her. She later faced these charges despite not remembering the incident, noting that "he didn't get any charges," even though he brought the drugs into the hospital. She also described how coercion and fear shaped her other charges. Kody forced her to shoplift, and she explained, "I felt like if I didn't do that, I was going to get hurt." The violence reinforced that fear. She recalled being hit while driving because she "wasn't driving fast enough," and she said, "blood [was] pouring down my face."

Despite clear signs of abuse, including visible injuries, Sarah was never asked about her home life or experiences of violence. She also never shared the abuse with her

attorney. She explained, “I just assumed that because I’m an adult and I made those choices that it didn’t really matter why.” When she reflected on her actions, she emphasized that “the choices I made… [were] not because I thought it was [going to] improve my life,” but were shaped by manipulation, addiction, and fear within an abusive relationship.

B. Forced Drug Use, Trafficking, Homicide

Gabi was incarcerated for fourteen years after being convicted of second-degree murder and armed criminal action for killing her abuser. She began her story by saying, “I thought we were in a relationship, but he was really just abusing me.” After a period of instability in her life, she moved in with her partner and “the dynamics changed.” He quickly became abusive and she experienced severe and escalating violence, including being beaten, held at gunpoint, “drugs were being forced down my throat,” and she was trafficked by him and his work associates.

Although Gabi attempted to seek help, her options were limited. Her family, also afraid of her abuser, distanced themselves and did not allow her to return home. She called the police after one abusive incident, but she was too afraid to identify her abuser. Instead of being treated as a victim, she felt dismissed and viewed with suspicion: “I remember one time he’d beat me, and I ran up the street and called the police, but I wouldn’t tell them who did it. So, they questioned me as though I was a prostitute, because here I am beat up, running down the street, and he had ripped my shirt off.”

The incident that led to Gabi’s conviction occurred during a prolonged episode of abuse over the course of a day and night. As a direct response to being threatened and held at gun point, she shot her abuser. Despite sharing evidence and details with her attorney, Gabi’s legal defense failed to meaningfully present her history of abuse. “We had pictures, we had it all. And when it came time for him to defend me, he said, ‘You’re [going to] take this plea.’” Furthermore, no evidence of her experienced abuse was presented during sentencing; she was sentenced to 17 years and required to serve 85% of the term.

Her incarceration had a profound impact on her and her family, particularly her son, who was 10 years old when she went to prison. Gabi described lasting trauma and said she will “never be the same,” noting that she received little to no mental health support while in prison. When asked about what she would like the system to understand, Gabi replied, “I want them to see the person, and also do a little bit more investigation… dig a little deeper. Don’t just throw some time at somebody. Don’t just disregard… the backstory.”

C. Childhood Abuse, Self-Medication, Assault

From early childhood, Jessica witnessed domestic abuse in the home while also experiencing severe and repeated sexual abuse from her sister’s father as well as her mother’s male friends. She described herself as “an angry child … a hurt child,” shaped by an environment where harm was constant and protection was minimal. Beginning when she was eight years old, Jessica was molested by multiple men leading to self-harm, mental health struggles, and early system involvement with juvenile detention and

psychiatric institutions. She said, “I would take the pain that I was feeling, and I’d hurt myself.”

Without meaningful support, Jessica’s pain manifested into anger and aggression and this survival instinct carried into her adulthood. Her relationships were marked by severe physical, emotional, and psychological abuse. She described being beaten, controlled, and degraded. These experiences reinforced her instinct to respond to perceived threats with violence, so “if a guy would come near me… I automatically defend[ed] myself. And… that led me to my assaults.”

She also highlighted how systems continually failed to protect and understand her. She described an assault charge that resulted from an act of self-defense and detailed the court’s poor response:

> **“My assault charge … I got jumped by two guys. They were drinking with my 13-year-old brother. … The morals that I had is you don't give a child alcohol, you don't give a child drugs, you don't do all that. … So, I went off on them … I ended up getting a wagon thrown at me, and I was 18 and pregnant at that time. … But I ended up going to jail because I picked up a piece of wood to defend myself. A guy was on top of me and I couldn't get him off me. … and I hit him with it … and I went to jail. … It was self-defense … I was in [rural Missouri] and at this time, there was very few black people in the community. And [the prosecutor] said, “If you wouldn't have got a change of venue, I would have dropped the charges.” And, so I was like, “Why’d you charge me with it anyway?”**

Throughout her story, Jessica emphasized the deep connection between trauma and criminal actions, describing abuse as something that fundamentally reshapes a person’s thinking and choices. She discussed how she “tried for a long time to self-medicate. That had to do with my drug addiction. … I realized that wasn’t working.” While incarcerated, she began to understand the roots of her behavior and credited programming and personal reflection with helping her develop insight and begin healing; however, she noted that prison systems often fail to provide meaningful, trauma-informed care.

V. CONCLUSION

The findings from this story banking project highlight critical gaps in how the criminal justice system responds to survivors of domestic abuse. These stories demonstrate how the actions of many women who experience incarceration are shaped by trauma, coercion, and survival. Many women described engaging in criminal actions as a means of survival to secure housing, provide food for their children, and prevent violence. These actions of survival were punished by the legal system without sufficient understanding of the underlying circumstances. It is imperative that Missouri increase access to diversion programs specifically designed for domestic abuse survivors and that the criminal legal system prioritizes alternatives to incarceration. This may include counseling, substance use treatment, or other supportive services, and participation should not be affected by criminal histories.

Building on these findings, it becomes clear that the criminal justice system often overlooks crucial opportunities for intervention throughout a survivor's interactions with various institutions. Women reported that signs of abuse were often disregarded during interactions with hospitals, courts, and law enforcement. These missed opportunities represent points where intervention could have prevented further harm and potentially avoided criminal legal involvement. The system needs to implement routine, confidential screenings for domestic abuse at key points throughout the criminal legal process, including arrest and pretrial services. To ensure signs of abuse and coercion are recognized, law enforcement, attorneys, and court personnel should receive proper training to ensure disclosures of abuse are handled safely and do not increase risk to survivors.

Similarly, trauma is rarely meaningfully considered at any stage of the legal process. Survivors often enter the system with untreated trauma, which affects their behavior, decision-making, and ability to comply with court requirements. Without trauma-informed approaches, the system risks misinterpreting trauma responses as willful noncompliance. It is important to provide training and resources for defense attorneys on identifying and presenting evidence of abuse. Social workers and advocates can be incorporated into legal teams to encourage holistic defense models. Creating a legal system that encourages survivors to step forward will help ensure survivors understand that they have a right to share their experiences.

Current legal frameworks often do not adequately account for domestic abuse and coercion by abusive partners. As a result, survivors who are pressured or manipulated into criminal activity are viewed as fully responsible, without considering the dynamics of abuse. Although the Battered Spouse Syndrome defense (RSMo 563.033) was updated in 2014, its underlying concept no longer reflects contemporary perspectives on the issue at hand. Missouri Appleseed currently supports an updated Missouri Survivors' Justice Act, legislation that would allow courts to consider evidence of abuse and coercion during sentencing and outlines sentence reductions based on felony class. This is an important piece of legislation that provides hope and support for survivors in the future, as well as those currently incarcerated.

Survivors seek understanding, not exemption from responsibility. A legal system that recognizes the impact of domestic abuse is better equipped to ensure accountability is administered fairly, proportionally, and with the consideration of an individual's circumstances. Without reform, survivors will continue to face injustice, inequitable prosecution, lengthy incarceration, and prolonged separation from their families.