Solutions to the Research-Practice Gap in Domestic Violence:
A Modified Delphi Study with Domestic Violence Coalition Leaders
Summary of Findings

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Overview:

The underutilization of research by domestic violence practitioners and the lack of attention by researchers to the needs and experiences of practitioners have the potential to obstruct our goal of ending violence against women. This study examined the experiences and ideas of an expert panel of domestic violence practitioners to seek potential solutions for integrating domestic violence research and practice. Expert panel members were representatives of state-level domestic violence coalitions who hold primary responsibility for determining the content of the training program and materials provided by coalitions to local domestic violence service providers. We used a modified Delphi methodology study with three rounds of questionnaires to identify potential solutions in six areas: access to research, the practical application of research, domestic violence coalitions' needs and usage of research, perceptions of research and researchers, researcher-practitioner collaborations, and the goals of domestic violence. The findings of the study are integrated into recommendations for researchers and domestic violence organizations.

What was the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study was to seek the input of key personnel within state-level domestic violence coalitions in order to identify potential solutions to the domestic violence "research-practice gap." The overarching research question guiding this study was as follows: *From the perspective of key coalition staff members, what needs to happen in order for a greater integration between domestic violence research and practice to occur*?

What methods were used for this study?

This study used a modified Delphi methodology, which is a commonly used research method for developing consensus responses to challenging dilemmas in a field. This method involves sending multiple rounds of questionnaires to a panel of experts on a particular topic. This study used three rounds of questionnaires, with each subsequent questionnaire being created through a process of compiling responses to the previous questionnaire. This study was conducted electronically, with participants completing their questionnaires through either an Internet-based survey hosting site or through e-mail. Throughout all rounds of questionnaires, participants' identities were kept confidential, and participants' responses were anonymous from one another, such that at no point were participants' individual responses linked to their identities. In the informed consent document, participants were informed that they would be identified as an expert panel member in reports of the study's findings, and they would also receive a summary of the study's findings and a list of the other expert panel members at the completion of the study.

Questionnaire 1 included six open-ended questions addressing the relevance, usefulness, helpfulness, and desired goals of research, as well as participants' experiences working with researchers. The responses to Questionnaire 1 were then compiled and used to create Questionnaire 2, on which expert panel members were asked to rate 124 items based on the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement. These items were arranged according to the six major categories that emerged in participants' responses to Questionnaire 1: (a) access to research, (b) the practical application of research, (c) state-level domestic violence coalitions' needs and usage of research, (d) perceptions of research and researchers, (e) researcher-practitioner collaborations, and (f) the goals of domestic violence research.

Once Questionnaire 2 responses were received, we calculated the medians and variation in responses (using interquartile ranges) for these items in order to identify items that demonstrated consistent high

agreement or disagreement (based on the medians), along with a high level of consensus (based on low variability). There were no items with high consensus and high disagreement. Overall, a high level of consensus was achieved in participants' responses to Questionnaire 2.

Questionnaire 3 presented the research team's preliminary interpretations and conclusions based on the responses to the prior two questionnaires, in order to seek the expert panel's assessment of the accuracy of these conclusions. Therefore, Questionnaire 3 for this study contained, for each category included on Questionnaire 2, a list of items for which participants demonstrated high levels of agreement and consensus, as well as a list of preliminary conclusions and interpretations based on the retained items. Participants then responded to the open-ended questions about the accuracy of the researchers' interpretations and suggestions they had for revising these interpretations. Participants' feedback to these open-ended questions was then integrated with the preliminary interpretations to develop a set of final conclusions, which are presented below.

Who participated in this study?

The target sample for the expert panel was employees of state-level domestic violence coalitions who hold primary responsibility for determining the content and format of the information provided to service providers in that state through the coalition, such as through continuing education and training programs, newsletters, and coalition web-sites. Participants were recruited through invitations posted to list-serves for Coalition Executive Directors and Trainers, both of which are hosted by the National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV).

The Appendix presents a list of expert panel members and their organizational affiliations. A total of 18 individuals were included on the expert panel. However, the number of participants completing each round of the questionnaires varied. Questionnaire 1 was completed by 13 participants, Questionnaire 2 was completed by 17 participants, and Questionnaire 3 was completed by 8 participants. Seven expert panel members completed all three questionnaires, six panel members completed two of the three questionnaires, and five panel members completed only one of the questionnaires. As an additional protection for the confidentiality of participants' responses, the names of participants completing each questionnaire are not reported.

What were the major findings of this study?

For each of the six major categories identified in this study, we integrated the participants' feedback to our preliminary interpretations into a final set of conclusions. The conclusions for each category are as follows:

Access to Research
- Domestic violence coalitions do make efforts to consult research, such as through VAWnet.
- However, access to useful research can be limited. Factors that contribute to limited access include the following: the high financial cost of research, the significant amount of time and energy it takes to locate research, people without training in research may be turned off by academic language, and coalition staff members and service providers have demanding jobs that leave little time for reading research.
- Strategies used to increase coalitions' and service providers' access to research should account for the job demands (e.g., time constraints) faced by service providers. Some potentially useful strategies include the following: developing improved mechanisms for providing Coalitions and service providers with time-efficient and cost-efficient (i.e., affordable or free) access to research; creating opportunities for more dialogue between researchers and advocates/service providers; offering interactive on-line trainings about research methods and findings, including such information as formulating research questions and understanding specific study findings; and developing researcher-advocate/service provider collaborations to write summaries of research that are written in understandable language and that highlight the most important findings.

The Practical Application of Research
- Although the practical applications of research can be difficult to identify, members of the expert panel do believe that research can have practical applications, particularly by suggesting new approaches or

potential modifications to current practices and potentially by providing information about prospective client populations.

- When researchers wish to have their research findings inform practice, they should consider the potential perceptions of those findings among service providers and the leaders of service and advocacy organizations. In particular, researchers should consider the extent to which the findings will be consistent with the real-life observations made by service providers in their work, as well as the extent to which organizational leaders may "buy in" to the findings.
- Some potentially useful strategies for making research more applicable to practice include the following: funding sources should increase their support for researchers translating their findings to practical applications and researchers should consult with advocates/service providers from the earliest stages of their studies in order to ensure that the research questions they are addressing are practically relevant and to make studies more oriented to practical issues.
- Some domestic violence topics have greater applicability to practice than other topics. Topics with practical applications may include the following: the effectiveness of preventive and advocacy-based interventions and the various components of the domestic violence response system.

Domestic Violence Coalitions' Needs and Usage of Research

- Although the specific applications of research are likely to vary based on such factors as the size or geographic location of a Coalition, research can be useful to domestic violence coalitions in many ways, including the following: for gaining information about current issues related to domestic violence, for informing training and outreach programs and materials, for informing legislative and policy initiatives, for identifying new practices, in writing grants, and for initiating new collaborations.
- Specific roles Coalitions may play related to research include helping community members interpret domestic violence research findings and providing research-based resources to member programs.
- Expert panel members noted that member programs vary in the extent to which they are interested in research, although levels of perceived interest may actually reflect the amount of access to and time available for reviewing research.

Perceptions of Research and Researchers

- Expert panel members believe that different types of research (such as small-scale qualitative studies and large-scale longitudinal studies) can be helpful to their work.
- Research is helpful to practitioners when it identifies and addresses gaps in the knowledge base about domestic violence (note: one gap noted by expert panel members was a lack of research addressing service models that differ from the traditional approaches to serving survivors).
- Research is helpful to practitioners when it has been informed by advocates/service providers, including input regarding the potential backlash or negative consequences that could result from the findings.
- Research is generally viewed as unhelpful when it is clear that the researchers have an underlying agenda for their research and therefore misrepresent their findings.
- Research is particularly likely to be viewed as unhelpful when the findings are not considered in the context of gender and other relevant variables, such as ethnicity, culture, and geography.
- Coalition staff members likely have had varying individual experiences with researchers—some negative and some positive—and those experiences can influence how they perceive researchers.

Researcher-Practitioner Collaborations

- Many expert panel members aim to assist researchers in their work, and many are open to learning from researchers, such as by attending training sessions conducted by them.
- Generally, most expert panel members' experiences with researchers have been positive and respectful;
- Researcher-practitioner collaborations are more likely to be positive experiences when the following occur: advocates/service providers are contacted in the early stages of the project, researchers are open to the input from advocates/service providers, and service providers and clients/participants are compensated for their time devoted to the project.

- Researcher-practitioner collaborations are more likely to be negative experiences when the following occur: the researchers have an underlying agenda for conducting their research, the researchers are not sensitive to the needs and safety concerns of victims and/or are not knowledgeable about domestic violence, and inadequate attention is paid to confidentiality.

The Goals of Domestic Violence Research
- There are many important goals for domestic violence research. Three broad themes of these goals, with the specific goals within each theme, are as follows:
  - *Informing interventions and prevention* [including to better understand what survivors need to heal, to provide evidence about what types of intervention are most effective, to increase service providers' knowledge of issues impacting domestic violence (e.g., mental health and substance abuse services) and how best to provide services, to explore the relevance of services with underserved populations, to identify effective methods of holding batterers accountable, to understand how to prevent domestic violence, to provide reliable data supporting the need for services for victims and their families which keep them safe from violence, to further our understanding of risk factors for domestic violence so that we can develop effective interventions and prevention strategies, to improve the criminal justice response to domestic violence, and to discover what new and existing strategies used by allied professionals are most effective in assisting victims of domestic violence and holding perpetrators accountable];
  - *Increasing understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence* [including to further our understanding of the complex interrelationship of trauma and other risk/resiliency factors (substance use, mental health concerns, parenting, economic realities, cultural influences, etc) and to better understand men's perpetration of domestic violence]; and
  - *Addressing the broader domestic violence movement and societal/contextual issues* [including to dispute misperceptions, myths, rationalizations for oppressive policies, etc. regarding domestic violence, to study awareness and community outreach campaigns around the country and tell us what works best in which communities, to discover ways to change societal norms that promote and condone violence, to find out how public attitudes about DV are shaped, and how they can be re-shaped, to expose biases, discrimination and neglect in institutions utilized by victims such as the healthcare system, the legal system, housing, child protection services, and welfare, to help guide policy choices and funding priorities for responding to domestic violence, and to explore the impact of lesbians in the movement].
- Future efforts are needed to achieve a greater understanding of the priorities within these goals of domestic violence research.

What are recommendations for researchers based on the findings of this study?
- Researchers should consider the access that practitioners and practitioner-based organizations have to research, particularly for researchers who wish to disseminate their findings to these groups.
- Researchers can help to make their research findings more accessible by presenting them to practitioners in more time-effective formats, particularly by using language that is understandable to practitioners and making clear the practical implications of their findings. In addition, researchers should engage in diverse forms of research dissemination that include efforts to disseminate findings directly to practitioners and practitioner-oriented groups.
- Researchers may find it useful to work with practitioners in identifying and describing the practical implications of their research.
- Whenever possible, researchers are encouraged to conduct research that is likely to hold practical relevance.
- One way to increase the likelihood that a study will be relevant to practice is to consult with practitioners early in the planning stages of a study.
- Researchers should be open to the feedback that practitioners provide.

- Researchers should make contact with the organizations in their area, in particular to seek the input of these organizations regarding the most relevant local and regional research needs and to identify roles that these organizations can play in helping researchers to connect their work to practice.
- Researchers should be cautious to avoid approaching practitioners with research agendas that are likely to be viewed as unhelpful, such as those that lack consideration for safety and confidentiality issues.
- Researchers are encouraged to be clear about the motives and intentions of their work, as well as to seek input from practitioners when interpreting potentially controversial findings.

What are recommendations for domestic violence organizations based on this study?

To our knowledge, this study was the first to examine specifically the role of state- or national level domestic violence\ organizations as intermediaries in linking research and practice. Only one type of organization (i.e., state-level coalitions) was included in this study, and therefore additional efforts are needed to understand the role of other types of statewide or national organizations, such as national advocacy groups, research organizations, and funding agencies. Nevertheless, the findings have implications for state-level coalitions and other statewide or national organizations, such as the following:

- One of the most apparent needs that organizations may best be poised to address is to work to develop mechanisms that are designed to help practitioners (and, often, the organizations themselves) gain access to relevant research, particularly due to the cost of gaining subscriptions to the journals in which research is typically published. Funding organizations and national practitioner- and researcher-oriented organizations should make meeting this need a priority.
- Additional challenges, such as time constraints and job demands, create a need for research findings to be made available to practitioners in a language that they can understand and in a way that highlights the implications for practice. One possible strategy for addressing this need would be for statewide or national organizations to create working groups comprised of researchers and practitioners that collaborate to review existing research and identify the meaningful applications to practice, and then develop dissemination strategies to reach practitioner and research audiences.
- Another role that statewide and national organizations can play is to build connections between researchers and practitioners. (The findings of this study make clear that many state-level coalitions are already serving in this capacity.)
- Practitioners and practitioner-related organizations can make active efforts to inform researchers of practice-related research needs, as well as to continue to inform researchers about the demands faced by service providers in their work.
- In recognition of the various roles that organizations may play with respect to research (e.g., serving as a resource for the community regarding domestic violence research findings, compiling and delivering research-based training materials, and developing research-informed legislative initiatives), we recommend that domestic violence organizations assess their existing strengths and limitations in terms of fulfilling all of these functions, and subsequently working to build their capacities in the areas in which limitations are identified.
- With regard to researcher-practitioner collaborations, organizations might serve in a screening capacity, such as by inquiring about researchers' motives before connecting them with practitioners, in order to help determine appropriate collaboration participants.
- Once collaborations have been established, organizational representatives can further contribute to their success by advocating for equitable compensation for practitioner and client study participants, as well as by advocating for increased attention to safety issues.
- Another area in which domestic violence organizations can take a proactive role involves working to identify lists of research priorities that can be used to inform individual researchers, other organizations, and funding agencies.

Appendix. Expert Panel Members

Name	Organization
Judy Kasten Bell	Utah Domestic Violence Council
Peggy Brown	Alaska Network on Domestic Violence and Assault
Lynda Carson	New Jersey Coalition for Battered Women
Elizabeth Collins	Colorado Coalition Against Domestic Violence
Deborah DeBare	Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence
Sarah DeWard	New York State Coalition Against Domestic Violence
Elizabeth Ditlevson	Arizona Coalition Against Domestic Violence
Margaret Hobart	Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence
Clema Lewis	Women's Coalition of St Croix
Stacey Mann	Kansas Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence
Grace Mattern	New Hampshire Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence
Kathy Moore	California Partnership to End Domestic Violence
Carol Post	Delaware Coalition Against Domestic Violence
Katie Ray-Jones	National Domestic Violence Hotline
Angie Rosser	West Virginia Coalition Against Domestic Violence
Marcia Smith	Oklahoma Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault
Karen Tronsgard-Scott	Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence
Emily van Schenkohf	Missouri Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence

Note: All expert panels did not participate in all three rounds of this study, as described in the "Who participated in this study?" section of this report.