

Fear and Silence:

2025 Insights from Advocates for Immigrant
Survivors of Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault,
and Human Trafficking





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Overview

The [Alliance for Immigrant Survivors](https://immigrantsurvivors.org) (AIS) is a national network of advocates and allies dedicated to defending and advocating for policies that ensure immigrant survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, trafficking, and other gender-based abuses have access to life-saving protections that all survivors of violence deserve.



In the Spring of 2025, AIS gathered feedback from 172 advocates and attorneys nationwide to better understand the current experiences, needs, and lived realities of immigrant survivors of domestic violence, sexual violence, and human trafficking. Findings reveal the significant negative impacts the current environment of increased immigration enforcement is having on immigrant survivors, including changes in help-seeking behaviors such as reporting crime, pursuing orders of protection, or contacting advocates for support.

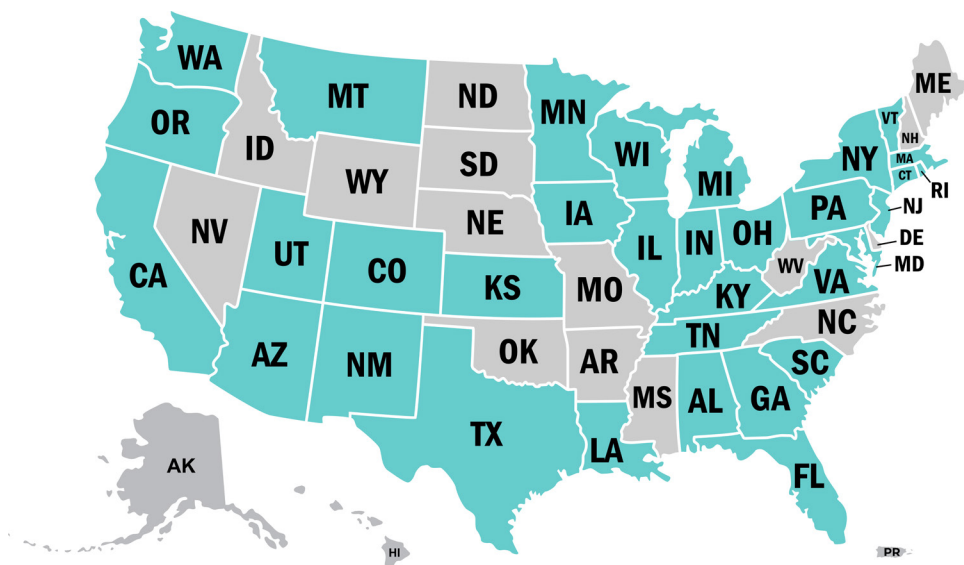
Perpetrators of crime routinely use a person's lack of legal immigration status (or dependent immigration status) to maintain power and control, threatening deportation to keep victims silent. Recognizing this, for the past 30 years, Congress has enshrined critical protections for immigrant survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, human trafficking, and other crimes in the Violence Against Women Act and the Trafficking Victims Protection Act with bipartisan support.

But recent policy shifts are eroding access to these protections and fueling a climate of fear. Local law enforcement participation in federal immigration actions, the detention and deportation of victims of crime who have come forward and enforcement actions at courthouses all work against the intent of these laws. These policies and practices do not just undermine survivor protections—they embolden abusers and put lives and communities at risk.

This report expands on previous findings and provides further insights into what advocates are witnessing when working with immigrant survivors.

Data Collection and Analysis

Methods and Survey Demographics



Advocates, attorneys, and service providers from 34 U.S. states, territories, and Washington, DC, took part in the survey.

Respondents hold diverse roles within their organizations. About half of the respondents, 53%, were victim services providers, followed by legal service providers, and holistic service providers (legal and social workers). The other category represented hospital/clinic roles, grassroots projects, Tribal coalitions, technical assistance providers, and psychologists.

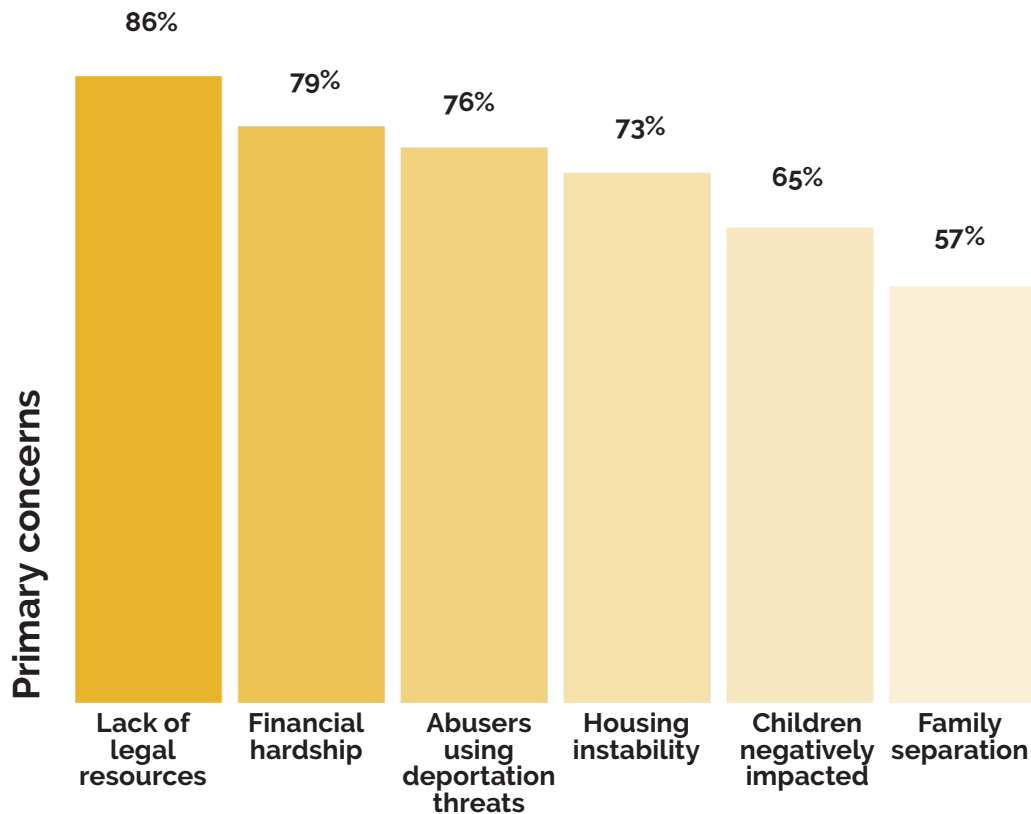
Responses ($n=172$) were recorded using an online platform in Spring 2025. Qualitative responses to



open-ended questions were analyzed in Spanish and English by two bilingual researchers using thematic analysis to identify themes across responses. Quantitative responses were analyzed to generate descriptive statistics.

Compounded Hardships

Advocates were asked to identify the primary concerns or additional hardships that their immigrant survivor clients are facing since November 2024. The most common responses that advocates shared were that immigrant survivors have faced a lack of legal resources, financial hardship, and abusers using the threat of deportation to keep them silent and prevent them from getting help. This was followed by housing instability, family separation, and children being negatively impacted (e.g., separated from parents, birthright citizenship ending, being deported alongside parents, and experiencing violence from abusers/perpetrators). As visualized, these concerns closely align in numbers, reflecting that these hardships are being experienced at similar levels throughout the country.



“Some families tell me they barely leave their homes anymore - they're scared to even go grocery shopping or take their kids to school. (...) They're making these huge life decisions based on fear - skipping doctor appointments, keeping kids home, turning down better jobs because they're in “riskier” areas. It's like they're living in invisible cages. We're seeing a lot more anxiety and depression, too, as people get more isolated.”

-Legal Service Provider

Advocates also noted that these concerns were compounded and experienced at the intersection of immigrant survivors' already marginalized identities, including documentation status, gender expression or identity, primary language, and ethnicity and race.

“Immigrant survivors of violence already face additional barriers and challenges in seeking services and support. Their experiences of abuse and violence intersect with their marginalization in society — as immigrants, limited English proficient (LEP) individuals, LGBTQ community members, and through social discrimination. When they face further challenges due to shifts in the political climate — such as increased immigration scrutiny, discrimination, and even hate violence — their fears and trauma can be compounded, heightening their stress levels. These added challenges can also trap survivors in cycles of harm longer, preventing them from moving beyond the violence and toward thriving, more self-sufficient lives.”

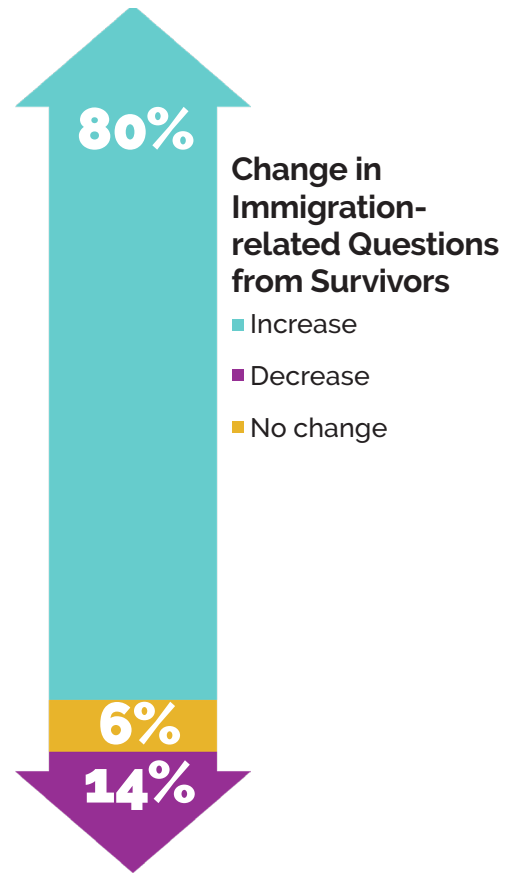
-Victim Service Provider

Immigration-related Concerns

79.7% of respondents reported an increase in immigration-related questions from survivors since November 2024, followed by 14% reporting no change and 6.4% reporting a decrease of immigration-related questions.

Respondents reported an increase in immigration-related questions on topics such as:

- Immigration policy changes
- Internal Revenue Service (IRS) agreements to share personal data
- Personal and family safety planning in case they are detained
- Immigration relief such as Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) self-petitions, U-Visas, T-Visas, and asylum
- Interacting with police
- International student concerns
- Legal aid for domestic violence and family law matters
- Access to public assistance/benefits



Help-Seeking Trends

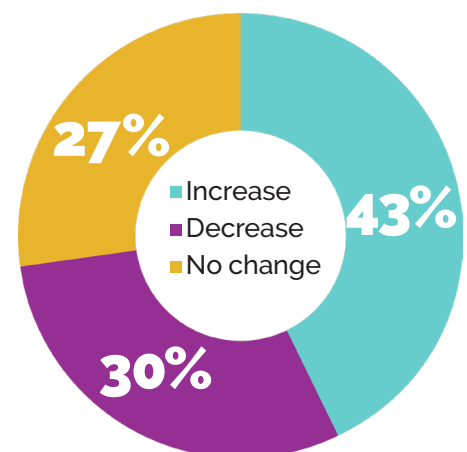


About 2 out of every 5 respondents noted an increase in the number of immigrant survivors reaching out to their agencies for support in the past 6 months. Some (30.2%) respondents reported a decrease in immigrant survivors reaching out, and 27.3% reported no change.

Some respondents shared reflections that there was an increased community need for a range of information and support including immigration protections for victims, know your rights resources, and general immigration information. Advocates also described a significant increase in requests for legal aid support in areas related to adjusting legal status, including filing for U-Visas, T-Visas, and VAWA self-petitions.

Advocates reported that even those survivors with legal status or a Green Card had questions about their safety as it relates to immigration enforcement. Although in some instances community members were reaching out more, advocates also noted a distinct fear of their personal information being shared with other agencies.

While many advocates described a general increase in outreach, at the same time, there was a decrease in clients showing up or coming to find services in person, stating that:



“People are afraid to come forward because of the current attack on immigrants. It seems/feels people want to stay hidden until/unless ICE finds them somehow.”

-Legal Service Provider Advocate

Respondents who observed a decrease in immigrant survivors seeking help noted certain explanations they believed to be driving the decrease, including 1) fear around deportation or detention, 2) worries about the current sociopolitical climate, and 3) fewer referrals from other agencies. Specifically, respondents reported a significant decrease in Spanish-speaking survivors calling for support or services, including a decrease in requests for help filing restraining orders related to domestic violence, fewer requests for shelter services, crisis calls, and less reporting to police. Advocates also shared that, as a result of the decline in immigrant survivors seeking in-person services, some have incorporated virtual services into their service model to decrease barriers to help-seeking.

Interactions with Law Enforcement



A majority of respondents (75.6%, $n=130$) reported that immigrant survivors have concerns about contacting the police. Open-ended responses regarding immigrant survivor interaction with police emphasized:

- Concerns about arrest, detention, or deportation
- Privacy concerns related to information sharing between agencies, and fear that local police are working with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)
- Fear of being in public spaces
- Being warned by community or family members to not to report or go to the police

Advocates described a long-standing sentiment among the communities they serve that the relationship between local law enforcement and the community is rooted in mistrust and trauma. This, paired with the current anti-immigrant sentiment, has reinforced the reluctance of immigrant survivors to reach out for help.

“This fear is rooted in both past trauma and the current perception—sometimes confirmed—that local law enforcement may collaborate with federal immigration authorities. As a result, many choose not to seek help, leaving them isolated and at greater risk. This chilling effect not only endangers survivors but also weakens community trust in systems designed to offer protection. (...)”

-Holistic Services Provider

Going to Court

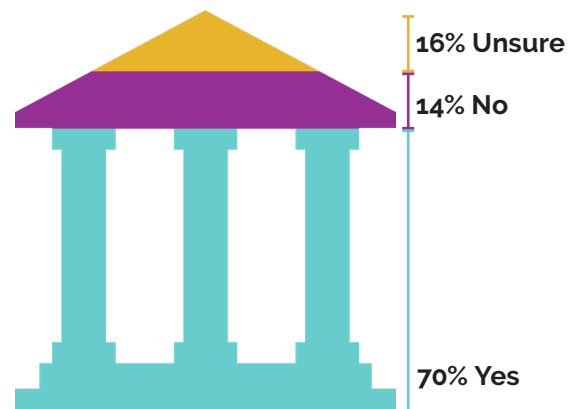
Most (70.3%, $n=121$) respondents reported that immigrant survivors have concerns about going to court for a matter related to their abuser/offender.

Respondents shared that these concerns included:

- Fear of arrest, detention, or deportation at or near the courthouse
- Abuser/offender using their immigration status as a threat or control tactic
- Concern that courts are working with ICE

One advocate described their experience working with a survivor in a criminal case. The survivor was asked questions related to her immigration status during court proceedings and consequently, she decided to no longer participate in the investigation.

Concerns about going to court for a matter related to the abuser/offender



"One of the survivors that I [advocate] work with was asked immigration related questions during a deposition for a criminal case and decided to no longer participate with the criminal investigation or prosecutor's efforts out of fear that they would be detained in the courtroom."

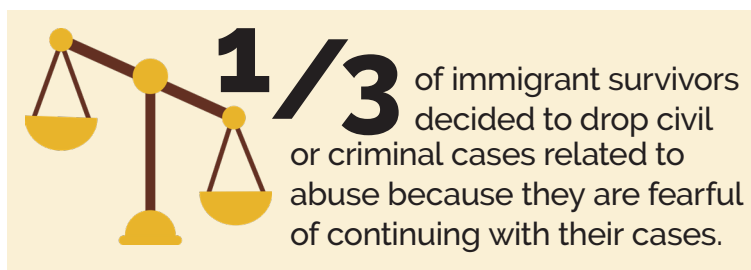
-Victim Service Provider

Advocates also described the dynamic of immigrant survivors receiving threats of being reported to immigration enforcement and deported from their abusers/perpetrators to silence them and deter them from going to court. Immigrant survivors also shared with advocates that their fear of having the abuser/offender present at case hearings and attempting to have them arrested and detained by ICE at the courthouse as another dynamic driving their hesitancy to go to court.

Participation in the Justice System

Nearly half of the advocates surveyed ($n=80$) reported that immigrant survivors who had concerns about contacting the police or going to court ultimately chose not to due to fear.

In the specific context of accessing courts, 35.5% ($n=61$) of advocates reported they worked with immigrant survivors who have decided to drop civil or criminal cases related to abuse because they are fearful of continuing with their cases.



Respondents noted that reasons for dropping civil or criminal cases included fear of arrest, detention, deportation, retaliation from abusers, and the potential heartbreak of family separation.

Specifically, advocates shared that immigrant survivors had dropped cases as a result of direct threats from their abusers/offenders to have them deported in retaliation for seeking safety and justice. Other reasons that cases were dropped included financial hardships or pressure from family.

“Our organization has supported immigrant survivors who have made the difficult decision not to pursue civil or criminal cases related to their abuse due to deep fears, particularly around immigration enforcement and potential consequences tied to their legal status. Many survivors worry that continuing with their case might expose them to ICE, lead to detention or deportation, or result in separation from their children, especially when their immigration status is tied to the abuser.”

-Holistic Services Provider

The reasons respondents described for instances where immigrant survivors chose not to drop civil or criminal cases largely included having continued accompaniment and clear guidance from advocates about what their risks and rights are. As a result of the concerns immigrant survivors are expressing, advocates shared that they are spending more time informing clients of what rights they have when pursuing a civil or criminal case, and have used strategies such as not requiring the client to appear in court or to request that they be permitted to appear virtually.

Strategies for Addressing the Needs of Immigrant Survivors

Below are the open-ended responses capturing what respondents shared would be useful in addressing the needs of immigrant survivors. The most commonly named strategies were:



Local, state, and federal laws/
legislation and policy updates



Legal aid and support



Safety planning resources for
immigrant survivors, families, and
children



“Know Your Rights” resources

Respondents also noted these resources as critical to effectively supporting immigrant survivors:

- Resources to understand the scope and mandate of local immigration enforcement
- Technical assistance for service providers
- Privacy protections and safe technology use resources for survivors
- Language access resources
- Short and long-term supportive resources for immigrant survivors, including shelter, housing, and support groups
- Therapy and mental health resources
- Community healing resources and support groups
- Connecting with local allies and potential partnerships
- Best practice resources for serving survivors with disabilities

Conclusion and Recommendations

This nationwide survey of advocates and attorneys captures a notable increase in survivors reaching out with immigration-related questions and concerns from winter 2024 to spring 2025. Survey findings show immigrant survivors throughout the United States and U.S. territories are in urgent need of legal, financial, and housing resources. Confidence in and access to the criminal justice system is complicated by local community-level traumas and hardships, as well as rapidly changing immigration policies and enforcement priorities. Most advocates surveyed reported that immigrant survivors are experiencing threats of deportation as a control tactic leveraged by individuals who use violence and that this is having a profound influence on immigrant survivor help-seeking behavior given the current climate of fear.

In 2025, immigrant survivors are navigating decisions about help-seeking while trying to balance immigration related concerns and fears of being arrested, detained, and deported simply for being undocumented. Many live in near constant fear of being separated from their children if they try to report the abuse they are experiencing to local authorities.

We put forward the following recommendations based on these survey findings:



For Congress:

- Support policies that are proven to increase survivor and community safety
- Oppose policies that contribute to immigrant survivors being discouraged from seeking help, such as efforts to increase funding for enforcement, promoting further entanglement between immigration enforcement and state and local police
- Support policies to protect paths to safety and justice for survivors like supporting policies limiting enforcement actions at sensitive locations
- Take action to prevent the unjust detention and deportation of survivors, including those with pending immigration applications
- Support robust funding for victim services and benefit programs so that they can meet the needs of all survivors in communities across the U.S., including culturally specific programs
- Oppose efforts to politicize domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence, stalking, and human trafficking by scapegoating, demonizing, and violating due process rights of immigrants
- Fully exercise constitutional oversight authority to ensure immigration enforcement practices are lawful, humane, and aligned with congressional intent and consistently document and report violations of the law and individual rights
- Support efforts to improve processing times for survivor-based immigration cases, eliminate the caps for T visas, U visas, and SIJ classifications and explicitly recognize gender as a protected ground of asylum under U.S. law



For the Administration:

- Reinstatement guidelines limiting immigration enforcement actions at sensitive locations, including at courthouses, medical centers, and victim service providers
- Reinstatement guidance on implementing a victim-centered approach with respect to ICE enforcement actions including a commitment to refrain from arresting, detaining, or taking enforcement action against individuals with pending or approved victim-based immigration benefits, such as T-Visas, U-Visas, Continued Presence, and VAWA relief
- Protect and expand language access for survivors, recognizing that professional interpretation and translation are legal and ethical necessities fundamental to survivor safety, autonomy, and access to justice



For State and Local Government Agencies:

- Grow capacity for local data collection and documentation of immigration-related concerns and trends among survivors
- Support family and individual healing through accessible physical and mental health services and community support opportunities
- Maintain data privacy and integrity across government systems



For Advocates:

- Ensure access to resources on safety planning specific to immigrant survivors and their families
- Strengthen local partnerships and resources among trusted entities including coalitions, churches, mutual-aid groups and community-led organizations in order to ensure holistic support is available to immigrant survivors wherever they live, no matter their status

The [Alliance for Immigrant Survivors](#) (AIS) is a national network of advocates and allies dedicated to defending and advocating for policies that ensure immigrant survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, trafficking, and other gender-based abuses have access to life-saving protections that all survivors of violence deserve.



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[Alliance for Immigrant Survivors](#)



policy@immigrantsurvivors.org