

# Charlotte-Mecklenburg Domestic Violence Research Collaborative

## Guidelines for Defining Domestic Violence

### Background: Why Defining Domestic Violence Matters

The concept of domestic violence does not have a universal definition. For example, local victim service providers such as Safe Alliance and Mecklenburg County Community Support Services define domestic violence as any form of abuse occurring between former or current intimate partners. [North Carolina General Statute 50B](#) defines domestic violence as bodily injury, threats of bodily injury, or actions inflicting substantial emotional distress between parties with a “personal relationship”. The federal [Department of Housing and Urban Development](#) (HUD) defines domestic violence as “dangerous or life-threatening conditions that relate to violence against the individual or family member that either takes place in, or [makes] him or her afraid to return to, their primary nighttime residence”.

Definitions of domestic violence matter. For individuals seeking services and service providers, these definitions determine who is included or excluded from direct services. These definitions determine who service providers and researchers “count” when examining local data about domestic violence. Definitions are also used to decide who benefits from local, state, and national funding streams, legal protections, and policy decisions. A universal definition of domestic violence does not need to exist; however, individuals, service providers, researchers, funders, and decision makers should be intentional and informed about the definitions they are using, and the impacts of that definition(s).

The Domestic Violence Research Collaborative (DVRC) is a coalition of self-identified domestic violence survivors, service providers, and researchers in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg area who convened to explore issues related to domestic violence, data, and research. Together, the DVRC has developed guidelines to support individuals’ and organizations’ critical examination of how they define domestic violence, and recommendations for improving the definition.

### Proposed Guidelines for Defining Domestic Violence

#### **Guideline #1: Be clear and transparent about your definition of domestic violence.**

##### *Rationale for Guideline #1:*

DVRC discussions revealed that individuals’ definitions of domestic violence vary greatly. When DVRC members were asked to define domestic violence, they provided definitions informed by their personal experiences, culture, beliefs, professional expertise, and/or role in the community. Some DVRC members defined domestic violence broadly to include any type of abuse happening within a home (a definition more aligned with HUD’s definition). This broader definition could include dynamics such as intimate partner violence, family violence, child maltreatment, and/or elder abuse. Other DVRC members defined domestic violence more specifically as abuse occurring between current or former intimate partners. The differences in how individuals approached defining domestic violence mirrored the differences in how organizations and institutions define domestic violence.

No single person, organization or institution necessarily has the “best” or “right” definition of domestic violence. It is okay for definitions to vary. However, these conversations illustrate the importance of

recognizing that different definitions exist and that people define domestic violence differently. It is especially important that domestic violence-related service providers, policy makers, and researchers are clear and transparent about what their definition of domestic violence does and does not include. Without a transparent definition, domestic violence survivors or others seeking services may incorrectly believe that they can receive services from that organization or provider. Similarly, policymakers may believe they are addressing increases in one type of violence (e.g., intimate partner violence), when they are addressing increases in a different or overlapping type of violence (e.g., family violence).

Here is an example of what can happen when definitions of domestic violence are unclear: *Victim Services Agency (VSA) indicates on its website that it provides domestic violence services. There is an adult in the community who is sharing a home with her adult child. The adult child is harming their adult parent with threats, verbal abuse, and psychological abuse. At a loss for what to do, the adult parent searches Google for “domestic violence services”, locates VSA, and calls for help. After explaining their situation, the caller hears the VSA advocate say, “Our agency provides domestic violence services, and what you are describing is family violence. I’m sorry, but you are not eligible for our services.”* The disconnect in this example is that VSA defines domestic violence as intimate partner violence, and the caller defines domestic violence more broadly. If VSA were to use a more specific descriptor for their services, such as “intimate partner domestic violence”, there may be less confusion about what services they provide and who is eligible.

Here is another example: *Domestic Violence Research Agency (DVRA) conducts a study of the prevalence of domestic violence in the community. They use a broad definition that encompasses many forms of family violence, household violence, and intimate partner violence. When DVRA shares their findings, they report the total number of households that reported experiencing any form of domestic violence, without differentiating between intimate partner violence, household violence, and family violence. Local policy makers use the data and findings to make decisions about how to allocate funding for domestic violence services, but they do not realize DVRA has used a broad definition of domestic violence. They assume the DVRA’s data includes only intimate partner violence, and they base their funding decisions on this assumption.* The disconnect in this example is that DVRA defines domestic violence broadly, whereas policy makers use DVRA’s work to make funding decisions about a more specific population. If the definitions of domestic violence were clearer and more transparent in this scenario, the policy makers may have made different funding decisions.

## **Guideline #2: Determine what word choices are most appropriate for your definition of domestic violence.**

### *Rationale for Guideline #2:*

Following from Guideline #1, being clear and transparent about definitions of domestic violence requires being intentional about word choices. A variety of terms exist that can help service providers, researchers, and/or policy makers determine whether “domestic violence” is the best wording to use, or whether one or more alternative terms may increase clarity and accuracy.

The DVRC identified the following examples of terms or concepts that are affiliated with domestic violence:

- Intimate partner domestic violence
- Interpersonal violence
- Intimate partner violence
- Relationship violence
- Family violence
- Household violence
- Teen dating violence
- Abuse
- Dating abuse
- Dating violence
- Sexual violence
- Physical abuse
- Financial abuse
- Coerced debt
- Employment manipulation
- Cyber/digital/technology abuse
- Stalking
- Psychological abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Verbal abuse
- Religious abuse
- Cultural abuse
- Pet/animal abuse
- Gaslighting
- Child maltreatment
- Child abuse or neglect
- Human trafficking
- Elder abuse or neglect
- Power and control
- Coercive control
- Pattern of behavior
- Generational cycle
- Threats
- Isolation
- Fear
- Manipulation

This list is not comprehensive, but it illustrates the wide range of language and terminology that can come into play with domestic violence. Sometimes general terms may be appropriate, but other times specific terms may be necessary to communicate accurately about domestic violence-related services, policies, or research.

Here is an example of what can happen when wording is not specific enough: *A local government creates a task force to give constituents an opportunity to advise local officials on the status of intimate partner domestic violence issues. When naming the task force, officials choose the general wording “Domestic Violence Task Force”, thinking that language will be more familiar to constituents than “intimate partner domestic violence”. When the task force members convene for their first meeting, they discover they are not on the same page about the scope of the task force. Some members wanted to focus on violence between household members such as siblings, grown children and parents. Others wanted to focus on stalking, including stalking by strangers. Still others wanted to focus on youth violence. Only a few task force members understood “domestic violence” to mean “intimate partner violence”. The unclear word choice created a mismatch between the intended scope of the task force and the interests of the task force members. As a result, task force meetings were ineffective, and the group struggled to achieve consensus on objectives.* In this scenario, using specific verbiage for the title of the task force would have been helpful. A simple change like “Intimate Partner Domestic Violence Task Force” instead of “Domestic Violence Task Force” would convey the purpose more accurately. Because “intimate partner domestic violence” may be a less common term among constituents, the advertisement for the task force should define the term and clarify the scope of the group.

Here is another example: *Victim Services Agency (VSA) includes a section on its client intake form where clients can indicate types of harm they have experienced. Options include “domestic violence”, “sexual violence”, “human trafficking”, “stalking”, “child maltreatment”, “bullying”, “elder abuse”, and “other”. VSA staff collect this information about each client and enter it into a secure database. VSA receives a request for information from a legislative liaison who is helping to draft a bill to provide legal protections and remedies for individuals who have suffered financial abuse from an intimate partner. The legislative liaison asks VSA for data from the last five years documenting how many clients have sought help for any form of financial abuse perpetrated by an intimate partner. VSA is unable to supply data for the request because the information they collect from clients is not that detailed. VSA can tell the legislative liaison*

*how many domestic violence clients they have served, but they cannot report how many of these clients experience financial abuse specifically.* In this scenario, the lack of specificity on VSA's intake form contributes to a gap in data, which could impact the strength of the legislative policy proposal. If VSA were to collaborate with local and state policy makers and researchers to determine what specific client data fields would be required to support systemic change efforts, VSA could then assess the feasibility of altering its internal processes and systems to gather the desired data.

Guideline #1 and Guideline #2 go hand-in-hand. When service providers, researchers, and/or policy makers are clear and transparent about their definitions of domestic violence and also intentional about word choice, several benefits occur:

- People in the community who are seeking services can more easily locate the services that are available to help them
- Providers who are seeking to refer clients for services can more accurately locate other providers who will accept the referral
- The scope of a problem can be more accurately measured and reported using data
- Services that exist for a given issue and population can be accurately assessed
- Gaps in services for a given issue and population can be accurately assessed
- Resources, funding, and policies can be better designed to meet the needs of a given community or population

DVRC discussions surfaced several questions that are worth considering when evaluating if a definition of domestic violence is adequately clear and transparent, with appropriate verbiage:

- How explicit is your definition of domestic violence with respect to the types of relationships that are included/excluded in the definition?
- How explicit is your definition of domestic violence with respect to the forms of harm, abuse, or violence that are included/excluded in the definition?
- Is your definition of domestic violence consistent across platforms, such as website, brochures, social media, database, client paperwork, written policies, community reports, etc.?
- Does your definition either use common language or explain uncommon terms?
- Is your word choice surrounding domestic violence intentional, specific, and clear?
- Does your word choice avoid the use of acronyms, abbreviations, or shorthand that can create confusion?

### **Guideline #3: Examine the cultural inclusivity of your definition of domestic violence**

#### *Rationale for Guideline #3:*

DVRC discussions highlighted that domestic violence impacts people across demographics including race, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, disability, immigration status, and marital status. It is improbable that any definition of domestic violence will capture every cultural nuance, but it is important to strive for cultural inclusivity to promote equitable treatment of all domestic violence survivors. Historically, some definitions of domestic violence have purposefully excluded and oppressed certain individuals, groups, and communities of people.

One example of a culturally exclusive definition of domestic violence is the language that was found in many state statutes until recently. In December 2020, North Carolina became the last state in the country to grant domestic violence protections to same-sex couples. Prior to the landmark North Carolina Court of Appeals ruling, Chapter 50B of the North Carolina General Statutes excluded LGBTQ individuals from its domestic violence protections by defining a domestic violence “personal relationship” as “persons of the opposite sex” who have lived together or are in a dating relationship. This language intentionally excluded LGBTQ couples from the state definition of domestic violence relationships that are eligible for Chapter 50B protective orders and other legal remedies.

Another example of cultural implications for domestic violence definitions comes from the research of Maya Ragavan. She shares that some cultural communities (e.g., South Asian) think of domestic violence as expanding beyond intimate partners to include other family members and in-laws as part of the violence. Other communities define domestic violence in connection with institutional violence such as colonization, slavery, and mass incarceration. And still other communities may not have a particular definition of domestic violence, if even to speak of it in their culture is unthinkable (Ragavan et al., 2020; Ragavan et al., 2018). When developing definitions of domestic violence, it is important to account for the cultural nuance and complexity that may impact how an individual relates to the definition, or whether they can relate to it at all.

When service providers, researchers, and/or policy makers prioritize cultural considerations in definitions of domestic violence, benefits may include:

- Advancing equitable access to services and/or legal protections
- Raising awareness that domestic violence impacts people from all backgrounds
- Building trust with historically oppressed individuals, groups, or communities

Here are a few questions that may prompt examination of cultural inclusivity:

- Is your definition of domestic violence communicated in a way that excludes particular individuals, groups, or communities? If so, is the exclusion intentional or unintentional?
- Who can see themselves in your definition of domestic violence? Who cannot?
- Is your definition of domestic violence communicated in a way that prioritizes the perspective of white survivors over Black and brown survivors?
- Have you asked diverse individuals, groups, or communities for input on how you are defining domestic violence?

#### ***Guideline #4: Examine your definition of domestic violence through a trauma-informed lens.***

##### *Rationale for Guideline #4:*

DVRC participants pointed out opportunities to bring a trauma-informed approach to definitions of domestic violence by starting with the perspective of the survivor. Domestic violence is complex, and survivor perspectives are diverse. Attempting to think about a definition for a survivor’s perspective can help identify aspects of the definition that may be retraumatizing or insensitive.

For example, definitions of domestic violence that center around physical violence and minimize other forms of violence can be retraumatizing. Most forms of domestic violence are not physical, and yet physical scars and injuries garner the most attention. When defining domestic violence, it is important to acknowledge the hidden impact of other forms of abuse and violence including emotional, verbal, psychological, financial, and technological. Definitions of domestic violence that center around survivors who have left, or are planning to leave, the abusive partner can also be retraumatizing. This focus neglects the fact that many survivors either choose to stay with their abusive partners, or they do not have a choice except to stay. Either way, the survivor is still a survivor. Venturing into the question of “Why doesn’t (s)he just leave?” is harmful. Definitions that pathologize domestic violence are also harmful. Pathologizing domestic violence means conveying something is wrong with the victim/survivor, as opposed to acknowledging that something traumatic happened to them.

When service providers, researchers, and/or policy makers use a trauma-informed lens to shape definitions of domestic violence, benefits may include:

- Increased likelihood that survivors will engage with individuals, groups and institutions that convey an understanding of trauma
- Reduced stigma and judgment surrounding issues of domestic violence

Here are a few questions that may promote a trauma-informed lens:

- To what extent does the language in your definition of domestic violence come across as empowering and affirming for victims or survivors?
- To what extent does the language in your definition of domestic violence either increase or reduce stigma related to domestic violence?