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Victim Advocacy

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Master of Science in Criminology & Criminal Justice

Merrimack College

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Victim Advocacy

When I was younger, I didn't necessarily know what I wanted to do for a career, but I knew that I wanted to help people. As I got older, I was able to express my beliefs through politics and explore my love for sociology which helped me gain a better understanding of society and those around me. In college, I earned degrees in both political science and sociology. During my time in undergrad, I worked at my school's women's center where I made some wonderful friends and had the chance to further explore my passion for women's rights and feminism. The women's center's purpose focused on creating awareness of feminist ideals and providing advocacy for all those that were oppressed. We hosted events, such as "Take Back the Night," where college students took a stand and walked around campus at night as a sign of strength and to raise awareness regarding college students who have experienced sexual assault.

Working at the women's center was one of the best experiences in my life, and those that worked there taught me the importance of bravery and always standing up for what you believed in. Once I graduated, I knew I always wanted to go back to school to get my Master's degree, but I was unsure of what I wanted to study and what my career focus would be. After the murder of George Floyd, I decided I wanted to study criminal justice to help those that have been wronged by the system. Through my graduate work at Merrimack College, I have discovered a love for victim advocacy. By following a career in victim advocacy, I am able to help those in need while also holding true to my feminist political views. Those that are in victim advocacy may have an extremely hard and emotionally taxing job but, it is my opinion, that the benefit of helping those in need outweighs the challenges of the job.

Those that work in victim advocacy are advocates for victims of crime. Victim advocates often provide support for domestic violence and sexual assault survivors, children who have been

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abused, and families who have lost a loved one to murder. This paper focuses on how victim advocates help to provide services for domestic violence and sexual assault survivors. Generally speaking, women are significantly more likely to be victims in these types of cases. For example, “1 in 7 women and 1 in 25 men have been injured by an intimate partner, and 1 in 5 women and 1 in 71 men in the United States has been raped in their lifetime” (NCADV, 2021). Victim advocates work to help those in need in whatever way they can, so that these individuals feel safe and are protected. Victim advocates also work to make sure that these victims are given the justice that they deserve. Victim advocates can either work in non-profit organizations, government agencies, such as the district attorney’s office, or at the state level to provide support and justice to these victims.

When a victim advocate works for a nonprofit organization, they work for an organization that isn’t directly tied and funded by the government. These types of organizations and services may include shelters which provide housing for those who may be escaping their abuser. Other types of services may also be to help provide education and job opportunities for women who may have been financially dependent upon their abuser. This helps survivors to get back on their feet and to make them secure in their new lives away from their abuser. Compared to government run organizations, nonprofit organizations provide more freedom to explore other ways in providing help to these individuals that are suffering from this violence and abuse.

Nonprofit organizations, such as the YWCA, work by providing these types of services to victims. These services include providing counseling, housing, job training, and a crisis hotline for victims of sexual assault or domestic violence (YWCA, 2020). The YWCA has volunteers, as well as paid employees, who work their crisis line where individuals who are experiencing domestic violence or sexual assault can call the crisis line for help. Volunteers and employees

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are trained to provide the best care as well as ensure confidentiality while offering services to these victims.

Agencies at the county and state level are government run and government funded organizations that work towards helping individuals that have experienced domestic violence or sexual assault by providing services, but they also more specifically in comparison to non-profit organizations, work towards providing justice to these individuals by holding abusers accountable within the criminal justice system. At the state level, individuals who work within victim advocacy are usually employed by the district attorney's office where they will work with local cities and towns and their authorities in order to help survivors living within the county to get help and provide justice and protection to these individuals. Victim advocates work closely with the district attorney's office, but they are different and separate from the district attorney's office. When looking at the Essex County district attorney's office website, you'll find a section titled Essex Victim and Witness Services. This website discusses how victim advocates work closely with the district attorney's office to provide justice for these victims. They provide support both in an emotional sense as well as providing services such as housing for these victims. The district attorney's office website also provides information on victim rights law as well as information on how individuals can get restraining orders against their abusers (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2021).

At the state level, there are some government funded services that are provided to survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault that may include housing, education and job opportunities, but at the state level those that work in victim advocacy for the state are more the individuals who work for providing justice for these victims that have experienced abuse through either domestic violence or sexual assault or any other victim involved case such as homicide or

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child abuse. One state level service known as the Massachusetts Office of Victim Assistance (MOVA) for short, provides services for a wide range of victims needs, “MOVA strives to advance victim rights by ensuring all victims and survivors of crime across the Commonwealth are supported and empowered through access to high-quality services that are trauma-informed, culturally-responsive, and reflective of diverse communities. MOVA achieves this through survivor-informed work, advocacy for enhanced victim rights and services, partnerships with agencies and individuals, and a commitment to providing funding and services for underserved and marginalized communities”(Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2021).

As previously discussed MOVA works for victims of child abuse, human trafficking, families of homicide victims, and adult services for domestic violence and sexual assault victims. On their website alone they provide much information on local organizations that can help provide services to these individuals based on where they live locally. They also provide this information in multiple languages, so that there are no issues with a language barrier for these victims who need help. Something else that is important to note on the mass.gov website is that there is an exit site button at the top of the website that is intended for victims to use if they need to. If they are looking for services, but may have to exit quickly so that their abuser does not see them looking up these services they can hit the exit site button in order to get off of it quickly.

Working as a victim advocate either in the nonprofit or government sector, the roles and responsibilities remain the same in that the victim advocates purpose is to help and protect individuals who have experienced domestic violence or sexual assault. To be a part of this field, it is important to have immense compassion and empathy in order to gain a better understanding of what these individuals have been through and to make sure that they are heard, their experience is validated and they are able to be protected by our criminal justice system. Society

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usually only sees one part of what goes on in our criminal justice system through punishing criminals by holding them accountable for their crimes and, in some instances, putting them into our prison system. However, there is also another side to the criminal justice system that works to help provide justice, as well as services to individuals who have been victims of these crimes. Victim advocates must be able to provide the best care that we can for these survivors because they are in a vulnerable state. It is important to help them feel safe and secure, so that they can be able to then work towards healing from the pain and trauma that they have experienced.

When looking to become a victim advocate, there are certain skills and educational requirements that are necessary. When looking up jobs for victim advocacy on popular job application sites, such as Indeed, you will find jobs that are either in the nonprofit or government sector. Based on the types of victim advocacy jobs available, there may be different types of requirements that are necessary in order to be best suited for those jobs. Both have educational requirements which mostly favor education that is higher than a bachelor's degree, such as a Master's or a law degree. The types of disciplines for the degree can vary in terms of what can best work for someone who would like to work in victim advocacy. Some specialties could include a degree in social work, criminal justice, and human services.

What is beneficial to being within our criminal justice degree program is that there are trainings and certifications that we may acquire that can help us better fulfill our career aspirations. For example, one training that I went through during my time here at Merrimack was a 51A mandated reporting training. Mandated reporters are designated to report instances of abuse. Someone becomes a mandated reporter when they are in charge of individuals, and become responsible for their safety. For example, we see in college, resident assistants who are in charge of their dorm become mandated reporters in order to keep their residents safe.

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Individuals that work with young children, such as caregivers, daycare workers, or teachers are assigned to be mandated reporters, since they interact with a vulnerable population on a regular basis, and could notice signs of abuse that others may not see. Once mandated reporters have any suspicion or evidence of abuse, they are obligated to fill out a report and notify their supervisors, or the proper authorities, so that the situation of possible abuse can be addressed and intervention can be provided if necessary. With mandated reporting one who is in these types of roles needs to report situations of abuse to the authorities, so that these cases can be taken care of properly before anything else occurs. Situations of abuse would include, but are not limited to, situations of physical abuse, such as physical violence or rape/molestation. Signs of this abuse would include finding marks, bruises on the individual. Signs of mental/emotional abuse may be more difficult to notice, but signs such as seeing the individual become distressed around their abuser, or the individual becoming quiet or unresponsive to questioning. This type of training can be beneficial to helping identify the signs of abuse and how to handle those difficult situations when you are working with victims of abuse.

Some other trainings that would be beneficial would be trainings and educational seminars on mental health issues/addiction, so that you are better prepared at handling difficult situations where you might encounter situations of a mental health crisis from a victim who is experiencing immense abuse and trauma. If you are better equipped to help them in those situations it will make the bond between victim and victim advocate stronger, “For patients, trauma-informed care offers the opportunity to engage more fully in their health care, develop a trusting relationship with their provider, and improve long-term health outcomes” (Trauma-Informed Care Implementation Resource Center, 2020). By using a trauma informed response to care for the victims that you are working with this will help these individuals to feel more

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comfortable to talk about the trauma that they are dealing with. For example, back in my undergraduate studies, I participated in a mental health first aid training that taught individuals in leadership roles how to recognize the signs of someone experiencing mental health issues. The training also gave us tips and education on how to properly handle certain situations such as someone experiencing suicidal ideation, and how we should go about helping that individual get the help that they need.

Some skills that are necessary to qualify as a victim advocate would be to have immense professionalism that is able to handle the tough situations that victim advocates must be able to handle. Some skills may be easily identifiable in a workplace setting, but some skills that are needed for this job are represented by who that individual is as a person. Victim advocates need to have great listening skills in order to be able to listen to those that they are representing and being able to let them know that they are being heard and then to provide them with any help that they need. Another beneficial skill would be if a victim advocate was bilingual, especially if they could speak both English and Spanish. In the United States, it is especially beneficial to have bilingual victim advocates that can speak Spanish, so that we can help a significant demographic population within our country when these individuals need help when utilizing these resources. We do not want to create any more obstacles or barriers for victims within this field, so it is a crucial skill within this career. Another important skill that is needed within this job would be to have immense compassion and empathy for these victims. This job is not for everyone, especially not for someone who is just looking for a paycheck. Being a victim advocate is devoting yourself and your career towards helping individuals who have suffered immense trauma.

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In terms of advancement in the career of victim advocacy it would involve starting out in a victim advocate position, such as a volunteer or a victim advocate working with victims while also providing services for those individuals. As your career progresses in the nonprofit organization you may be able to advance to a program director, or lead victim advocate where you would be able to have a greater say in how the organization is operated and how to greater help individuals that have been victims of domestic violence or sexual assault.

According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, there you will find statistics in relation to job opportunities in particular career fields. These statistics are helpful in predicting what type of growth could potentially happen for a career in the future. When looking at statistics in relation to the social assistance sector, which relates to victim advocates in the category of either social and community service managers or social and human service assistance it shows statistically that there will be an increase in employment in the future within the United States. Similar to many social work type career options, victim advocacy is also a career path that does not provide the most lucrative benefit. Once again to reiterate the fact that in order to be a victim advocate you must not be looking for a paycheck. In order to be a victim advocate it is best to care more about the work that you were doing to help these individuals and to not worry or stress too much about the salary. Working as a victim advocate you will find the mean annual income of about \$35-\$40,000 (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). If you were to be a director or assistant director within a nonprofit organization, or if you were to be a higher up within the government sector you'd be looking at doubling your salary to upwards of \$70,000 (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). It also looks as though we are seeing a significant increase in employment within non-private organizations in comparison to the government sector. Therefore, for someone who may be looking towards a career path in victim advocacy, they may be more likely

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to find a job within a nonprofit organization since many places are hiring and increasing employment in the near future. From 2019 to 2029, it is predicted that the social assistance sector will have a rate of change of a 1.4 percent increase in that job sector (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021).

As in any career, there are some challenges that you may need to face within the profession. The job of victim advocacy in itself is a hard job in that those that work as victim advocates have to work for a very vulnerable group of people within our society who have experienced immense hardships and trauma surrounding experiences of domestic violence or sexual assault. That in and of itself can be a very intense and troublesome task to hold on one's shoulders, so those that go into this career should also have support systems, so that they are able to help themselves, so that they can then go out and help others. It is also very important for individuals that work as victim advocates to have the right intentions and to have the correct training and education in order to help these individuals who are suffering from mental and physical traumas.

Not only may you have to check in with yourself to see if you are doing well mentally and physically as a victim advocate, you may also have to watch out for your coworkers who work with you in these intense circumstances. It is necessary to recognize stress and anxiety within yourself while working as a victim advocate, it is also important to notice the signs, so that you can also help those around you either victims or coworkers within your organization, in order to help them better. It is also imperative to practice self care strategies in order to alleviate the stress and anxiety of the job. Self care strategies could include meditation, physical exercise, spending time with friends etc. There are many healthy practices that can be utilized to relieve stress and anxiety, so it is important to find the right self care strategies that work for you. If the

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organization is filled with stress and anxiety this could lead to dysfunction and could lead to poor coworker relationships that could be filled with anger or annoyance. With this type of dysfunction this creates toxicity that does not benefit the victims that are trying to get help for themselves, so it's important that we limit that dysfunction and toxicity and work towards having healthy minds and better workplace relationships, so that we are better able to help victims.

Challenges Facing Victim Advocates

Work Environment and Workplace Conflict

There most likely will be some issues of conflict within organizations from time to time, just like any other career path. It is important to make sure to minimize the amount of conflict, as much as possible, because it is more important to focus on the survivors and caring for their needs. One key challenge victim advocates are facing is that, while there may be some conflict within the organization itself, there may also be conflict with other agencies responsible for working together for a victim's care. For example, Patterson and Pennefather (2015) examined the dynamics between victim advocates and forensic nurses who work towards gathering evidence in sexual assault cases. Through interviews of both forensic nurses and victim advocates, they found that most victim advocates felt subordinate to the forensic nurses who treated them more like assistants, or did not see them as equals in terms of importance to the victims care. One victim advocate stated in regards to nurses, "I don't think they realize how important we are. I'm not sure that even some of them care" (Patterson & Pennefather, 2015).

Victim advocates recognize the importance of emotional support to victims and value that support within their own line of work. However, they believed that forensic nurses did not take them seriously, and did not see the emotional support component to the work as important as collecting physical evidence (Patterson & Pennefather, 2015). Many victim advocates reported

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that it seemed as though the forensic nurses were rushing through the examination, wanting to move onto the next patient as quickly as possible. Victim advocates were focusing on helping their victims emotionally which may take some time especially after the victim had experienced a sexual assault and goes to the hospital to then be evaluated. There at the hospital, evidence is collected by the forensic nurses which can be a very traumatic, but necessary component of providing justice to these individuals, so it is important that the victim advocates provide emotional support to these individuals, so that the victims feel comfortable enough to go through the process. Even though some of the nurses provided reasons as to why they may act a certain way towards victim advocates, such as trying to speed up the process by having them help more in an assistant like fashion, it is imperative to make sure that the roles of forensic nurse and victim advocate are both seen as equal and important within the justice system, so that better relationships and cooperation can be established between these organizations.

Research suggests that both forensic nurses and victim advocates had a hard time cooperating which puts strain on the workplace, as well as stress upon victims. Cole and Logan (2008) identified concerns regarding “professional autonomy, control, and turf issues.” For example, forensic nurses and the victim advocates found it difficult in terms of having to be on someone else’s turf (ie.g. victim advocates had to be within the hospital in order to provide services to the victims while the victims were also being taken care of by the nurses). There were issues with autonomy and control in that the nurses felt like they had complete control over the situation within the hospital and they felt as though the victim advocates did not have much say in what was going on. Negative perceptions of the other’s role often created a toxic work environment and a power dynamic that had the nurses seeing themselves as higher than the victim advocates. This ultimately does not benefit the survivors. Cole and Logan (2008) argued

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that better communication and workplace professionalism amongst the nurses and victim advocates would in turn create a better workplace environment. With a better workplace environment between forensic nurses and victim advocates, they all can provide better patient care to the survivors of sexual assault or domestic violence.

Practicing Self-Care for Victim Advocates

With all of this traumatic content, victim advocates can also suffer emotionally and psychologically. Victim advocates are supposed to be strong for the victims that they are advocating for, but they are also having to deal with traumatic experiences and circumstances. This consistent exposure to trauma and victimization can be draining on an individual. “Rape crisis advocates play a critical role in responding to and meeting the needs of sexual assault survivors. In doing so, they are exposed to trauma on a regular basis. Research has consistently found that such vicarious experiences of trauma have negative effects on mental health care providers’ well-being and may also contribute to service provider burnout and organizational turnover” (Houston-Kolnik et al, 2021, page 407). It is important that victim advocates also advocate for themselves and make sure that they are taking care of themselves mentally, physically, and emotionally. It is important to have self-care practices and to have social support, so that victim advocates are able to reach out to someone to talk to. A common phrase is that “while on a plane you must put on your own oxygen mask first before you can help others to put their oxygen masks on.” The same goes for victim advocacy work in that it is important to take care of yourself as a victim advocate first, so that you are better able to help the victims that you are working for. Self care should be utilized by everyone and should be tailored to every individual. Not everyone is going to have the same self-care management, so it can be hard to measure the effectiveness of certain self-care practices, but it’s important for every victim

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advocate to find what works for them in order to be the best that they can be while on the job working to help survivors heal from their trauma and victimization.

Not only may there be issues for someone who would like to work as a victim advocate, but there are also issues that we see throughout the career of victim advocacy as a whole within our society and for those who experience trauma. Some distinct groups that will be highlighted within this paper involve certain demographics within our society who may not be receiving enough treatment or resources or may be also experiencing higher instances of mental and physical trauma.

False Media Portrayals and Victim Blaming

While working as a victim advocate, many would agree that they are wholeheartedly working and advocating for the victims; however, Maier (2012) suggests that there is a small population of victim advocates that may be doing more harm than good. Victim advocates must take care not to perpetuate rape myths and blame the victim for their own victimization. Rape myths are defined as generally false, but widely and persistently held beliefs and attitudes that serve to deny or justify male sexual aggression against women (Maier, 2012). Rape myths falsely accuse victims of contributing to the victimization by blaming them for the way that they dress or that they were out late at night by themselves or that they were drunk. These misperceptions are consistently portrayed within our media and are held by many. These misperceptions are not only dangerous for our society, but especially for victims who are trying to seek help by confiding in the victim advocates.

If a survivor were to come across a victim advocate who was skeptical of their abuse or would even try to blame the victim for their abuse this could cause further damage to the victim. Not only will they be re-traumatized by the experience, but then they also may feel like they

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can't come forward with the truth and are afraid to speak out after a bad encounter with a victim blamer. Although Maier (2012) argues that these attitudes amongst victim advocates are rare, it is still a possibility that these attitudes are in the hearts and minds of some individuals who work as victim advocates. It's critical as a career that the proper training is involved in order to unlearn these attitudes and to make sure that victim advocates understand that victim blaming is extremely harmful.

Many issues arise when there are negative or misleading portrayals in the media that can influence people within our society to think certain things that may be untrue or can lead to negative or false attitudes. For example, Houston-Kolnick and colleagues (2020) draw attention to how, through the media's handling of human trafficking cases, there can be many stereotypes and misinformation that are spread that can lead the public to think poorly of the victims. Victim blaming can lead to a variety of negative outcomes and can affect people across diverse demographics. Victim blaming can harm both male and female survivors. For example, victim blaming leads to decreased reporting among male survivors who experience domestic violence or sexual assault because they may feel as though their abuse isn't real and that they should get over it or "man up." Their abuse is real and they should be encouraged to talk about it and report it to the authorities.

Houston-Kolnick and colleagues (2020) also reiterated the importance of unlearning negative attitudes. One key solution that they provided was through interacting with the community. By raising awareness about these issues within a local community, victim advocates are then able to help deconstruct and work towards unlearning negative portrayals of survivors within the media. For example, "advocates share their strategies counteracting misinformation

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through engaging in informative conversations, utilizing social media to educate, and promoting media messages of survivor agency” (Houston-Kolnick et. al, 2020, page 1109).

The Improbable Male Victim

Typically those that experience either domestic abuse or sexual assault are women who endure that trauma at the hands of men, “women between the ages of 18-24 are most commonly abused by an intimate partner” (NCADV, 2021). These intimate partners are usually men that are their significant other like their boyfriend or husband. Rarely, is it that a man experiences domestic violence or sexual assault at the hands of a man or a woman. However, it does occur, needs to be recognized, and treated the same as any other individual who has experienced that type of trauma. As humans, regardless of sex, we all need to be treated with bodily autonomy in that we have the right to our own bodies and other individuals cannot and do not have the right to harm us in anyway, mentally or physically. Traditionally, in American society, women are seen as subordinate to men and what happens is some men try to keep women subordinate in any way possible. This leads to acts of violence against women through domestic violence or sexual assault. On the contrary, men are seen as the dominant sex within our culture and are seen as the ones who are to control women.

Though this is clearly not the case and, in my opinion, is ridiculous, our social constructs and societal norms have led many to believe this notion about men and women. These social constructs are harmful because we see that not only are women suffering from acts of violence through societal teachings men are also being harmed in that if they experience domestic violence or sexual assault they are seen as weak or not man enough. What happens is that many men who experience this trauma tend to ignore it or hide it, so that others do not find out and ridicule them. This leads to men having to suffer in silence, “even though they are experiencing

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serious abuse from their partners, they prefer to remain silent to prove that they are “man enough” to handle the situation” (Seun Enakele, 2020, page 39).

What is important is that those that have chosen a career in victim advocacy need to recognize these disadvantages that men have within society and must be able to provide specialized care and services for them while also making it known that what happened to them is not their fault and it doesn't make them any less of a man or who they are as a person. We need to work towards changing society's perceptions of these social constructs that are placed on sex and gender and making sure that all individuals are treated equally in terms of providing services for those who have experienced domestic violence or sexual assault. So, not only can victim advocates advocate for their clients from a victim standpoint, they also should be advocating for them for societal reasons and work towards making sure that they are treated with dignity and respect within our society.

Hine and colleagues (2020) add to this discussion by diving into different gender perceptions and what is seen as acceptable within our society. Typically within our patriarchal society, men are usually supposed to be seen as the strong protectors of the family and are supposed to be taking care of their wife and children. They are seen as weak or feminine if they do not fall into these gender roles or if they are physically or mentally abused by their wives. They are “hidden victims” (Hine et al, 2020). In most circumstances, it is very hard for men to discuss what has happened to them in terms of abuse, so unfortunately many do not come forward with their stories. Male victims similarly say “I can't be a victim of domestic abuse... I can't talk to anyone” (Hine et al, 2020).

It is important to recognize that if the wife were the abuser in the relationship, she could use the children to manipulate the husband and continue the abuse. Many husbands who had

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children had said that they felt like they had no choice but to stay within the relationship because if they tried to leave the abusive relationship then their wife would take away their children.

Another important demographic to look at would be men who are part of the LGBTQ+ community who have romantic relationships with other men. It is important to recognize that abuse can still occur between two men within a relationship. Similar abuses occur which lead to similar reactions in that men are too ashamed to come forward about their experience with abuse. As a victim advocate, it is crucial to recognize the signs of abuse within any relationship. It is also essential to encourage the survivor to come forward with their account of their significant other's abuse, but only when they feel safe and comfortable enough to do so.

The United States is not the only country who clings to traditional gender roles within families and relationships. In Trinidad and Tobago, a common perception is that domestic violence is a heteronormative and gendered experience and that men are improbable victims (Edwards & Wallace, 2021). However, men do experience mental abuse and sexual aggression in some cases where the wives were being aggressive or even being coercive towards their husbands. There were also instances of financial control in that many women would seek to control the finances entirely and this was one way to control their husbands in a manipulative way. Also, acts of embarrassment and belittling of their husbands was something that a lot of these women did to mentally abuse their husbands. This led to many of the men avoiding the issue, denying the abuse, and turning to alcohol to deal with the abuse and manipulation.

The Vulnerable Child Victim

Another vulnerable population that is significantly affected by domestic violence and sexual assault are children. It can be very hard for children, especially for those at a very young age, to speak out against their abusers. Unfortunately, most of the time their abuser is someone

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that is within their own home or may be a close family relative. Young children may also be unaware that the abuse against them is not right and may be convinced that what is happening to them is normal, when it is not. Many young children, across the country, suffer in silence within their own homes and are afraid to speak out for many reasons, such as retribution. They are afraid that they may get kicked out of the houses or they may think that people won't believe their story. It is very important for victim advocates to recognize the signs of trauma that may be unseen and untold by these young children. That is why many victim advocates that work with young children go through mandated reporter training. Mandated reporter training allows advocates to more easily recognize the signs of abuse and report that abuse to the state or local government, so that there can be interventions made within the young child's home in an effort to stop the abuse.

One child advocacy center in Brazil, known as CREAS, which stood for Reference Center Specialized in Social Assistance, work with young children who were suffering from family violence either through domestic abuse or sexual assault (Da Silva et al, 2018). As previously discussed, since many young children solely surround themselves with family members it is most likely that in most cases of child abuse that the abuse comes at the hands of a family member or someone that they know closely. At CREAS, not only was there an influx of young children who were suffering from instances of abuse at the hands of family members and other adults, but there was also a lack of funding, training, and resources in order to properly care for these young individuals who were experiencing traumatic events. "We do not have the support we need from the services, especially essential services that should guarantee the protection of the victims with us, but unfortunately in some cases the child is exposed,

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unprotected” (Da Silva et al, 2018, page 15). Without the proper resources and training for this type of child victim advocacy work, it is very hard to help these young children.

Unfortunately, Child Advocacy Centers (CACs) are increasingly being utilized as initial access sites for mental health services for sexual abuse survivors, either through the provision of referrals to community agencies, or on-site care (Tavkar & Hansen, 2011) . What occurs most often is that there are mental health issues that run within many families that have led to generations of trauma and abuse, so without treatment, the cycle of violence continues. Not only is it important to focus on advocating for these young children who are suffering from these abuses, but we should also be focusing on the mental health component. Services need to be provided in order to be sure that the family and child’s mental health is being taken care of to stop the cycle of violence. Therefore, it is very crucial for victim advocates to provide intervention as soon as possible, so that we are able to help young individuals who are suffering from traumatic instances of domestic violence or sexual assault at the hands of a family member. As previously discussed, through training, such as the mandated reporter training, it is imperative to understand the signs of abuse and to report them as soon as possible to the proper authorities, so that intervention can be provided.

Through early intervention, we can hopefully stop the cycle of abuse before it gets worse by advocating for the young victims and providing services. We must not downplay the importance of recognizing the signs and providing intervention early, so that further abuse does not occur. Another risk factor for abuse is if the child is a part of the LGBTQ+ community and being a part of the LGBTQ+ community is not accepted within their family. This lack of acceptance can lead to abuse within the home if the child is choosing to be who they are .“Runaway and homeless youth, as well as throwaway youth (those who are told to leave home

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or not allowed to return), are at especially high risk, as are children with a history of sexual or physical abuse or neglect, those from families with other dysfunction (eg, caregiver substance misuse, untreated psychiatric problems, intimate partner violence, criminality), youth with a history of juvenile justice or child protective services (CPS) involvement, and those who are lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender or questioning” (Greenbaum & Crawford- Jakubiak, 2015, page 567).

Another form of abuse that relates directly to sexual violence is the human trafficking of young children. As a victim advocate, it’s important to make sure that individuals that are in these young children’s lives are not targeting or recruiting these minors into sex trafficking. As previously discussed, since family members are one of the main demographics that contribute to child abuse, unfortunately, family members can also become involved in human trafficking and can recruit their young children into sex trafficking. There is evidence of exploitation and abuse, as well as coercion at the hands of family members who are trying to make money off of their young children by putting them into sex trafficking practices. This leads to more abuse against the minor both physically, mentally and emotionally “abuse or worse is threatened, and traffickers compel victims to continue to serve their interests through physical and psychological means. Trafficking victims are subjected to psychological and physical torture, including threats of assault, threats to harm loved ones, intimidation, pharmacological manipulation, witness torture and murder, economic abuse, and isolation” (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al, 2017, page 65). Again intervention and advocacy will be key in the lives of these child victims. Victim advocates must take it upon themselves to be a part of the investigation process in order to help minors be free from sex trafficking. Additionally, victim advocates are encouraged to fight to improve sex

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trafficking laws, so that they are able to help these young individuals as much as possible in any capacity they can.

Much of the research on child victims focuses on risk factors and the importance of understanding if an individual is at high risk or low risk for sexual exploitation or being trafficked into sex trafficking practices. High risk factors may include a weak family bond. For example, “a common risk factor among children who have been exploited is family dysfunction, including insecure attachments with primary caregivers, family disruption, exposure to parental substance abuse and violence, family poverty, and family or community history of exploitation” (Brandt et al, 2021, page 3). If an individual has a weak family bond, they may be in and out of the house a lot and this can lead young children to bad behaviors and bad people. These factors can also lead them down the path of sexual exploitation. Victim advocates are encouraged to look out for such things as an extra phone or extra keys to a hotel or an apartment (Brandt et al, 2021). These signs can be red flags for victim advocates to recognize that something may be wrong in this child’s life that may require intervention in order to get them out of sex trafficking practices.

Potential Solutions to the Challenges and Recommendations for the Future

For victim advocates to succeed within this career, in order to help victims in a more efficient and empathetic way, it is important to work towards solutions to the problems discussed above. As discussed, victim advocates face challenges, such as difficulties coping with traumatic experiences, working to help vulnerable minority populations in this area of work such as men and children, as well as having problems with interpersonal relationships amongst victim advocates and other organizations. Solutions for helping victim advocates with the stress that can surround the work that they do is that it is important that each individual victim advocate works

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towards their own self care by practicing stress reducing activities. If someone does not practice self care strategies, that individual could experience immense stress and anxiety that would be extremely unhealthy to try to function under everyday. This could lead to burnout and this also does not work to help victim advocates that are trying to be the best that they can be for their clients. It is necessary for every individual to incorporate self care strategies in order to reduce the stress and anxiety they may be feeling from the work that they do. Self care practices can be any healthy activity that works to provide individuals stress and anxiety relief, and helps the individual to unwind. These self care strategies could include mental relaxation practices such as meditation, reading, or even sitting down to watch some television to get your mind to settle down can all be forms of self care. Self care practices can be physical as well such as physical exercise, or taking a hot shower to calm down and relax from the stressful day. Self-care varies by each person, so it's necessary to understand what works for you and to then go about doing those activities on a healthy and regular basis.

When it comes to the issues in interpersonal organizational conflicts, such as between victim advocates and forensic nurses at the hospital, it is essential to provide as much communication and professionalism as possible to the job. It is especially necessary for both nurses and victim advocates to work together and to be regarded as equals especially while they're in the hospital working together to help a victim after their instance of abuse. By creating a more inclusive, collaborative environment between victim advocates and other organizations such as the nurses at the hospital where victims are being evaluated, this would benefit the victim's care immensely. In order to do this, the hospital needs to create a culture within the hospital that allows the victim advocates to do their job without interference or feeling inferior to

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the nurses working there. The victim should be held to the highest standard of care, so victim advocates and nurses should work together to provide the best care possible to the victim.

When it comes to male victims of domestic violence and sexual assault, it is important that we create an open dialogue for male victims to feel comfortable enough to tell their stories, so that they do not feel ashamed or weak. It's necessary that as a society we rid ourselves of gender stereotypes and gender roles where it feels as though men can't suffer or men can't be hurt mentally or physically. It's imperative as victim advocates that we provide services to those victims in a respectful manner. By providing male centered programming and services to these individuals, such as male support groups, men would be able to feel comfortable enough to speak about the abuse they have experienced. Knowing that other men have experienced abuse as well would help male victims to know that it is okay to come forward and talk about their experience rather than suffering in silence. As a society we need to recognize all forms of mental and physical abuse at the hands of any individual. Though it may seem not as harmful as physical hitting, mental manipulation and belittling can be just as harmful to a person's emotional well-being. Though many of these solutions to these male centered problems may seem broad and involve major societal changes it is still meaningful as a society to work towards those changes, so that hopefully men will feel comfortable enough coming forward. A victim advocate's job does not begin when someone becomes a victim, it is imperative to provide advocacy for victim prevention. If we can stop these acts of abuse, mental and physical, before they occur, we are then able to lower the rates of abuse against vulnerable populations which would help our society immensely.

Victim advocates that work with young victims of child abuse work with our most vulnerable demographic population. Young children can face high rates of physical or sexual

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assault usually at the hands of a family member or someone close to them that they know. Many of these cases can occur when a child is too young to comprehend and express what is happening to them. It is essential for victim advocates working with victims of child abuse to have the proper training such as mandated reporter training, so that they are able to recognize the signs of physical or sexual abuse of a child. With mandated reporter training, it is also essential to properly file a report and then send it to the authorities, so that the state or local police can get involved. The purpose of this is to hopefully be able to stop these instances of abuse before they continue further and lead to even worse instances of violence. Similarly to the instances of men who experience abuse, young children may not understand or ignore signs of abuse and do not share it with anyone. They may not feel comfortable with anyone to come forward about what is happening to them. It is vital for victim advocates to help these young victims find their voice and find the comfort and courage to tell the truth about their abuse.

Young children are also at risk for sex trafficking within our society, so it is also critical to recognize the signs that these young children may be vulnerable or are being targeted to be put into sex trafficking practices. Once again it's crucial to recognize the signs as a victim advocate and then be able to help provide support and services to these young individuals in hopes that they will go down a path that does not lead them to sex trafficking and even further abuse. As previously discussed, victim advocates can work towards helping to make new laws that help protect these young victims as well.

The work that victim advocates do is integral to the process of a survivor's healing within our criminal justice system. These victims go through traumatic experiences. When at times it feels as though no one is on your side, it is imperative for victims to know that victim advocates are always on their side fighting for them. It is vital for victim advocates to provide services and

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support that are offered through either the nonprofit organizations or government organizations that they work for. Something that may not be a part of the victim advocate's job description, but is essential is providing services and support is that victim advocates help to provide victims with empathy and compassion in order to help these victims get through the traumatic experiences of having to go through the criminal justice process in order to get justice. Through this capstone, I have found a greater and deep appreciation for what victim advocates do for vulnerable individuals who have suffered from domestic violence or sexual assault. I can most certainly envision myself working as a victim advocate in the future especially through the help of the education that I have earned at Merrimack College.

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