Alternatives to Calling the Police in the Context of of GBV: A Guide for Community Organizations

A Transformation Hub Booklet

Authors

Elsayed, Dalia, Natalie Kouri-Towe, Marlihan Lopez, Evelyne Marchal Ferrière. 2025. Alternatives to Calling the Police in the Context of GBV: A Guide for Community Organizations. *The Transformation Hub*. A partnership of Éduconnexion, Simone de Beauvoir Institute, and Project 10.

Acknowledgements

This project was supported by funding from the Office of Community Engagement, Concordia University; RéQEF: Réseau québécois en études féministes; Mitacs; and the FRQSC. Translation support from Alexis Poirier-Saumure.

https://transformativepedagogies.ca/en/projects/the-transformation-hub

Who is this Booklet for?

This booklet was designed for use by community groups and organizations in Montreal, Quebec. Anyone who is interested in introductory-level alternatives to calling the police or who wants to support someone experiencing gender and sexuality-based violence (GBV) can use this guide. The guide is written as an introduction for service providers, but we include more resources and readings at the end if you want to learn more.

Use this guide to help you develop tools for supporting people within your community who experience GBV to determine their own pathways for reducing violence and securing their emotional and physical safety. You can also use this guide to help empower your communities to recognize the signs and causes of violence and to create non-violent alternatives.

What this booklet is not

This booklet does not outline how to engage in alternative models of justice, such as transformative justice or restorative justice programs. We include a few examples for further reading that you might find helpful if you're interested in alternative models for justice. Likewise, we don't recommend using this booklet as a final answer for how to respond to gender and sexuality-based violence. Context matters, so follow the needs and priorities of the people you're working with.

Why calling the police might increase the risk of violence

Context

For many communities, policing is a source of harm and not protection. When people experiencing gender and sexuality-based violence (GBV) interact with police, they might be seeking support, but police can escalate violence. Calling the police can trigger a chain reaction, such as the involvement of child protection services, immigration enforcement, forced hospitalization in cases of mental health crisis and even death or physical harm. Police are not trained to help you de-escalate a violent situation.

For someone experiencing a mental health emergency or suicidal thoughts, police presence can make them vulnerable to state violence. For families, a call for help can result in children being removed, sometimes permanently, from their homes. Some people who call the police seeking help end up being arrested themselves. For racialized people who experience gender-based violence, calling the police might lead to their criminalization for defending themselves and their children from abusive partners. These examples are not just unfortunate accidents in our criminal justice and social welfare system; they are common outcomes of the way these systems were designed.

Alternatives to policing are not just political talking points, they are a way of prioritizing a person's safety in cases of violence.

Guiding Principles

There is no one-size-fits-all strategy for GBV prevention and support; however, we recommend the following guiding principles to help you ground your approach to support and prevention.

Harm Reduction

Harm reduction in the context of GBV is an approach to supporting people in high risk situations by helping to reduce the risks of violence. Harm reduction involves developing strategies around the conditions and contexts that might be contributing to violence, even if violence cannot be entirely avoided or prevented (Cross 2019).

Practice (LIVES): Listen, Inquire, Validate, Ensure Safety, Support

(World Health Organization 2014)
You can read more about this strategy using the World Health Organization links, including tips for what you can say and do to support someone experiencing violence. The guide focuses on women as victims of domestic violence, but many of the guidelines are helpful for people of any gender or sexual orientation.

Trauma- and violence-informed care (TVIC)

"The four principles of TVIC are as follows: (1) understanding and awareness of trauma and violence, especially structural violence, and their impacts on people's lives; (2) prioritizing people's (including providers') physical, emotional, and cultural safety; (3) promoting person-centered connection, collaboration, and choice; and (4) finding and building on people's existing strengths, and supporting their skills and capacity development" (Wathen and Mantler 2022).

Cultural Safety

Cultural safety is a framework developed through work with Indigenous communities and connects cultural awareness and sensitivity to the social, political, and historic contexts that shape a person's life and a community's experience. Cultural safety involves self-reflection on the part of the person offering support to help create a relationship where individuals feel respected, valued, and free from discrimination. Cultural safety centers on the principles of anti-racism, cultural humility, and trauma- and violence-informed care (TVIC).

> "Cultural safety is an approach to working across ethnic and other differences to make systems and organizations responsible for ensuring that environments are safe for everyone. This approach is compatible with and is often an embedded component of trauma and violence informed approaches. Cultural humility is ongoing reflection and learning about diverse cultures and experiences."
>
> (NGBV)

When someone wants to call the police

We can't tell you when someone should or shouldn't call the police. Instead, the choice to call the police should be made by the person who has experienced violence. Rather than helping someone make that choice, you can help support a person experiencing GBV by giving them the tools to make their own decisions, including information, alternatives, strategies, and plans.

1) Take a shame-free approach

If someone wants to call the police, don't discourage them. Instead, offer to support them by identifying possible risks and challenges around communications with police (e.g. what information to disclose and what information to keep private, what your rights are).

Identify steps for safety regardless of whether or not the police are called (see the section on Safety Planning). Who will they call for support? Is there a safe location to go to? What will be the next step if the first call for support doesn't work?

2) Provide them with the information they need to make decisions

- Help them understand how mandatory charges in cases of domestic violence in Canada are handled (i.e. if you call the police, they may be required to press charges, even if you don't want them to).
- Help them understand the risk around cases of victims who have been arrested and charged (e.g. in cases of self-defence or as a form of punishment by an abuser).
- Help them develop a plan for their communication with the police. What outcome do they want and what outcomes are possible, what risks are there for themselves or their loved ones, what steps can they take? Do they have someone they trust who they can ask to come and serve as a witness or to support them before/after the police come?
- Identify how the criminalization of GBV is handled by police, the courts, and with child protection. Help them identify the possible benefits and the risks to

determine what steps to take when interacting with police. For example, if they have previous criminal charges or a record.
- Identify the role of reporting and documentation, especially in the context of family law (e.g. in child custody cases).

3) **Help identify if there is a "high risk" of escalation of violence**

   Identify the signs if violence is escalating. If there is a risk of homicide, the alternatives outlined in this booklet will not be adequate (patterns of coercive control and increasing violent behaviour, a partner threatening to kill or hurt themselves or the person being abused or other family members, sudden change in circumstances that is connected to escalated violent behaviour such as sudden job loss or family separation).

   Is the person you're supporting isolated? Are they undocumented? Do they have friends or family they can rely on? The answers to these questions may signal an increased risk to their safety in cases where there is an escalation of violence, especially if there is no one for that person to reach out to for support. Help them build a Safety Plan and connect to local resources, such as domestic violence shelters and hotlines.

Double Victimization

Double victimization is the experience of additional harm that can occur when seeking support for experiences of violence (e.g. from the police, hospital staff, social workers, a trusted loved one, a professional who is supposed to help, etc). Help identify if there are risks around double victimization and how the person might reduce this risk.

Examples of double victimization:
- A 2SLGBTIQI+ person whose identity is invalidated at a hospital or shelter;
- a woman of colour who is subject to racist cultural stereotypes and biases (e.g. Arabs and Muslims being culturally violent, or Black women having a higher pain tolerance);
- being shamed for their choices (e.g. drug and substance users, sex workers, people who have unprotected sex, etc.).

Strategies to support a person experiencing violence:
- Plan for a support person to accompany and witness, take notes of events, and pre-discuss whether they want that person to intervene.
- Let the person know they can ask for another case worker, social worker, nurse, doctor, etc., if someone is treating the person in a discriminatory or disrespectful way.

- Ask in advance if the staff at a service provider have been trained with inclusivity and/or diversity training; whether they have trauma-informed training or approach; what their policies on mandatory reporting to the police are before referring a person you're supporting to that service.
- Practice having the person you're supporting assert their rights (e.g. role play, write out a list of questions or statements that they can read out).
- Suggest they call from a blocked or anonymous number if you want to keep confidential.

Transformative Justice Strategies for Responding to Violence Outside of the Criminal Justice System

The Restorative Justice Approach

Restorative justice is a response to violence or harm that involves some or all of the people who have been affected by violence (including family and community members, the person who enacted harm, and the person who was harmed) to participate collectively in resolution. Restorative justice is centered on repairing harm and repairing a community after a harm has been enacted (Daly, 2015). Examples of a restorative justice approach can be found in Indigenous restorative justice settings, in post-conflict zones, in religious communities, and even in the criminal and legal systems.

While restoring a relationship may not be feasible or desired, restorative justice is one pathway some communities take to respond to GBV. This approach emphasizes accountability by focusing on the relational and social impact of the harm, rather than solely on whether violence is a punishable offense, including the broader impact of violence on the entire community.

Strategies for De-escalation in a Crisis

De-escalation is a strategy for reducing the potential for harm in a non-physical crisis or conflict situation. De-escalation is not a strategy for responding to physical violence. In cases of physical violence, leave (and encourage others to leave) and move as far away from the risk of harm as possible.

When someone is in crisis, an unsafe situation can easily escalate if a person can't remove themselves or others from the situation (e.g. a "fawn" or "freeze" response) or responds in a way that increases the risk of violence (e.g. a "fight" response).

The primary goal for a person facing violence is to seek safety. De-escalation may not be an appropriate strategy in many situations, especially in situations of acute physical

violence; however, it can be one of many tools available to help reduce the risk of violence for you or the people you're supporting.

De-escalation is not a form of conflict resolution. It is a strategy to prevent, interrupt, or pause conflict so that you have time and space to use other strategies.

De-escalation is a crisis management tool and can be helpful when someone is in distress, is in an altered state (e.g. from substance use or acute mental health crisis), or is struggling to self-regulate their own emotions. De-escalation can help reduce the feeling of urgency in a crisis situation and can reduce the involvement of police in cases where there is a high risk that police presence could escalate violence.

IMPORTANT
The first step for de-escalation is to check in with yourself. If you are not feeling calm yourself, you cannot help de-escalate a situation. Remove yourself and seek support from someone else.

Quick Strategies for De-escalation in a Crisis:

- **Non-engagement**: if you can, do not engage with escalating behaviour. Don't respond to provocations, raise your own voice, or threaten a person in a crisis or conflict situation (e.g. do not threaten to call the police on someone if they don't calm down, instead calmly say that you need to leave or excuse yourself and leave).
- **Draw away**: encourage others to move away from a violent or escalated situation, invite them to join you in another room or walk to a safe distance.
- Distract: interrupt a situation that is escalating by drawing everyone's attention elsewhere, ask someone to come help you with something urgent or time-sensitive in another location.
- **Protect**: create physical space and barriers between you and the person/people you're supporting and the person who is escalating a crisis or conflict. Move to a location where you can lock the door behind you, go to a public location with people nearby who can observe the situation, stand behind large objects that cannot easily be moved (e.g. stand by the door on the other side of a large table)

Engaged De-escalation Strategies:

You can use the following strategies to build strategies for engaging with people to help de-escalate the risk of crisis or conflict in situations that are not already at the "crisis" level.

- **Cultural sensitivity:** when working with marginalized communities use language that is recognizable to the person you're communicating with, taking into consideration how a person's needs and identities might differ from someone else.
    - e.g. recognizing the differences between cultural contexts where raising your voice is not seen as aggressive vs contexts where speaking loudly can be seen as threatening.
- **Active listening:** asking people to share what they're feeling or thinking without interruption can help de-escalate heightened emotions. Centering empathy, building trust, and using language that validates a person's feelings (without necessarily validating their interpretation of a conflict) can reduce the feeling of a crisis and leave room for people to feel heard, and potentially hear what others have to say as well.
    - e.g. when someone is very angry or upset, pulling them aside and letting them know that you want to hear what they have to say while setting clear boundaries: "Hey, can we talk outside? I want to hear what you have to say but I don't think this can happen in the room right now. What if we talk outside for 10 minutes and then come back? It will help me if you speak slowly, I'm trying to fully understand you"
- **Encourage collaborative problem solving:** a crisis situation can feel like decisions are a competition where one person needs to "win." Fostering shared decision-making and problem solving can reduce the escalation of emotions in a situation by pulling people out of a competitive mindset.
    - e.g. when two people are in a conflict and can't seem to listen to one another, you can try role playing with a similar but different scenario and ask the people you're working with to come up with solutions for that scenario; then afterwards ask if there are any solutions they came up with that they think could work for them in their own situation (this requires pre-planning).
- **Identify early signs of escalation:** pay attention to early warning signs before a situation escalates into a crisis, including:
    - tone change (e.g. speaking louder, using words that are more threatening or aggressive),
    - non-verbal cues (e.g. clenching fists, facial expressions that show a rise in emotion, body language that towers over another person).

  The best way to de-escalate is to remove anyone at risk of harm from the immediate area of a person who is in a state of escalation. Only after you can ensure your own safety and the safety of others should you attempt to help support someone to calm down. It is better to leave someone alone than to put yourself in harm's way.

Where to Access Services and Support

To access a searchable list of current organizations and groups based in the Greater Montreal Area, you can search based on geographic area or service sector: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1xTBy9sGgdE-bLgpg9Iv07M-ux1mg7-SYVi0VslmyURY/edit?usp=drive_link

We recommend becoming familiar with organizations that serve the needs of your community and keeping contact information for these organizations and groups on hand to help support someone with developing their safety plan, including housing support, shelters, gender-based violence services, employment, 2SLGBTQI+ support, etc.

Further Reading & References

Harm Reduction International (n.d.) What is harm reduction? https://hri.global/what-is-harm-reduction/

Hoffer, Eden, and C. Nadine Wathen. (2024). "Criminalizing Coercive Control May Seem like a Good Idea, but Could It Further Victimize Women?" *The Conversation*. July 11, 2024. https://theconversation.com/criminalizing-coercive-control-may-seem-like-a-good-idea-but-could-it-further-victimize-women-233407.

Creative Interventions. (2012). Creative Interventions Toolkit: A Practical Guide to Stop Interpersonal Violence. https://www.creative-interventions.org/toolkit/

Cross, C. (2019). Harm Reduction in the Domestic Violence Context. In *The Politicization of Safety: Critical Perspectives on Domestic Violence Responses*. Ed. Jane Stoever. New York: NYU Press. 332-361. https://academic.oup.com/nyu-press-scholarship-online/book/31553

Daly, K. (2015). What is Restorative Justice? Fresh Answers to a Vexed Question. *Victims & Offenders*, *11*(1), 9–29. https://doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2015.1107797

Rise Above Risk: A Risk Identification & Safety Assessment Portal. *The Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic*. https://www.riseaboverisk.ca/

Shim, Hyejin. 2022. Safety Planning and Intimate Partner Violence: A Toolkit for Survivors and Supporters. *Community Justice Exchange*. https://www.communityjusticeexchange.org/en/resources-all/safety-planning-and-intimate-partner-violence-a-toolkit-for-survivors-and-supporters

Wathen, C. Nadine, and Tara Mantler. 2022. "Trauma- and Violence-Informed Care: Orienting Intimate Partner Violence Interventions to Equity." *Current Epidemiology Reports* 9 (4): 233–44. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40471-022-00307-7.

World Health Organization. 2014. "Health Care for Women Subjected to Intimate Partner Violence or Sexual Violence: A Clinical Handbook." WHO/RHR/14.26. World Health Organization. https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/136101.