



**Client Satisfaction and Service Effectiveness of
Penquis Law Project, Bangor, Maine
2002-2008**

Renate Klein, Ph.D., University of Maine

September 2009

Author address: Renate Klein, Ph.D., University of Maine, 330A Merrill Hall, Orono, ME 04469
renate.klein@umit.maine.edu

This project is supported by Grant No. 2004-WL-AX-0017 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions and recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.

**“Your legal service, at no charge, was invaluable to my life...
Before your lawyer arrived I was effectively beaten...**

Thank you for making (and keeping) this program available.”

(Law Project client)

Penquis Law Project

The Penquis Law Project is a public interest law practice in Maine serving low- and moderate-income residents of Penobscot, Knox, and Piscataquis Counties who would otherwise be without counsel and/or representation. The Law Project provides legal assistance for divorce, protection from abuse, child support, visitation and other civil legal matters related to sexual assault and stalking. Priority is given to clients who have experienced or are experiencing domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault or stalking. The Penquis Law Project receives funding from the US Department of Justice, the Maine State Department of Health and Human Services, the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund, the United Way of Eastern Maine, small foundation grants and private donations.

Assessing effectiveness

In 2001 the Penquis Law Project asked the University of Maine to develop a low-cost approach to ongoing performance evaluation that would help to assess to what extent the Law Project is meeting expected target and objectives¹. For the Law Project this meant tracking demographics and referral patterns and monitoring that the target population is served (low/moderate income clients dealing with intimate partner violence who would otherwise be without legal counsel or representation). The Law Project also wanted to know whether its services help clients feel supported, empowered and satisfied.

Toward this goal I developed an exit survey based on earlier pilot research with Law Project attorneys, clients, and victim advocates². The survey assesses client demographics, referral patterns, and access to legal services. Respondents evaluate the Law Project on a number of dimensions including the performance of the attorneys and aspects of the client's case. Respondents also report whether they experienced intimate partner violence over the course of their involvement with the Law Project.

In interpreting the findings from this survey the reader needs to keep in mind that control group data are not available and that it is often difficult to draw conclusions about causes and effects. In addition, not all clients return the exit surveys. Over the past seven years the Law Project sent out about 406 exit questionnaires. Of these, 89 (22%) were returned. With regard to the demographic variables gender, age, and income the clients who returned exit surveys are representative of all Law Project clients who received representation but they are less representative with regard to services used and referral networks. The differences will be noted in the report. With regard to the

¹ This definition of performance evaluation is based on a presentation by Sally Hillsman (2002), Office of Research and Evaluation, National Institute of Justice, April 23, 2002, Washington, DC.

² Klein, R.C.A., Butler, S. & Crider, B. (2000). The impact of civil legal services for low-income battered women: Emerging perspectives. Unpublished manuscript.

self-ratings, it is not known whether clients who returned exit surveys are representative of the client base; generalizations should be made with caution.

A significant strength of the available data is that they are longitudinal. The Law Project has been sending out exist surveys consistently since about 2002 so that now there is a data set that can show changes over time and longer term trends. About once a year or every other year the Project sends returned surveys to me for analysis. Thus, one can look at the data in terms of cohorts that roughly correspond to one or two year periods. This report includes six cohorts beginning with the first surveys returned in 2002 to the most recent surveys from 2007 and 2008.

One example of an interesting trend concerns the role of informal third parties like friends, family and coworkers (as compared to professional responders in the community or at state agencies). For Law Project clients who returned surveys, informal third parties have steadily become a more common source of referrals to the Law Project, and in the 2007-2008 cohort were the single most common referral source, more common even than domestic violence projects. It remains to be seen how this trend develops into the future. It points to the potential impact of informal third parties in community-wide intervention systems and it may reflect the beginnings of important cultural changes. The awareness-raising activities that have taken place over the past decades have, among other things, aimed at creating a more supportive culture in which disclosure of victimization is less risky and more people are knowledge about community resources and know to take disclosures seriously and respond supportively. If these cultural changes are indeed taking place in the community, one would expect informal third parties to play an increasingly important role helping victims find needed services.

Since client satisfaction data were first collected 89 clients have returned exit surveys. This report includes those 89 surveys. Due to missing data the analysis of some questions made be based on fewer respondents. Most of the findings reported below are based on quantitative data aggregated from the exit surveys. In quotation marks are verbatim quotations from clients' responses to open-ended questions. The findings illuminate how respondents have experienced the Law Project attorneys and support benchmarking of the Law Project's client-centered practices. The findings also add to our understanding of the role of legal interventions in intimate partner violence.

Demographics and Financial Need

Gender and Age

Of the 89 respondents 88 were women and one was a man (Fig.1). The youngest respondent was 18; the oldest 62. The median age was 34 years (halfway point in the distribution) with a standard deviation of about 11 years.

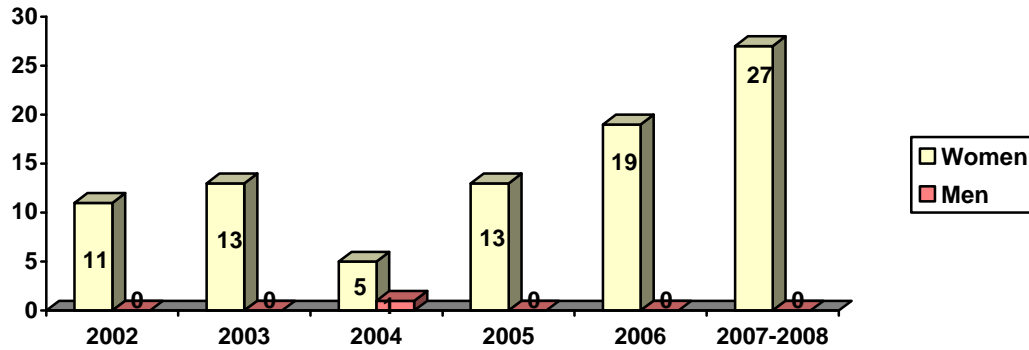


Figure 1 Number of female and male respondents

Financial Need

The Law Project aims to serve low-income families. In terms of financial need respondents are representative of all Law Project clients in that the great majority of them lives at 75% of poverty. Figure 2 shows three graphs that represent, respectively, the median income of respondents (bottom graph), the federal poverty line (middle), and per capita annual income in Maine (top graph).

For the 75 respondents who provided income information, the median annual income was \$8,000 with a range from \$0 to \$32,000. Each year—with the exception of 2004—respondents' median income was below the federal poverty line for 3-person households³. Respondents' median income was also clearly below the state's per capita personal income⁴.

The figures illustrate that the Law Project serves families with extremely low incomes and thus supports those who are economically vulnerable and marginalized.

³ U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (<http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/figures-fed-reg.shtml>)

⁴ U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (<http://www.bea.gov/>)

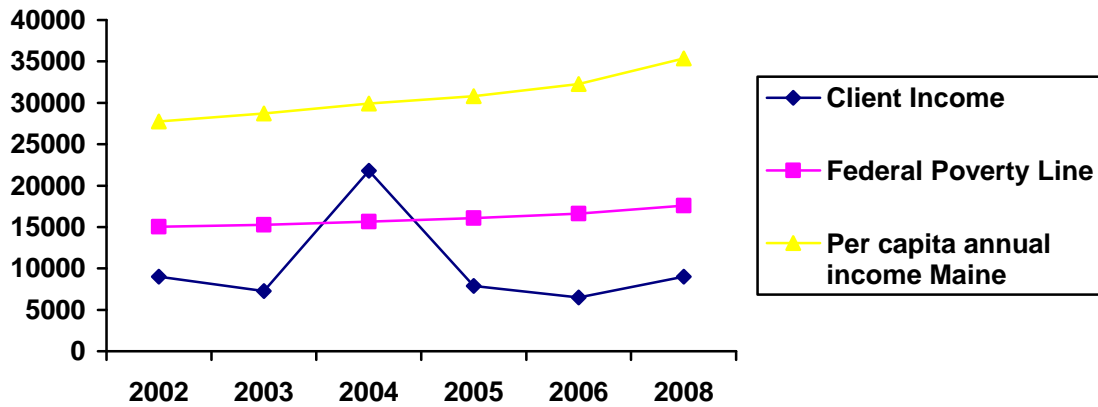


Figure 2 Median respondent income compared to federal poverty line and annual income in Maine

Children

The impact of low incomes is particularly severe because most Law Project clients have children under 18. In this regard the sample of respondents is representative of the total client population. Figure 3 shows that since 2002 only five respondents had no children; 29 had one under-age child; and 55 had more than one under-age children (including the one male respondent).

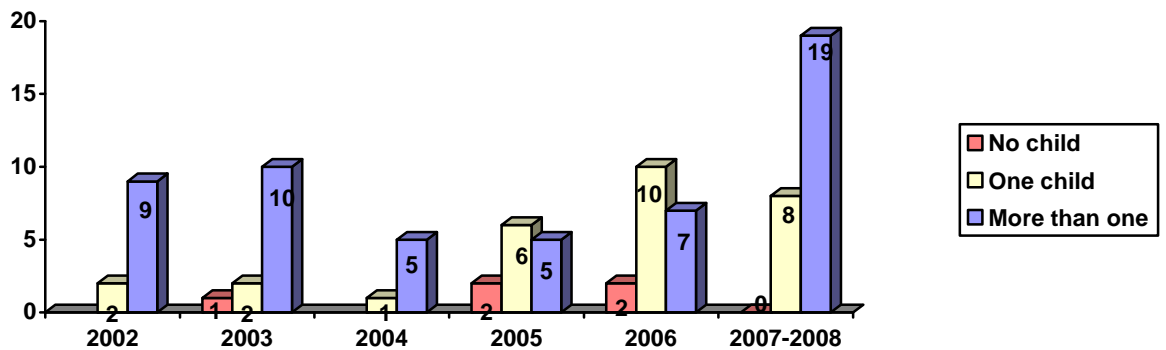


Figure 3 Number of children in respondents' households

Access to Legal Representation

The Law Project aims to provide access to civil legal services for clients who would otherwise be without legal representation. The Law Project meets this objective. Without the Law Project, 84 respondents (94%) would not have been able to access civil legal services (Fig. 4).

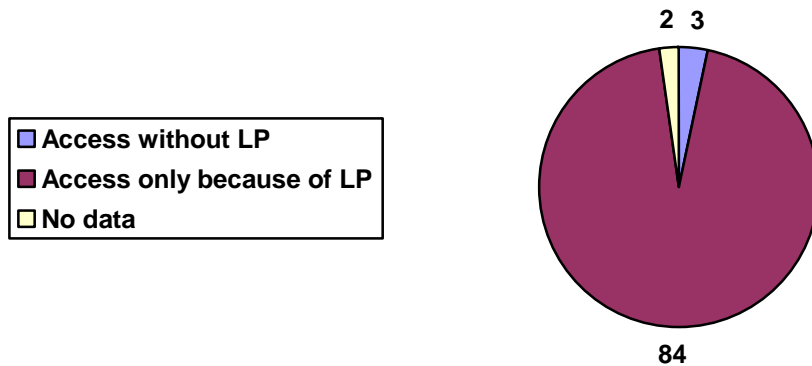


Figure 4 Number of respondents with access to legal services through Law Project or other legal entity

Legal Services Used

Respondents used the Law Project primarily in divorce proceedings and to determine parental rights and responsibilities (Fig. 5). Nineteen respondents used the Law Project for multiple services: nine cases concerned divorce and protection order, five cases concerned divorce and parental rights, four parental rights and protection order and one case parental rights and post-judgments. Note that these numbers and their representation in Figure 5 refer only to respondents who returned exit surveys, not to all clients.

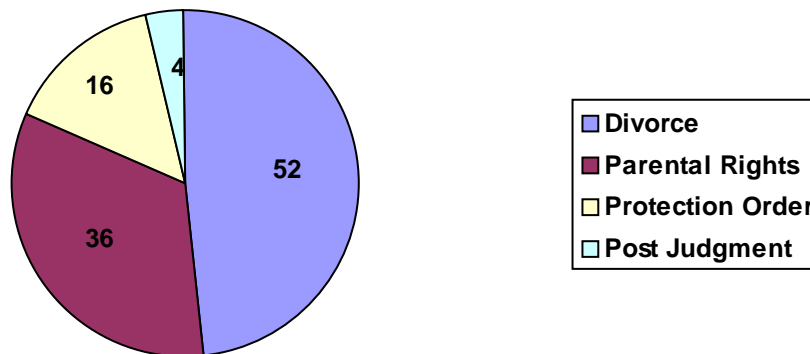


Figure 5 Number of respondents using the Law Project for different legal services

Figure 6 also refers only to respondents who returned exit surveys. Among respondents, post judgments remained relatively constant at a low level. Requests for protection orders and parental rights increased from 2004 to 2006. Between 2006 and 2008 requests for divorce increased steeply.

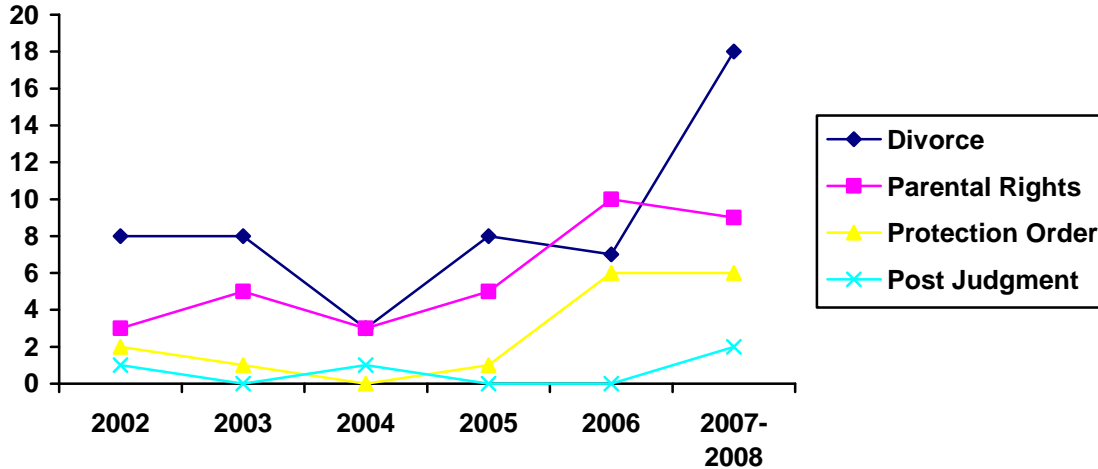


Figure 6 Number of respondents per cohort who used different legal services

However, among all clients who received representation (not only those who returned surveys) the pattern of service use was somewhat different. Figure 7 represents the respective percentages. In the returned surveys post judgments (Post) were under-represented (7%) relative to all clients in 2007 (24%) and all clients in 2008 (21%). Protection from abuse orders (PFA) and cases regarding parental rights and responsibilities (PRR) were overrepresented (from 5 percentage points to 15 percentage points). Over-representation was strongest for divorce cases (18 percentage points).

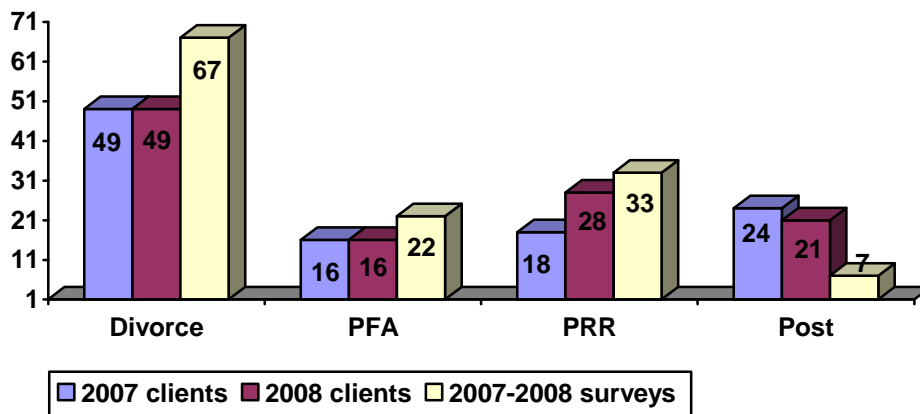


Figure 7 Percentage of cases (all clients versus returned surveys, 2007-2008)

Coordinated Community Response

Families are more likely to find out about the Law Project if more people in their social networks know of the Law Project and can refer to it. Such knowledge of community resources along with a readiness to refer to these resources is one aspect of a coordinated community response. It is considered good practice in victim support that community agencies and service providers know of each other, make referrals and increase public awareness about existing resources. Better referral networks make it more likely that people will find the services they need.

When asked how they learned of the Law Project respondents listed many different referral sources. This suggests that a relatively broad referral network is in place in the community. Figure 8 represents the number of respondents who said they had been referred by the respective source. In addition, several respondents indicated that multiple sources had referred them to the Law Project; for these individuals the referral network was particularly robust.

Based on returned surveys the most common referral source was a victim services agency such as a domestic violence project or rape crisis center. This may be a reflection of the successful coordination between the Law Project, the two regional domestic violence agencies, the regional sexual assault project and the University of Maine Safe Campus Project. The second most important referral source was friends and family, followed by law enforcement agencies and social services agencies. The overall pattern suggests that the Law Project is part of, and active contributor to, a well-developed community response.

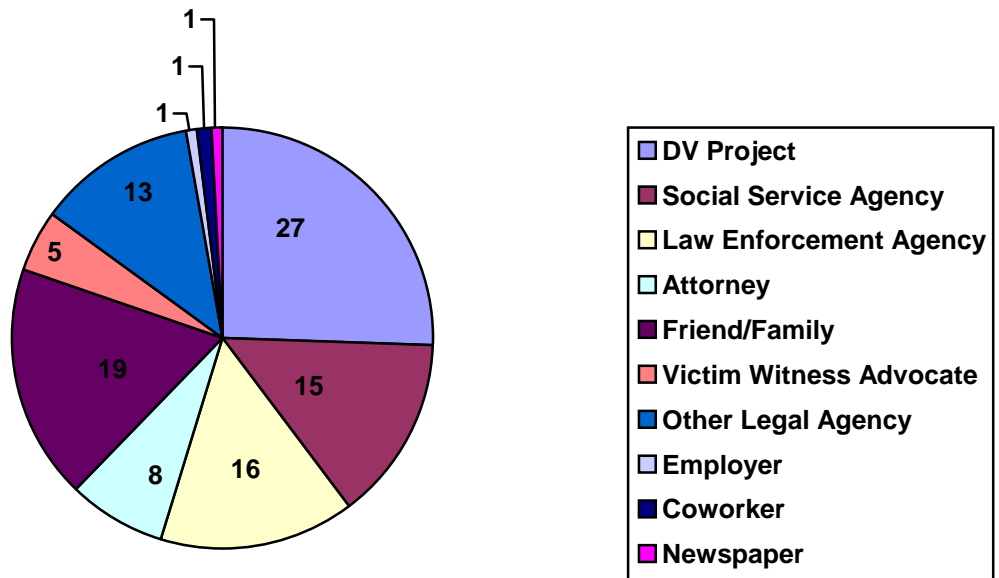


Figure 8 Number of referrals from different agencies or individuals (based on surveys)

Because referral networks are such an important aspect of the coordinated community response and the surveys represent only about one fifth of the total number of clients who received services it is useful to establish the referral patterns among all clients and compare this with the referral pattern based on the surveys. Client data were available for 2008. However, direct comparisons are limited by the fact that the referral categories used at intake are slightly different from those used in the survey. Figure 9 represents numbers of clients in 2008 and their referral source. The intake categories were combined to parallel those of the survey. That has the disadvantage that two relatively large referral categories at intake are not represented at all (28 clients were categorized as self-referrals; for 10 clients referral sources was 'other').

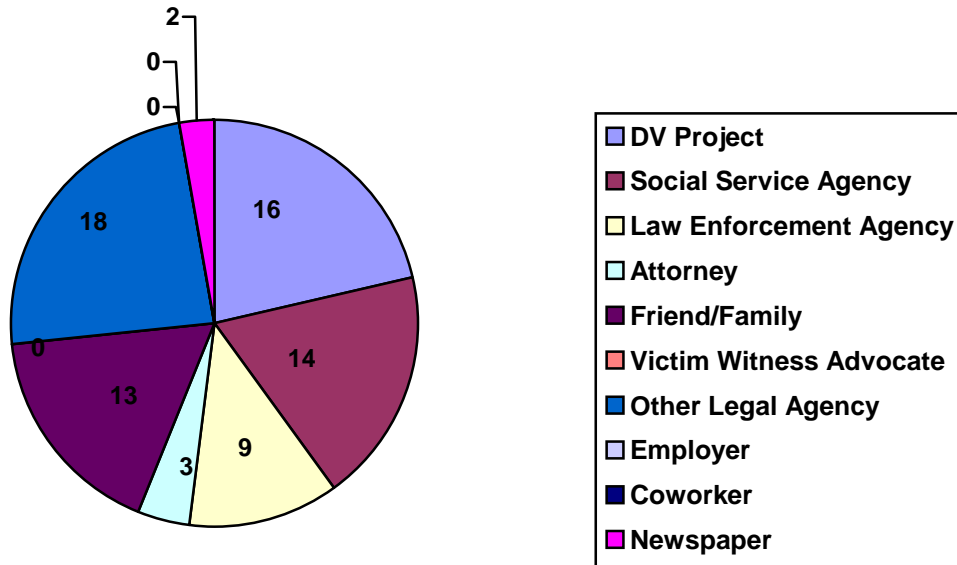


Figure 9 Number of referrals from different agencies or individuals (based on 2008 clients)

A comparison of figures 8 and 9 suggests that among all clients more referrals came from other legal agencies and fewer from victim services projects, law enforcement agencies and family/friends.

Figure 10 illustrates a direct comparison between referral sources logged for all clients in 2008 and reported in the surveys from 2007-2008. Figure 10 shows percentages based on the 115 clients for whom a referral source was logged at intake, and on the 27 2007-2008 surveys. Intake referral categories were combined to match the categories used in the survey. Categories at intake and in the survey that were very small were dropped (e.g., newspaper). The large referral category at intake of "self" has been included. Only unique referrals are represented (multiple referrals were possible in the survey but were not logged at intake).

Compared to intake data, the referral pattern visible in the surveys includes relatively more referrals from social service agencies, law enforcement, family/friends, and victim services, and fewer referrals from other legal agencies. The largest differences occur for referrals from victim services (26% in survey data versus 14% in intake data) and other legal agencies (7% in survey data versus 16% in intake data).

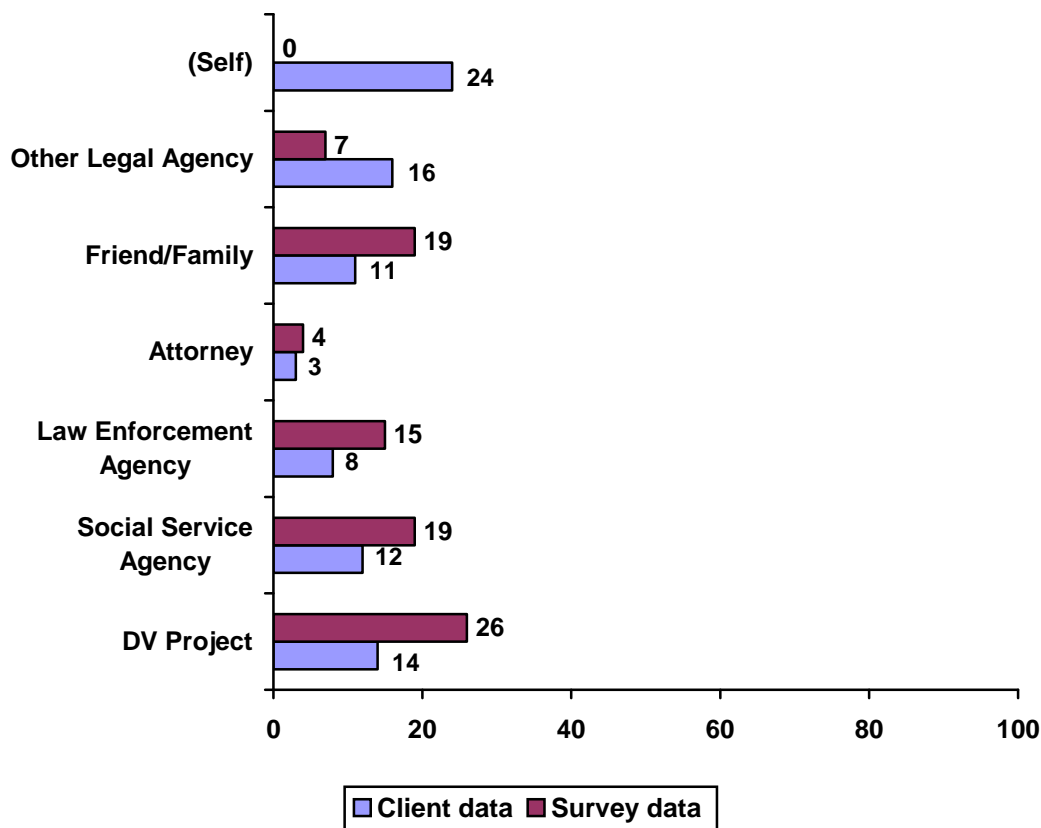


Figure 10 Referral network based on client data at intake and on survey data (2008; percentages)

The overall conclusion about the referral networks remains the same: referrals come from many different sources, suggesting diverse referral networks and widespread awareness of resources.

There are two other interesting findings about the referral patterns in the survey data: since 2002 the referral network has become more diverse, and some sources of referrals that were rare in 2002 were common in the 2007-2008 cohort. These findings refer to the survey data only.

Figure 11 represents the number of respondents who identified different referral sources. In the 2002 cohort five referral sources were listed by at least one respondent (domestic violence project, social service agency, law enforcement agency, friend/family member, or other attorney). In the 2007-2008 cohort eight referral sources were listed by at least one respondent. In addition to the five sources above, the eight sources included victim witness advocate, newspaper, and co-worker. This was the first time that a co-worker was mentioned as a referral source.

The second finding concerns the growth in referrals from informal third parties and social service agencies. These are both sources that historically had not been at the core of coordinated community responses in the way domestic violence projects and law enforcement agencies had been. However, over the past years efforts have been made to train staff at social service agencies and increase the awareness of informal third parties, and both groups are considered untapped potential for effective interventions in domestic/dating violence, sexual assault and stalking.

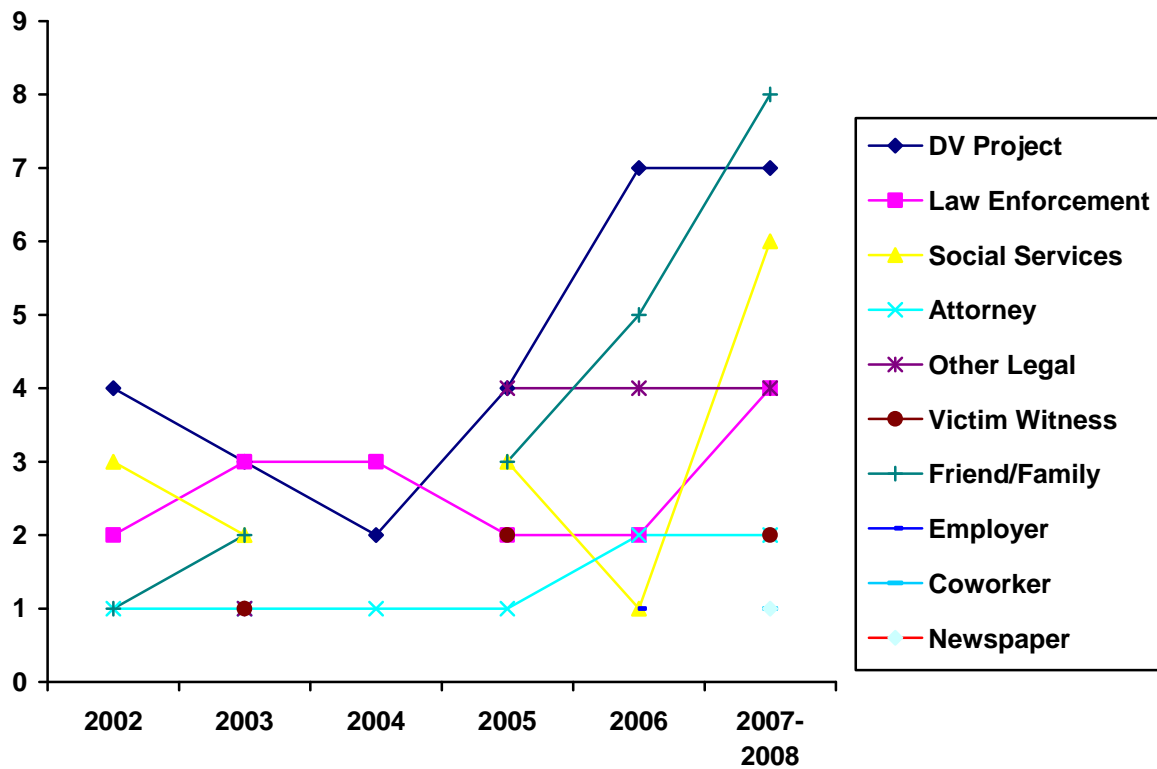


Figure 11 Number of referrals per cohort (survey data)

In the 2007-2008 cohort family and friends for the first time were a more common referral source than domestic violence projects. It will be interesting to see how these most recent referral trends continue into the future.

Satisfaction with the Law Project

Because the Law Project works with clients who have been victimized by domestic violence it is important that services are delivered in a supportive and attentive atmosphere and that clients experience interactions with the Law Project as helpful and empowering.

In the exit survey respondents indicate how satisfied they were with their interactions with the Law Project, how attentive the Law Project was, how supportive, and how helpful in reaching their goals. Ratings were made on 5-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (not satisfied, not attentive etc) to 5 (very satisfied, very attentive etc.). Responses to the four questions were internally consistent and averaged into one overall Satisfaction score⁵ (Fig. 12). The mean Satisfaction rating was 4.7, with a standard deviation of .60 (i.e. little variation around the mean).

The level of satisfaction was high for all cohorts; differences between the mean annual scores were not statistically significant.

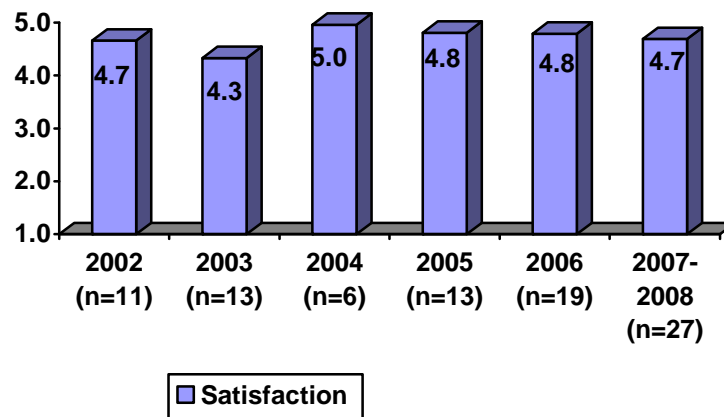


Figure 12 Mean scores for satisfaction with Law Project

In addition to the ratings, many respondents also commented in writing on how much they enjoyed interacting with the attorneys at the Law Project. The following quotation from one respondent is one of the many very positive comments that were returned (emphasis in the original).

“I had a very safe, secure feeling after receiving help from the Law Project. They were very reassuring, helpful, understanding, always ready to listen. They helped bolster my self-esteem, self-confidence and security about my situation.”

⁵ The similarity in responses to the four items that make up the aggregate Satisfaction score is expressed in a measure of internal reliability, Cronbach’s Alpha, which was .93. An alpha of 1.00 would indicate that all four questions were answered in exactly the same way. A high alpha like .93 means that the separate assessments of satisfaction, attentiveness, supportiveness, and helpfulness can be combined into one overall satisfaction rating.

The following comment illustrates how the impact of Law Project goes beyond the provision of legal services and can help clients to better attend to other aspects of their lives.

“Using your services was an answer to my prayers because if it weren’t for your services I would have been so overwhelmed with my circumstances—emotionally & financially—that I might have given up”.

Empowerment & Quality of Life

In addition to satisfaction, respondents rated aspects of empowerment and quality of life. These are matters that reach beyond the control of the Law Project but even here respondent feedback indicates that the Law Project was effective and experienced as helpful and empowering. Quality of Life items were included in the exit survey because they relate to the wider mission of the Law Project of improving the lives of low-income families. Respondents rated whether using the Law Project made them feel more in control of their life, and whether it helped them decide how to move forward on their case. Higher ratings indicate that respondents felt more in control of their life, and found the Law Project helpful in making decisions about their case (differences between cohorts were not significant, Fig. 13).

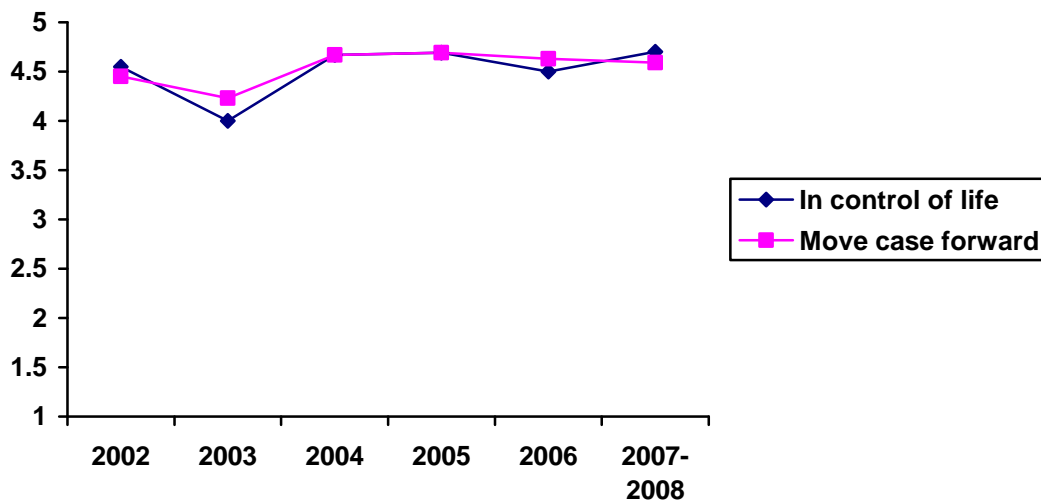


Figure 13 Mean ratings of feeling in control of life and knowing how to move case forward

Respondents also indicated whether using the Law Project improved their economic situation, and whether they found that using the Law Project improved their quality of life (Fig. 14). Higher ratings indicate improvement (differences between cohorts were not significant). The Law Project’s economic impact varies considerably across respondents. In some cases respondents do much better financially after they fought their case, for example when they win favorable financial terms in a divorce. In other cases there may be few if any financial benefits. But even

though legal issues are only one aspect of their lives, respondents nonetheless felt that the Law Project had improved their overall quality of life.

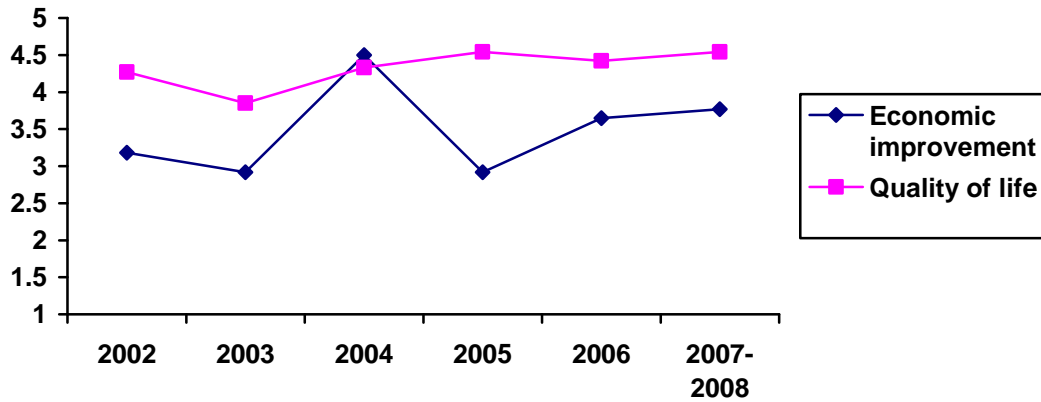


Figure 14 Mean ratings for improved economic situation and quality of life

Feeling Safe

Respondents rated whether utilizing the Law Project made them feel safer for themselves or safer for their children (Fig. 15). These two ratings are highly correlated. Mean scores for the entire sample show that women felt relatively safe for themselves (4.19) and for their children (4.16). The difference between these two values was not statistically significant.

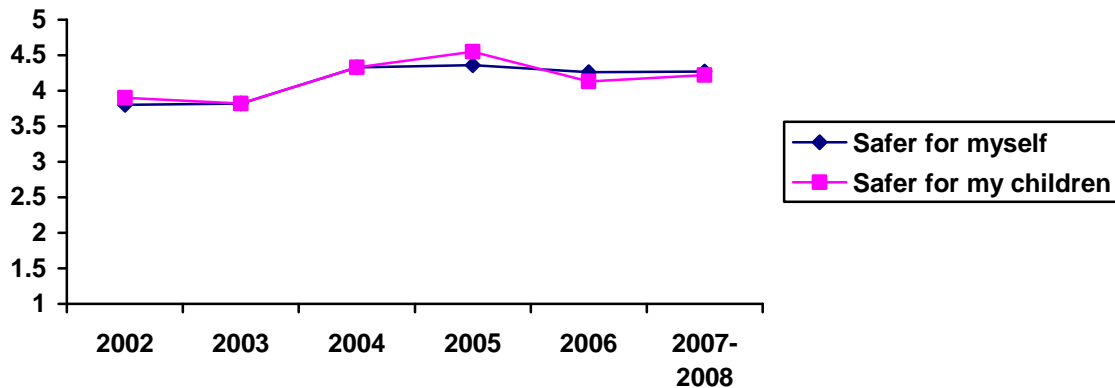


Figure 15 Mean ratings of feeling safe for self and children

When looking at the extreme ends of the safety ratings, more respondents said the Law Project made them feel much safer than said it did not make them feel safer. This was particularly pronounced for the two recent cohorts of 2006 and 2007-2008 (Fig. 16).

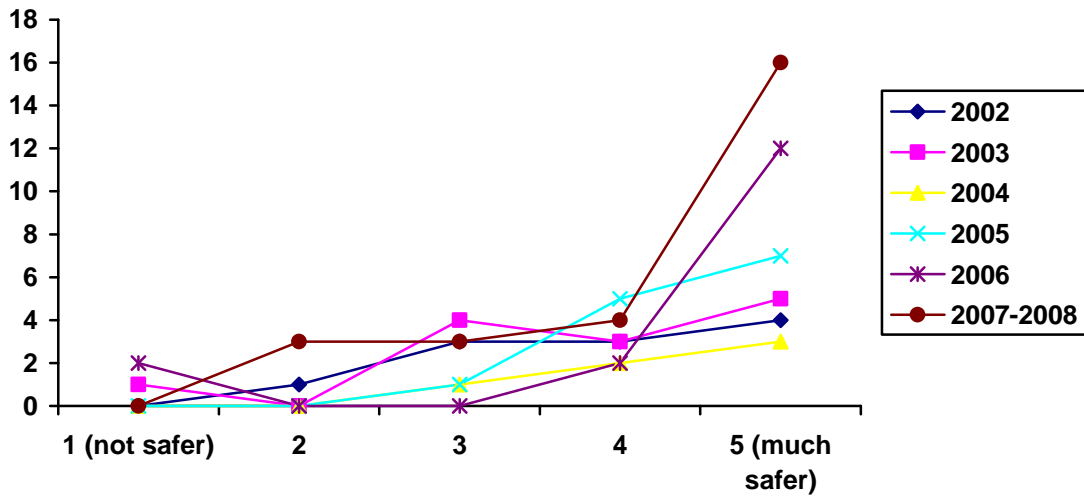


Figure 16 Number of respondents who felt not safe or much safer for themselves

Similarly, in each cohort more respondents said the Law Project made them feel much safer for their children than said it did not make them feel safer. This, too, was particularly pronounced for the two recent cohorts from 2006 and 2007-2008 (Fig. 17).

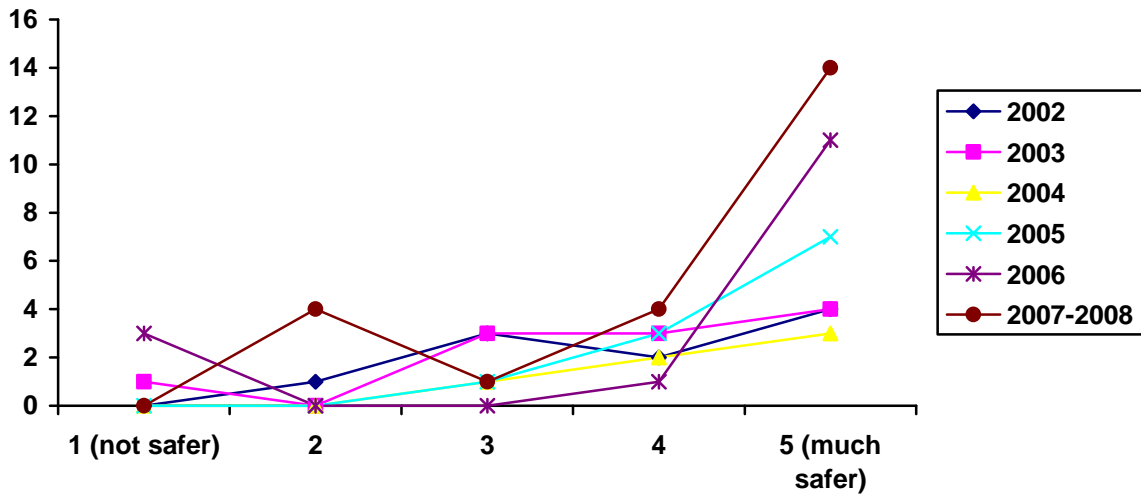


Figure 17 Number of respondents who felt not safer or much safer for their children

“Without [the Law Project] my kids and I wouldn’t ever feel safe; you saved us from a very bad man. I couldn’t have done it if I had to pay top dollars.”

Intimate Partner Violence

Finally, in addition to questions about safety, respondents were asked if they had experienced threats or abuse from their intimate partner before, during, or after contact with the Law Project. Responses ranged from “not at all” to “very frequently” on a 5-point Likert scale.

Eighty-seven respondents responded to the three questions and reported a statistically significant decline in victimization over the period of their involvement with the Law Project ($F(1.74, 149.65) = 91.26, p = .000$). This does not necessarily mean the Law Project caused the decline but it points to potential protective effects of engaging civil legal services (Fig. 18).

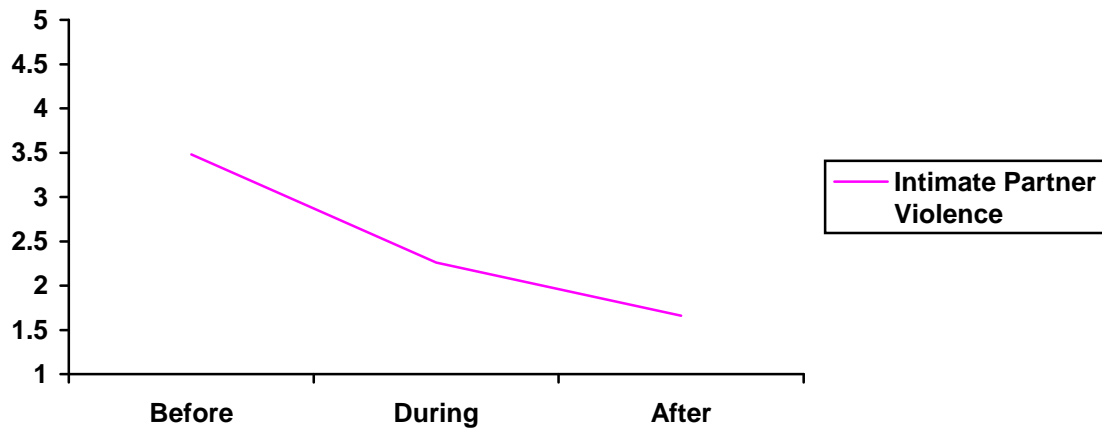


Figure 18 Mean ratings for frequency of intimate partner violence

This trend has been similar over the years with each cohort reporting a decline of victimization. Overall levels of victimization seem to have been highest for the 2002 cohort but the differences are small, especially compared to the drop in victimization from before to after the engagement of legal services (Fig. 19).

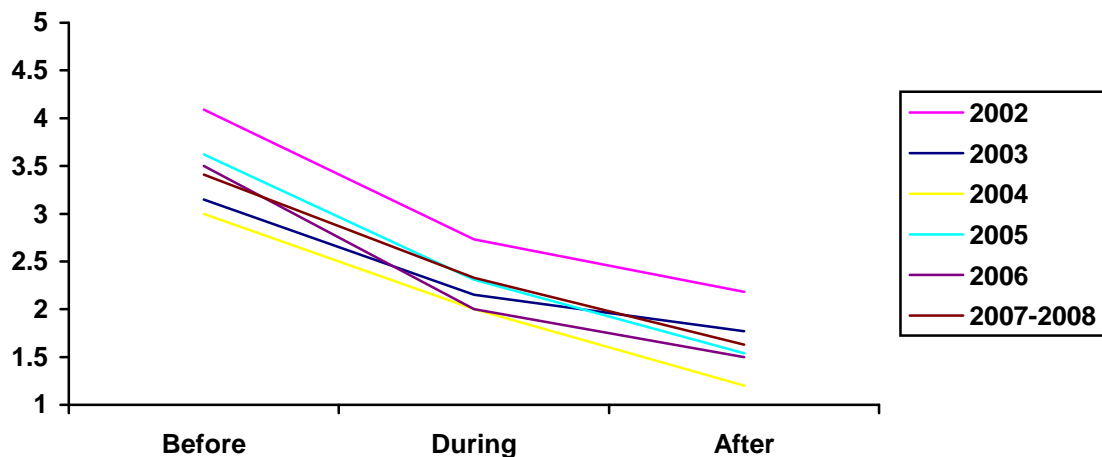


Figure 19 Mean ratings for frequency of intimate partner violence by cohort

It is also interesting to look only at the endpoint of the scales, that is, the number of respondents who reported either no or very frequent victimization. Figure 20 represents these findings. The ascending graph shows that from before interaction with the Law Project to after the case was closed the number of respondents who said they experienced no violence at all increased steeply. In contrast, the number of respondents who said they experienced very frequent violence decreased. After cases were closed only one respondent said she was experiencing very frequent violence, down from 29 before the Law Project became involved.

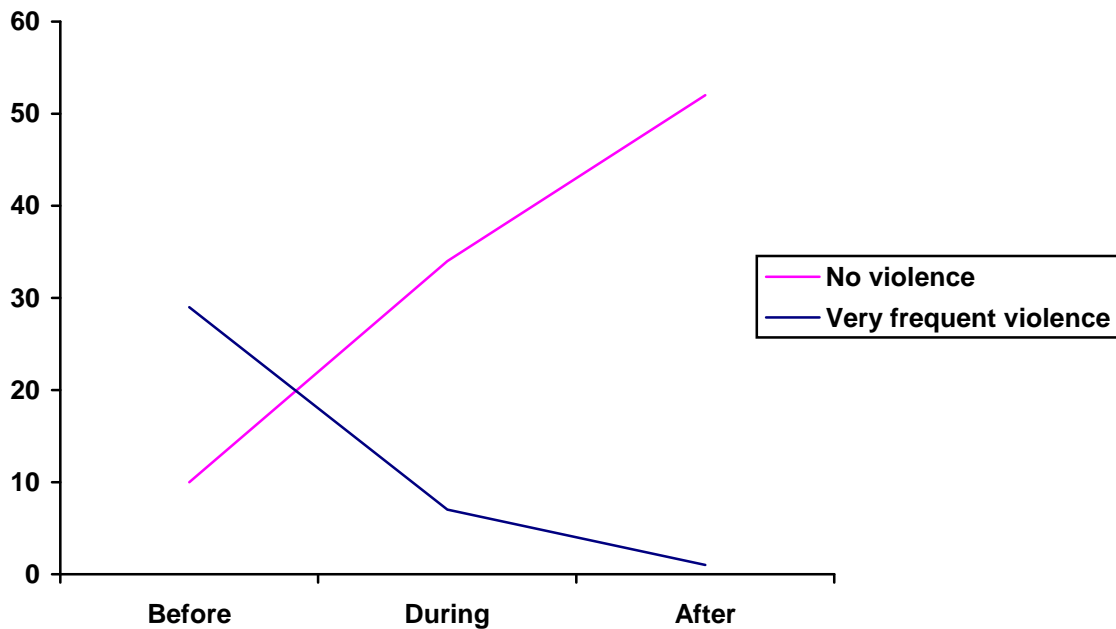


Figure 20 Number of respondents reporting no or very frequent victimization before, during, and after contact with Law Project

Because the period of separation from an abuser can be especially dangerous the analysis in Figure 20 was recalculated for those respondents only who sought a divorce (n=50; Fig. 21). (All those who sought a divorce were women; the one male respondent used the Law Project to determine parental rights and responsibilities.) The trends are similar to the whole sample: Over the course of interaction with the Law Project, more respondents experienced no violence, and fewer respondents experienced very frequent violence.

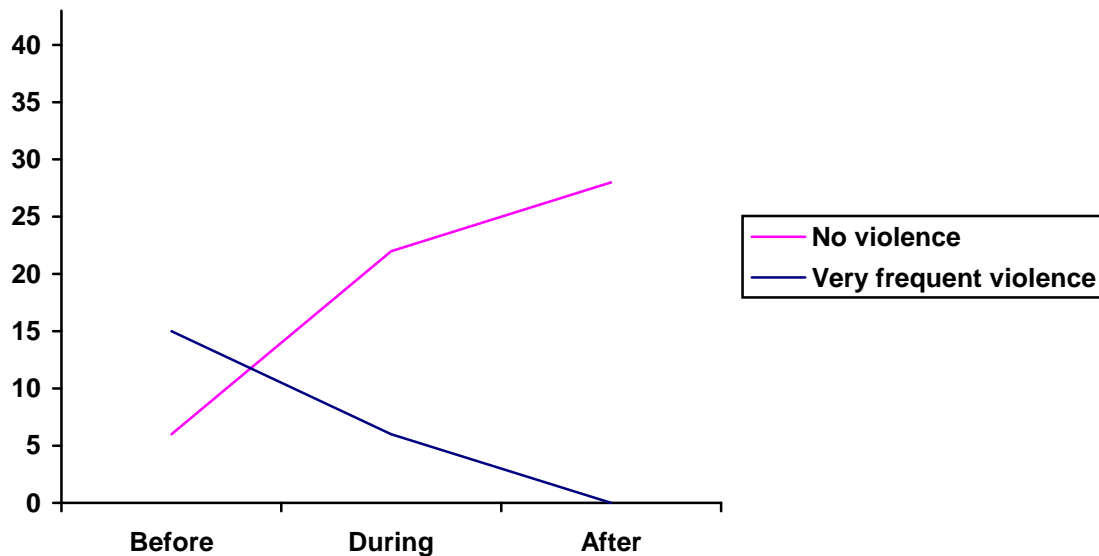


Figure 21 Number of respondents going through a divorce who reported no or very frequent victimization

The present sample is selective. It is possible that among those who did not respond to the survey levels of victimization stayed the same or increased. Still, it is important to note that for some people at least, during the process of divorce victimization decreased and safety increased.

Summary

Overall, respondents evaluated the Law Project very positively. Interactions with the Law Project were described as helpful, supportive and overall very satisfying. The Law Project enhanced respondents' quality of life, contributed to their sense of empowerment, and enabled them to feel in control of the legal process. Respondents experienced less intimate partner violence once they started proceedings with the Law Project—this is a very significant finding that points to the protective potential of civil legal services. Funding for the Law Project is crucial and must continue because all but one respondent would have been without legal representation had the Law Project not been there. The findings suggest that the Law Project is achieving all of its objectives. It has developed into an essential part of community-based interventions in domestic violence and is an effective way to support victims, increase safety, and promote justice.

“[The Law Project] was a light at the end of a dark & dreary tunnel.”

“Your organization gave me hope.”