

WE KEEP US SAFE: EARLY FINDINGS FROM A SURVIVOR-LED STUDY ON COMMUNITY-LED RESPONSES TO DOMESTIC, FAMILY, AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE (DFSV) AMONG CRIMINALISED PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS

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Background:

Responses to domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV) amongst criminalised people who use drugs are often ineffective but can also be traumatising or can increase risks and harms. Despite this, drug user communities—including victim-survivors and men who use violence—are often excluded from producing new knowledge on preventing and responding to violence. This study, led by victim-survivors with lived experience of drug use and criminalisation, explores pathways into and out of DFSV and seeks to develop community-led, non-carceral prevention and response interventions.

Methods:

We conducted qualitative interviews (n=10) with criminalised victim survivors and men who use DFSV and explored experiences of violence, the role of criminal justice, and perspectives on community-led and non-carceral responses. Data were thematically analysed using an iterative approach and grounded in transformative justice and lived experience epistemologies.

Results:

Preliminary findings indicate that criminalised people who use drugs experience structural violence alongside DFSV, including systemic barriers to safety, justice and healing. Participants held nuanced understandings of accountability and capacity for change, citing histories of victimisation and intergenerational trauma as drivers of men's use of violence. Many viewed police and criminal justice responses as harmful, often resulting in criminalisation of victim-survivors or other adverse outcomes. Participants expressed a clear need for alternatives but sometimes found it difficult to imagine what else might be possible. Participants described elements of community-led violence interventions which utilise harm reduction or transformative justice frameworks that have the potential to build safety and agency instead of relying on criminalisation.

Conclusion:

Findings demonstrate the need for survivor-led, non-carceral responses to DFSV for criminalised people who use drugs. Insights will inform the next phase of co-designing community-led responses with victim-survivors and men who use violence. This study contributes to transformative justice scholarship and highlights lived expertise in shaping healing responses to violence.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

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