Tech Abuse in the Pandemic & Beyond

REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THANK YOU to the over 1,000 dedicated advocates and legal systems professionals who took the time to complete our survey in December 2020 to January 2021. We're grateful for your responses and your work every day alongside survivors to increase safety, privacy, and healing. We recognize your efforts and the strength and resilience of survivors in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ongoing, long-standing struggles for individual and collective liberation from multiple forms of oppression that form the roots of domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, and tech abuse.

Recognition of Land and People
The NNEDV office sits on the lands of the Anacostans (Nacotchtank), and along the Anacostia and Potomac Rivers. It was shaped by the enslaved labor of Black people. We must all learn histories and hear present experiences, and strive to honor, protect, and sustain both land and each other.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Tech abuse is a widespread problem seen by advocates and legal systems professionals across the US. People who work with survivors told us that tech abuse increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Survivors and their communities also encountered additional barriers to safety, justice, and healing. Advocates and other victim service providers inside and outside of legal systems shifted to new ways of using technology to communicate with survivors and each other while coping with profound personal, professional, and pre-existing societal challenges and inequities.

This report shares the results of a needs assessment conducted at the end of 2020. We began planning the assessment prior to the pandemic, and we shifted the timeline and scope as the pandemic unfolded in order to capture this snapshot of tech abuse and victim services in the time of COVID.

The findings are not just a picture of a moment frozen in time. The implications of the responses from over 1,000 victim service providers offer us glimpses of the future, post-COVID world – including both troubling trends in the misuse of technology to harm and control survivors, and also promising new avenues to increase access for survivors to services and ultimately safety, justice, and healing.

Key Findings:
- The most common types of tech abuse - **harassment, limiting access** to technology, and **surveillance** - increased during the pandemic.

- **Phones, social media, and messaging** were the technologies most commonly misused as a tactic of tech abuse.

- Internet of Things (IoT) devices, next generation location trackers, and other emerging technologies are increasingly used in tech abuse.

- **Survivors' lack of access to technology**, sometimes called the "Digital Divide," is a barrier to accessing services, legal support, courts, and other services and social supports.

- Though victim service providers increasingly offered services via video, text, and chat during the pandemic, most found that traditional phone service or meeting in person (with health precautions) remained essential strategies.

Takeaways:

- As we emerge from the pandemic, we should be prepared for the strong likelihood that tech abuse tactics adopted or increased during the pandemic will not be given up easily.

- We should work together to promote digital equity and tech safety, ensuring that survivors can access and enjoy the benefits of technology in their personal lives, as well as at work, school, and in public life.

- We should reflect and build on lessons learned about using technology in this work. Safety Net will support these efforts through technical assistance, resources, and training to help ensure privacy and safety.

Related research on victim services throughout the pandemic highlights what we have always known: that advocates and service providers are resilient and dedicated. However, there is a cost to excessive flexibility and creativity in burnout, vicarious trauma, and exhaustion.[1] Technology can amplify abuse but is also used strategically by survivors and those who support them.[2] Moving forward, we should bring this knowledge even more deeply into our work to respond to and prevent violence and abuse while supporting the well-being of providers.

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[1] Wood, et al. (2020)

[2] Freed, et al. (2017); Matthews et al. (2017); Dragiewicz, et al. (2018); Richard & Gray (2018); Douglas, Harris, & Dragiewicz (2019); Harris & Woodlock (2019); Messing, et al. (2020); Leitão (2021)
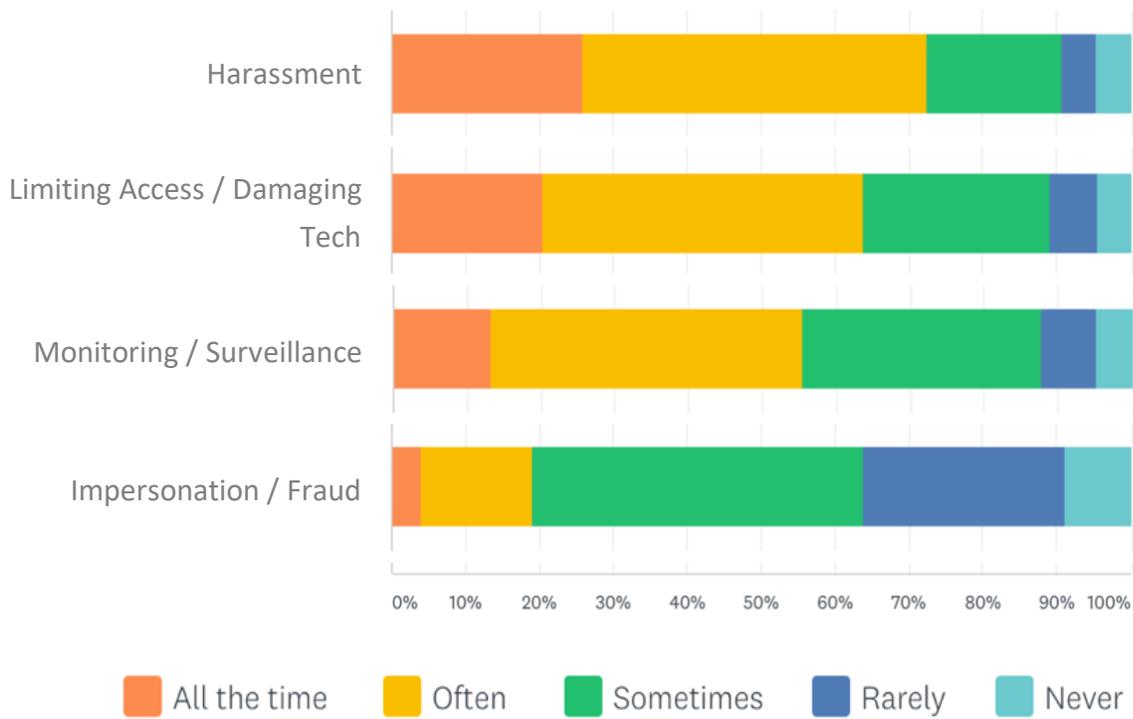
READ THE FULL REPORT

FINDINGS
- **TECHNOLOGY ABUSE**
- **SURVIVORS' NEEDS AND BARRIERS**
- **PROVIDERS' TECHNOLOGY USE DURING THE PANDEMIC**
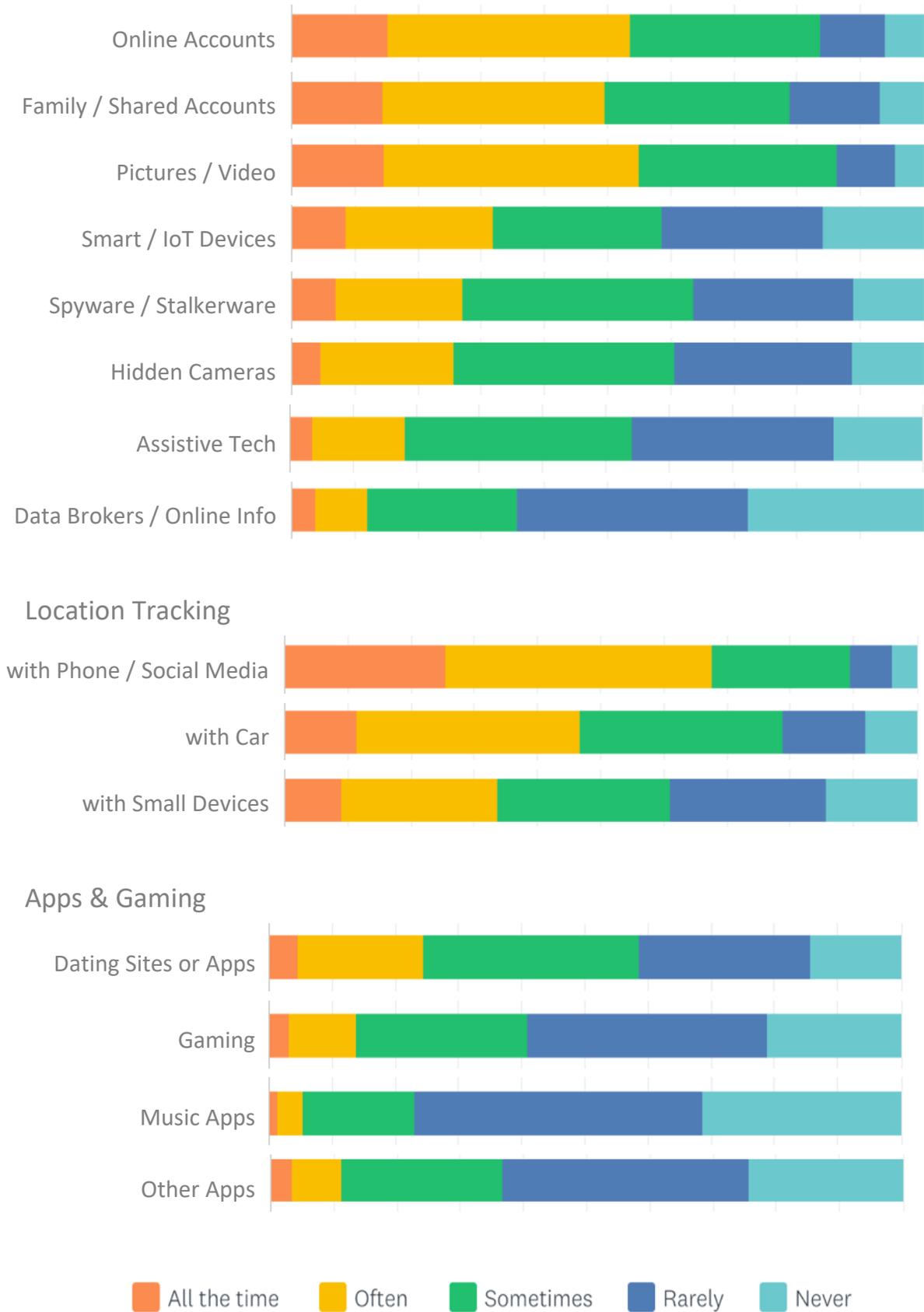- **PROVIDERS' NEEDS**

TECHNOLOGY ABUSE

What kinds of tech misuse are survivors experiencing (not just during the pandemic?)

How often are these kinds of technology misused against survivors you work with (not just during the pandemic)?

Tech Abuse in the Pandemic & Beyond

Online Accounts

Family / Shared Accounts

Pictures / Video

Smart / IoT Devices

Spyware / Stalkerware

Hidden Cameras

Assistive Tech

Data Brokers / Online Info

Location Tracking

with Phone / Social Media

with Car

with Small Devices

Apps & Gaming

Dating Sites or Apps

Gaming

Music Apps

Other Apps

■ All the time ■ Often ■ Sometimes ■ Rarely ■ Never

TECHNOLOGY USED TO PROVIDE SERVICES DURING THE PANDEMIC

What technology are you using for your hotline?

Hotlines

- **55% routed calls to home**
- **22.5% added text**
- **20% added chat**
- **11% forwarded to another hotline**

How are you doing ongoing work with survivors?

Advocacy

- **89% voice calls**
- **71% met in person**
- **69% email**
- **54% text**
- **48% video calls**
- **17% web chat**

How are you holding support groups?

Groups

- **38% video calls**
- **27% Suspended**
- **16.5% in person**
- **11% conference calls**
- **7.5% web chat rooms**

PROVIDERS' NEEDS

Challenges to Providing Digital Services, ranked

1. Privacy and confidentiality
2. Survivors' lack of access to tech
3. Technical capacity to manage devices and accounts
4. Lack of funding
5. Training for employees

Needed Topical Resources, ranked

1. How to include technology in protection orders
2. Preparing tech abuse cases for court
3. Getting documentation from tech companies
4. Applying existing laws
5. Processing or analyzing evidence
6. Supervising offenders in tech abuse cases post-conviction

SAFETY NET, a project of the National Network to End Domestic Violence, was founded in 2000 by Cindy Southworth. We focus on the intersection of technology and safety by:

- **Working with communities, agencies, and technology companies** to address how current and emerging technology impacts the safety, privacy, accessibility, and civil rights of victims.
- **Educating victim advocates and the general public** on ways to use technology strategically to increase and maintain safety and privacy.
- **Training law enforcement and justice systems, social services, coordinated community response teams and others** on tactics of technology abuse and offender accountability.
- **Advocating for strong local, state, national and international policies** that ensure the safety, privacy and civil rights of all victims and survivors.

Contact us at SafetyNet@nnedv.org and find more information at TechSafety.org.

If you would like to be notified of upcoming training opportunities and when new materials are released, please contact safetynet@nnedv.org to be added to our mailing list.

If you need technical assistance about responding to tech abuse or managing your organization's use of technology to provide services, please contact safetynet@nnedv.org.

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