

Adolescent and Young Adult Perspectives on Legal Help-Seeking for Intimate Partner Violence

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Anna E. Bender¹, Leah Hardenbergh¹,
Megan Moore¹, Mary A. Kernic¹,
and Avanti Adhia¹

Abstract

Adolescence and young adulthood are particularly vulnerable times for experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV). For some survivors, legal remedies, including civil protection orders (CPOs), can prevent further violence. However, little is known about legal help-seeking and CPO use among adolescents and young adults (AYAs). This study sought to examine barriers to and facilitators of seeking legal help, particularly CPOs, among AYAs who experienced IPV. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 AYAs in King County, Washington aged 14 to 24 years who experienced some form of IPV. Interview topics included disclosure of IPV, IPV help-seeking, desired outcomes, knowledge of CPOs, and attitudes toward and decision-making processes around engaging with the legal system. Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed in Dedoose software. Guided by phenomenology, we used thematic analysis and organized themes by levels of the socioecological model. Barriers to seeking legal help for IPV included concerns about privacy/confidentiality, perceptions that abuse

¹University of Washington, Seattle, USA

Corresponding Author:

Anna E. Bender, Harborview Injury Prevention & Research Center, Box 359960, 325 Ninth Ave, Seattle, WA 98104, USA.

Email: aebender@uw.edu

was not severe enough to warrant a CPO, fear of contact with abusive partners, lack of trust in the legal system, logistical challenges (e.g., time, money), and cultural stigma. Facilitators included the need for physical safety, having a third party to enforce rules, and potential consequences for abusive partners. Participants provided practical recommendations to facilitate increased access to legal services/CPOs, such as improved parental permission/notification policies and improved and increased access to resources in schools. Findings highlight barriers and facilitators at multiple levels that influence perceptions and use of legal services among AYAs. While legal remedies, including CPOs, may not be desirable or appropriate for all youth experiencing IPV, survivors should have full information and agency to choose from several appropriate options. Our findings underscore the need for additional education and reduced barriers to accessing legal services for AYAs experiencing IPV.

Keywords

intimate partner violence, civil protection orders, legal help-seeking, adolescents, young adults

Introduction

Adolescents and young adults (AYAs) are particularly vulnerable to experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV; also referred to as dating violence), which includes stalking and physical, sexual, and psychological violence by a current or former intimate partner (Basile et al., 2014). Nationally representative survey data indicates >70% of women and >60% of men who experience IPV in their lifetime report their first victimization before age 25 (Leemis et al., 2022). IPV in adolescence and young adulthood is associated with both immediate and lasting consequences, including depression, suicidal ideation, substance use, adult re-victimization, lower educational attainment, and death (Adams et al., 2013; Adhia et al., 2019; Exner-Cortens et al., 2013, 2017). While some interventions to reduce IPV in this age group have shown promise, effective responses are still needed (Finnie et al., 2022; Niolon et al., 2017).

Civil protection orders (CPOs) are the most common legal remedy for those experiencing IPV to prevent further harm, and over 1 million CPOs are issued in the United States annually (Fleury-Steiner et al., 2016). A CPO is a court order granted to protect an individual from another who exhibits abusive, exploitative, or threatening behavior by, for example, prohibiting or

limiting perpetrator contact, requiring physical distance between perpetrator and victim, or stipulating temporary child custody, child support, or counseling (Logan et al., 2006). Research on the effectiveness of CPOs in adult populations has shown that full CPOs (typically in effect for 12 months) are associated with a decreased risk of physical and non-physical IPV (Holt et al., 2002, 2003). For some survivors, CPOs are perceived as beneficial and can increase feelings of safety and well-being (Cordier et al., 2019; Russell et al., 2025).

Despite encouraging evidence of the effectiveness of CPOs in adult populations, little is known about CPO use and legal help-seeking among AYAs experiencing IPV. Similar barriers to legal help-seeking have been noted for both adult and AYA survivors, such as relationship factors, cultural differences, embarrassment and shame, and concerns with services, and may be amplified for AYAs (Bundock et al., 2020; Cardenas et al., 2024; Zinzow et al., 2022). When help is sought, AYAs more often turn to informal support from friends and family than formal sources like school staff (e.g., teachers, counselors; Ashley & Foshee, 2005; Bundock et al., 2020). Additionally, many states impose restrictions that may uniquely affect adolescents seeking CPOs, including requiring parental permission or notification to petition for a CPO, or limiting CPO eligibility to those who have experienced specific types of violence (e.g., physical rather than psychological IPV; Adhia et al., 2020). More research is needed to understand how these complexities impact legal help-seeking among AYAs.

This qualitative study sought to examine barriers to and facilitators of seeking legal help, particularly CPOs, among AYAs who experienced IPV. We used a socioecological framework to contextualize multilevel barriers and facilitators, a framework that has been utilized to understand experiences of adults who suffered IPV and other forms of interpersonal violence (Cardenas et al., 2024; Zinzow et al., 2022). We also highlight points of intervention proposed by AYAs to reduce the identified barriers and amplify facilitators of legal help-seeking.

Methods

Participants

We interviewed AYAs between 14 and 24 years old who had experienced some form of self-reported IPV. Participants were drawn from King County, Washington, the most populous county in the state with over 2.2 million residents. We aimed to recruit youth who were at different levels of engagement with the legal system, spanning from those with no knowledge/engagement

with legal help-seeking to those who had filed for CPOs. In addition, we intentionally sampled to ensure adequate representation by age group (14–17 vs. 18–24) since states have different restrictions on access to CPOs based on age or requirements for parent/guardian permission or notification (Adhia et al., 2020). In Washington State as of 2023, CPOs for IPV are accessible for individuals who are at least 13 years old but, if under age 15, the CPO must be filed by a household or family member who is age 15 or older (Washington State Administrative Office of the Courts, 2023). At the time of this study, parental notification/permission is not required in Washington State.

Procedures

We used multiple sampling methods to identify potential participants. First, we collaborated with regional agencies that serve IPV survivors and specifically work with youth populations. Advocates were provided flyers with basic information about the study to offer to eligible clients as appropriate. We also recruited through social media advertising on Instagram. Potential participants contacted our study team either directly by email or by following a QR code that linked to a brief eligibility survey where they included contact information for us to reach out. Recruitment continued until we reached sufficient information power (e.g., data saturation; Malterud et al., 2016), which we determined through concurrent data analysis. We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with participants via Zoom videoconferencing between December 2022 and January 2024. Interviews were conducted by author AA, who has experience conducting interviews with youth about interpersonal violence. Ahead of the interview, participants were sent the consent form, which reviewed potential risks including experiencing uncomfortable emotions and provided resources to relevant and free national hot-lines. At the beginning of the interview, we reviewed the consent form and reiterated resources. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could end their participation at any time. Participants provided verbal consent/assent. The semi-structured interview guide was developed using existing empirical literature and consultation with advocates at IPV community organizations. Participants were asked about their experiences with general help-seeking around IPV, experiences and perceptions of legal help-seeking (including CPOs), barriers to and facilitators of legal help-seeking, and recommendations for increasing accessibility of legal services for AYAs. At the end of the interview, participants were asked to complete a short demographic survey via REDCap. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes, and participants received a \$50 gift card. All interview data were

treated as confidential; identifiable data were kept separate from transcripts using a study number that only the research team could access. This study was approved by the University of Washington Institutional Review Board, and this approval included a waiver of parental consent.

Analysis

Participant demographics were analyzed descriptively. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and uploaded into Dedoose software for analysis (*Dedoose Version 9.0.107, Cloud Application for Managing, Analyzing, and Presenting Qualitative and Mixed Method Research Data*, 2023). Given this study's aim of describing the lived experiences of AYA with help-seeking in the context of IPV, we were guided by phenomenology and conducted our analysis using a codebook approach to thematic analysis to identify themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Moustakas, 1994). Three coders (AB, LH, AA) carefully reviewed transcripts and conducted open coding based on recurring topics to inductively develop an initial codebook with both semantic and latent codes and code labels (i.e., definitions; Braun & Clarke, 2022). We randomly selected six transcripts (20%) to be double coded, where pairs of coders independently applied the initial codebook to these transcripts. The coders and author MM convened to resolve discrepancies, ensure consistent applications of codes, and iteratively revise the codebook. The remaining interviews were randomly assigned to the three coders for coding with the revised codebook. Throughout the coding process, the three coders met for weekly collaborative discussions, with oversight by author MM, to modify and clarify the codebook and discuss complex excerpts. We used a consensus-based approach to construct a coding hierarchy and develop higher-level themes. During analysis, we identified barriers and facilitators to legal help-seeking at multiple levels of the socioecological model: individual (individual perceptions and attitudes), relationship (factors related to relationships with partners, family, and peers), systems (legal system structures, how AYAs interact with the legal system), and societal (systems of oppression, social and cultural norms; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Zinzow et al., 2022). We maintained trustworthiness through confirmability (e.g., independent coding) and credibility (e.g., deep, iterative engagement with the data; Nowell et al., 2017). Quotes were edited to improve readability and clarity (e.g., removing "um" and repeated words) and identifying information was redacted (e.g., specific information about the case that resulted in CPO), but no changes were made to quote content or meaning.

Results

Of the 30 participants, 43% were 14 to 17 years old and 57% were 18 to 24 years old (Table 1). Most participants identified as a woman/girl (80%). Nearly half of participants identified as Asian (47%) or White (43%) and 13% as Black/African American. About half of participants identified as heterosexual/straight (53%), and 23% lived independently from their parents.

We identified themes within three main categories: (1) barriers to legal help-seeking, (2) facilitators of legal help-seeking, and (3) recommendations and solutions to increase access to legal help-seeking. Informed by the socio-ecological model, themes within the barriers and facilitators categories are presented by level when identified in the data (Figure 1). Tables 2–4 provide additional illustrative quotes for each theme that reflect participant perceptions of or experiences with legal help-seeking.

Barriers to Legal Help-Seeking

Individual Level. Participants expressed concerns about privacy/confidentiality as barriers to seeking legal help. They noted that talking to people they are not comfortable with (e.g., counselors, court system actors) and having those people learn about their experiences of IPV acted as a deterrent to legal help-seeking. As one participant noted, “I feel like it’s very hard to actually issue one because stepping out of your little bubble and actually going to talk to people you’re not as comfortable with . . . is really hard” [woman/girl, 14–17, Hispanic/Latina]. These concerns were often related to feelings of embarrassment and shame, as participants worried about pervasive stigma around IPV. Some participants also described a sense of *misalignment* that would prevent them from engaging in legal help; participants shared how filing a CPO would not be viable because of their preferred approaches to conflict management, perceived lack of likelihood of being in such a situation again, and a general sense that CPOs would not be the right fit for them (“Why I am serving a protection order when I can just leave the relationship?” [man/boy, 14–17, multi-racial]). Participants described a *lack of trust in self*, specifically how dynamics of IPV (e.g., gaslighting, simultaneous fear or and care for partner) resulted in confusion about whether their experiences constituted IPV or warranted help-seeking. As one participant explained, “it would be a very perplexing situation for anyone to have someone that they thought loved them that then is going to do something to hurt them” [woman/girl, 18–24, multiracial].

Relationship Level. Participants described numerous ways in which characteristics of their relationships with others, including the abusive partner and

Table 1. Demographic Information of Participants ($n = 30$).

Demographic Characteristics	All Participants
	<i>n</i> (%)
<i>Participant</i>	
Age group	
14–17 years	13 (43)
18–24 years	17 (57)
Gender identity ^a	
Man/boy	6 (20)
Woman/girl	24 (80)
Ethnicity	
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin	1 (3)
Not Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin	29 (97)
Race ^a	
American Indian or Alaska Native	1 (3)
Asian	14 (47)
Black or African American	4 (13)
White	13 (43)
Not listed	1 (3)
Sexual orientation ^a	
Bisexual	7 (23)
Heterosexual/Straight	16 (53)
Lesbian	1 (3)
Pansexual	3 (10)
Queer	4 (13)
Not sure/questioning	2 (7)
Highest level of school completed	
Grade 9	2 (7)
Grade 10	4 (13)
Grade 11	6 (20)
High school (diploma, tests of General Education Development [GED], or alternative credential)	4 (13)
Some college	11 (37)
Bachelor's degree	2 (7)
Master's or doctoral degree	1 (3)
<i>Family</i>	
Highest level of school parents completed	
Less than first grade	1 (3)

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

	All Participants
Demographic Characteristics	<i>n</i> (%)
High school (diploma, GED, or alternative credential)	8 (27)
Some college	4 (13)
Bachelor's degree	9 (30)
Master's or doctoral degree	8 (27)
Live independently from parents	
Yes	7 (23)
No	23 (77)
Overall personal financial situation ^b	
Meet expenses with a little left over	2 (29)
Just meet basic expenses	4 (57)
Don't meet basic expenses	1 (14)
Family socioeconomic status from birth to age 14	
Pretty well off financially	10 (33)
About average	14 (47)
Poor	6 (20)

Note. Only response options that were selected by at least one participant are shown.

^aParticipants could select all that apply, so percentages may add up to >100%.

^bOnly asked to participants who live independently from parent.

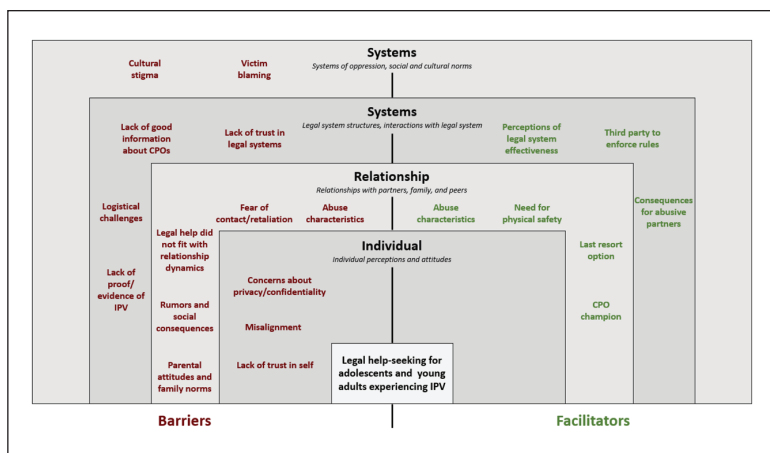


Figure 1. Barriers to and facilitators of legal help-seeking for intimate partner violence among adolescents and young adults.

Note. No individual- or systems-level facilitators were identified in the data.

Table 2. Barriers to Legal Help-Seeking for Intimate Partner Violence Among Adolescents and Young Adults in King County, Washington.

Socioecological level	Barrier	Illustrative quotes
Individual	Concerns about privacy/confidentiality	"I mean, just socially it is difficult because again, it's like other people are going to know about what is happening to you or what has happened, and, even if they're trying to help, that's still really scary." [woman/girl, 14–17, White]
		"I think that a sense of confidentiality would be very important and, if we were to seek that type of help, it wouldn't affect us. Let them know that we kind of try to look for that help, I guess. [Interviewer: Yeah. And on the confidentiality piece, who would you be most concerned about the sort of the information going to?] Parents. I guess. As well as maybe the people around school." [woman/girl, 14–17, Asian]
		"I think the only way I would do it is if I had no other options. Like if I'm being stalked, then yeah. But if I'm being abused or whatever, well, I don't think this would happen. I've learned not to be in these relationships." [woman/girl, 14–17, White]
	Misalignment	"I think it would maybe take a lot for me to actually go through with it, but, if it were to get to that point, then yes. [Interviewer: And why do you feel like it would take a lot for you to get to that point?] I would say probably 'cause I'm not really confrontational or I don't think it's really necessary. I guess." [woman/girl, 14–17, Asian]
	Lack of trust in self	"I never really just took myself seriously enough or the gravity of the situation. I'm like, it's okay, this just happens to some people and I'm one of them. And I feel like a lot of the times too, as women we're told, like, this is just a normal thing." [woman/girl, 18–24, White]
Relationship	Abuse characteristics (e.g., frequency, type, severity)	"Especially with the relationships that I see around me with high schoolers . . . a lot of people don't think that the relationships are . . . bad enough to be—or because they're in high school, it can't be that bad. Like, it's still okay, we're just kids. But the relationships that some people have in high school can definitely be that bad. The age is not a barrier here." [woman/girl, 14–17, White]
		"So I think that's a big reason why is that verbal abuse, in general—not just with partners but with families but, especially with partners—it's not taken seriously at all. It's not considered abuse by a lot of people. If it's not considered abuse by a lot of everyday people that just think like, 'we don't have thick skin'. What is the police gonna think?" [woman/girl, 18–24, White]
	Fear of contact/retaliation	"And it's also for your own safety, 'cause you never know how that person might react to whatever you say. Some might take it positively and choose to change, and some might just—it just might turn into something way more sinister that might just come to bite you in the back, which you wouldn't want." [woman/girl, 14–17, Asian]

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Socioecological level	Barrier	Illustrative quotes
Systems	Legal help did not fit with their relationship dynamics	"I think the number one reason why I would not do it would be because I still want to engage with my partner, my daughter's dad. And I don't necessarily want an outside entity—just because I went that avenue—to feel me like, 'no, you did this, so therefore you can't engage with them anymore or talk with them'. Because I do feel like it's like, no, you asked for this legal protection, so you can't go back on it." [woman/girl, 18–24, White] "I think—I can speak to my experience as a woman—is that you want to make things work so badly. There's this societal expectation of like, in your relationship, in your marriage. You have to continue to put in the work. And he's not gonna be perfect, he's gonna have his issues or your partner will have issues, but, as a woman, it's your job to resolve it and make things work . . . It's sad but, in these instances, you still do have affection or some sort of love towards these partners." [woman/girl, 18–24, White] "I think it's mostly because people still do believe, 'oh they might change if I give them a chance. It's just one more chance. They said they would change, they might change, let's give them a chance.'" [woman/girl, 14–17, Asian]
	Rumors and social consequences	"The people around you might just think like, 'oh, she's dramatic, or start rumors about you, or something of that sort.' So I don't know, kind of, scared that there's gonna be an odd public image of you." [woman/girl, 14–17, White]
	Parental attitudes and family norms	"I know especially in my situation where I'm queer and my parents aren't the most LGBT-friendly people, it would definitely impact my decision. I wouldn't wanna be like ostracized from my family in a way . . . And especially in cases where like, not even just being queer but like cultural stigmas with relationships. It would definitely be a consideration probably like the first thing that I would look at honestly on in terms of whether I get support or not." [man/boy, 18–24, Asian]
Systems	Lack of trust in legal systems	"I honestly feel like they don't do anything. Because my mom, we had like six DV cases and restraining orders that never got followed. And during this court thing, they dropped all the DV cases, all of them. And it kind of, it hurt even more knowing that it felt like no one cared that he was abusive." [woman/girl, 14–17, White] "I think some of it would be like not being trusted by the legal system, like having to prove some parts of evidence or having to have really specific types of evidence that would make it harder. So, I would question if screenshots would just be enough or some things would just be enough like word of mouth. That I think would help stop that from like interacting with the legal system, and then just general distrust, towards the legal system being partial minority and kind of struggling with just the trust within that too." [woman/girl, 18–24, multiracial] "I feel like the system is kind of set up not in a way that protects victims . . . Because most of the time when women specifically go to court or like try and get legal protection, it always ends up ends up doing more harm than good." [woman/girl, 18–24, Asian]

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Socioecological level	Barrier	Illustrative quotes
Lack of good information about CPOs		"I feel like when I hear legal system, I think about guns, I hear about violence. I know this is violence, but this is relationship violence. What kind of judge would even do this case? Like probably a lower, really low rank judge. Honestly, I haven't even heard of legal help or restraining order. I haven't heard of that much. I barely ever heard of it. It's not a popular case, you know?" [woman/girl, 14–17, White]
		"So, I think that if people who do go and they're specifically seeking legal protections, just knowing that if they decide at any point that they want to kind of back out or, you know, take some time to think about it, that that can be up to them. I think a lot of people [think] . . . that when you go down that route, you can't go back."
	Logistical challenges	[woman/girl, 18–24, White] "Well, it's always with these things, I think it's a pros and cons list. So, if I think the effort of getting legal help, like getting an attorney, making court appointments, all of that ends up being too much work or stress on myself compared to what this person is giving me, I'd probably just give up on that. So, suppose getting an attorney is expensive or whatever I've lost to this person is not worth that expense. Or, if the time taken to get this procedure done is way too long compared to what sort of discomfort I went through, I would probably not go for a legal measure to keep them away from me." [woman/girl, 18–24, Asian]
Lack of proof/evidence of IPV		"I think I would absolutely bring to their attention that oftentimes they don't take any action until someone shows up covered in bruises. And it's just really ridiculous to me that they have to wait for it to get to that extreme point just for them to have a case, or they have to be constantly screenshotting, doing their own work, recording them. I don't know how to do that. I didn't know how to do all that when I was 17. And then obviously I couldn't take pictures when she was texting me all the time on the apps 'cause you can delete your text now. You can make them put into vanish mode or whatever. You can't keep everything. You can't turn in all your evidence to build a case and then you arrive and no one takes you seriously. 'Cause like I get it's a huge allegation, but like who would lie about that? . . . I think I would just kind of change the way people think about cases like this." [woman/girl, 18–24, White] "To me, it just seemed harder to prove. Would they really take a screenshot and understand the seriousness of it if they are doing these things? And then a lot of feelings of unsafety for me happened in person where there would be no evidence and it's like, 'well this is just gonna be, he said, she said'. What kind of process is that? And I didn't really know. So, it just wasn't solidified enough to where if I bring this up, am I going to actually be safe enough to then get that process or is it just gonna bring it to their attention and now I'm gonna have to deal with further things?" [woman/girl, 18–24, multiracial]

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Socioecological level	Barrier	Illustrative quotes
Societal	Victim blaming	"You almost blame yourself and you're worried about how people are gonna look at you. And you don't want everyone to look at you as some kind of victim, but you also don't want people to ask you, 'oh, were you wearing—? What were you doing there?' Because I know that's, unfortunately, how it works sometimes. My parents love me so much, but they're also very traditional in the sense that if God forbid, that ever happened to me, the questions would be: firstly, they'd be like, 'are you okay?' But it would [then] be, 'how late were you out? What were you wearing? How short was your dress? Were you talking to 'em? Were you drinking anything?' I thought those are valid questions to ask. And sometimes you just don't want to deal with that." [woman/girl, 18–24, Black/African American]
	Cultural stigma	"I think probably implementing a system where it's more punishable for offenders rather than victims because, in rape culture, most of the time it starts in schools. And most of the time schools let it slide because maybe he's an athlete, maybe he's super smart and this is the one time he messes up. But I feel like it doesn't really matter how many times—like if this is the first offense—because the first time should never happen. And, so if we keep creating the system where men and young boys are allowed to get away with things like this, it keeps building up against our society." [woman/girl, 18–24, Asian]

Table 3. Facilitators of Legal Help-Seeking for Intimate Partner Violence Among Adolescents and Young Adults in King County, Washington.

Socioecological level	Facilitator	Illustrative quotes
Relationship	Abuse characteristics (e.g., frequency, type, severity)	"Those are the really only two things I can think of where it's like if they're hitting you or whether it's with their hand or they're kicking you or they're using an object to hit you . . . if it's more than one or two times and it's just continuous, whether it's a few times every week or, it just keeps on happening over and over and over, then I think it's a good time to get legal help with that." [woman/girl, 14–17, White] "I think it should be used if there is any sort of really harmful emotional abuse because it can put people in a state of mind where they are like—I mean, you're already not in a good spot, emotionally and with your mental health when you're going through most of that. And so, when someone's bombarding you with horrible things, it puts you in a position of possibly harming yourself, I'd say more likely than not." [woman/girl, 18–24, White] "I feel like I've dealt with a lot of emotional abuse, but physical abuse has never gotten to the point where I've either been unable to defend myself or been actually physically injured. It's not like I can't put a Band-Aid over it, like I have to go to the doctor for it. It has not gotten to that point for me. So, I feel like at that point, that's definitely when you should—or if it gets violent to your family or your belongings. I know a lot of people will get upset and when they break up and key someone's car or puncture their tires or break their windows and that's, you know, destruction of property. I definitely think that should also be part of something that you should seek legal help for." [woman/girl, 14–17, White]
	Need for physical safety	"So, obsessive or stalking actions, I feel like would be a very good time to put the protection order in place or go to court for it and have something like that. The same thing goes for whether it's emotional abuse or physical abuse, hitting, yelling. . ." [woman/girl, 14–17, White] "[Interviewer: What was your primary motivation for filing a protection order?] To keep him and his baby's mom away from me and my child because they both liked to make a lot of different threats. So, and then when she was threatening to—I have screenshots of her threatening me while I was pregnant with my daughter." [woman/girl, 18–24, Black/African American]

(continued)

Table 3. (continued)

Socioecological level	Facilitator	Illustrative quotes
Systems	No other options, Last resort option	"If the person has tried to leave the partner or get out. If they were able to and the partner is still seeking them out to kind of cause harm and like finding them, I think—if it's verbally been said and, like partner to partner, and then they're still not respecting that, there's sometimes you have to go to legal route 'cause it's like what else are you going to do? [Interviewer: Yeah. Okay. So, you see it as sort of a last resort option?] I mean, I don't think it should be. I think in a perfect world people would reach out and do it as soon as there's harm." [woman/girl, 14–17, White] "I wanted to explore other avenues first before getting down to that. It's really complicated. 'Cause like I said, from the outside looking in, I feel like I have an understanding that like, okay, if someone like grabs your arm or threatens that they're gonna do something to you like that is worth looking into legal protection. But then, again, if it were to happen to me, it's like, all right, I can handle it myself." [woman/girl, 18–24, White]
	CPO champion	"My parents were with me every step of the way and my mom is actually the one who suggested the protection order. Because at first we had a SAPO [Sexual Assault Protection Order] but, after our case ended, they had told us that if we didn't do a protection order, that there would be nothing else we can do. So, we kind of got forced into a protection order when it honestly has done nothing." [woman/girl, 14–17, White]
	Perceptions of legal system effectiveness	"So, when I was a child, my mom had a protection order against my dad. So, there's some experience with that. I think that it is a really great way to support people in harmful situations, and it takes a long time to put yourself in a position where you're like, this really has to happen. It's not just something that people can use whenever they want. It's something that really takes time. So, yeah, I think it's great. I think it's a wonderful resource to have for people." [woman/girl, 18–24, White] "I think for some people it can be really helpful though. Like if there's kids involved and maybe it was an abusive relationship, maybe one person doesn't want their partner to be around the kids ever or them, so that they can't cause harm to them. I don't know. I'm kind of in a gray area on protection orders myself." [woman/girl, 18–24, White]

(continued)

Table 3. (continued)

Socioecological level	Facilitator	Illustrative quotes
	Third party to enforce rules	"And he kind of used that, like he would text me multiple times a day or try to bump into me on the way to class as he knew my schedule and things like that . . . And so having someone involved to kind of say, 'Hey, you can't actually text her anymore. You can't casually bump into her anymore. You have to give her space 'cause she's wanting space'. That would've been nice." [woman/girl, 18–24, Black/African American]
	Consequences for abusive partners	"I think the process was a unique situation. Both of—or actually not anymore—but at the time these two were still both minors. We all went to the same school . . . This first individual had everything filled out. They were ready to testify and stuff and they—it is a big school, so I guess they haven't crossed paths. I don't go to the same school as they do anymore. But it was a very—I think as a friend of this first individual, I kind of saw that they knew how powerful and empowering that action would've been. And, and this second individual, I think they felt a bit scared that it was becoming a legal thing. Kids, they don't learn that things come with consequences." [woman/girl, 14–17, Asian] "I think that it signifies to the abuser that it's a very severe situation and that they're serious about this. And it isn't just like I'm consulting legal help. It's like I've gone through the process already and I'm putting my foot down. I feel like it's a lot more official than other things that could be done." [woman/girl, 18–24, White]

Table 4. Adolescent and Young Adult Systems-Level Recommendations & Solutions to Increase Access to Legal Help-Seeking for Intimate Partner Violence.

Recommendation/ solution	Illustrative quotes
Better advocates	"I wanna work in the field like that because I have experience and I care about people like that. Whereas there's people who are in the system that don't give a f*ck about them at all. They're only there because of the money, and that's not fair. People in the system need to have people who are going to actually care about them. And if you don't have anybody who's actually gonna care about you, then of course you're gonna feel like you don't belong, you don't care to anybody or you don't matter because you don't have the right support system." [woman/girl, 18–24, Black/African American] "I think just having specific people mandated to those reports, to not just have any regular police officer. 'Cause I think it does require some type of knowledge on that system and mental health and psychology I think would be really beneficial to have those systems in place rather than a police officer in the way that they're trained." [woman/girl, 18–24, multiracial]
Strengthen laws/policies	"Within the court systems, too, having it placed in a certain way that helps reduce harm to the person because those can be really traumatic in needing to kind of review events and feeling like you're being questioned on if you're telling the truth or not. And kind of having that form something different where it's like, okay, here's the evidence in place rather than this is like trying to disprove somebody. Changing that to being like, okay, let's find a system that benefits this person." [woman/girl, 18–24, multiracial] "As long as the person has evidence, the reporting should be done anonymously. And only once the protection order can be passed or is eligible to be passed, you can announce your—I mean, release your personal information, so that you are protected against the person. So, in case the protection order is denied, no one is gonna know that you were the one who filed the protection order." [woman/girl, 14–17, Asian]
Improve parental notification and permission	"Hypothetically speaking, it would probably affect my decision a lot. Because, as I was mentioning like as someone who's with strict parents who don't really allow dating, if I were to get myself into a situation where it became harmful and I reached out for legal help but then my family would have to be notified . . . I feel like that is a really big factor to make me not push for like legal help because not only am I now in the situation with this guy, I'm now in this situation with my parents as well. And I actually like—and if I see my parents or if I live with my parents, I feel like that makes it a hundred percent harder." [woman/girl, 18–24, Asian] "They're pretty understanding about me making my own decisions. They just—it came down to the point where it's like, I'm gonna make my own decisions and they know that. It is just hopefully I can make the right and safe choices. But they know they can't stop everything. So they kind of just say, you know what, he's old enough, he can make his own decisions. And if he thinks that's the best way to go, then that's the best way to go." [man/boy, 14–17, multiracial] "[Interviewer: So a different scenario is if you decided you wanted to seek legal protection and you didn't have to get their permission, but they were notified that you had gotten an order, would that feel different? Would that be a little bit different if I feel like if I needed their permission, maybe they had to be informed of everything I shared. And, if it's just letting them know that I've pursued something then I can kind of control how much I share with them." [woman/girl, 18–24, Asian]

(continued)

Table 4. (continued)

Recommendation/ solution	Illustrative quotes
Improve and increase access to resources in schools	"So, I guess it would've been nice if the school had a day where they taught these are the signs of an unhealthy relationship. This is a resource, this is a lawyer, this is the nearest police station. Like, very basic guidelines for it . . . that could be useful. I think that it matters if at least schools try." [woman/girl, 14–17, Asian] "Uh, I think you start high school when you're 14 and you end when you're 18. So it's four years, I think. Yes, so between 14 and 18, I feel that that is a point in time where that information should really be accessible for all of those ages and I think would just be really helpful. Because some people, like I said, they don't know where to reach out or maybe they may be afraid of reaching out. But if it's in school somewhere or if the counselors are given lessons on how to respond to that, I think that would be really helpful." [woman/girl, 14–17, White]
Develop and expand accessible community resources	"So, I think if there was a lot more, stuff like that, like posters and whatnot that was geared towards or had stuff that would be more, I don't wanna say like eye-catching, but more like relatable to my age group or high school teens and people of that matter. I think they could even work for college. I feel like a lot of people think—like when they think like domestic abuse—they think adults and people who are married or have been dating for a long time and like, 'oh, it couldn't happen to me' but it could. So, I feel like if it was more geared towards, or I feel like everybody watches a domestic abuse video at school and it's like a billion years old. So, you just kind of have this standard of 'oh yeah, these people'. So, your brain kind of just makes the standard and thinks that it's only this little kind of what it is but it's a lot more than that." [woman/girl, 14–17, White] "I mean, from that experience I've learned, I think so much about what I define as healthy relationships and the standard that I have for myself. And I feel like before I had learned those lessons, I would go back and do it all the same again. So, I feel like honestly more education at a younger age about what relationships are, the dangers of them, what they can look like, what they should look like, all of that stuff would've been helpful because I think that would've signaled the red flags in my mind about like, well, maybe I shouldn't be feeling this kind of way, or maybe I shouldn't be, you know, afraid." [woman/girl, 18–24, White] "Honestly, I've always wanted a therapist. I feel like just talking it out with someone professional really does help 'cause they're unbiased, you know? I mean, they don't know anything about you—like you're telling them fresh outta the book. Well, my friends have been with me since the start, you know? And also they know him . . . A therapist is like a book, you know, you're like writing in it. It's like a fresh page." [woman/girl, 14–17, Hispanic/Latino]

their close family/friends, would present barriers to seeking legal help. For example, participants described how *abuse characteristics* (e.g., frequency, type, severity) were a barrier to seeking legal help, considering emotional/psychological abuse or coercive control as not legitimate or valid enough to require help compared to physical abuse. Not all participants considered their experience as IPV: “. . . some of the things that I experienced when I was dating the girl, I just didn’t ever really consider that abuse. I was like, so she is threatening me with suicide. That’s not abuse. That’s just her being mentally ill” [woman/girl, 18–24, White]. They also expressed hesitation about seeking help if the abuse was not perceived by others to be that severe, sometimes based on the assumption that persons that young do not experience abuse.

In the context of their intimate relationship, participants described a *fear of contact with or retaliation* by their abusive partner as a barrier to legal help-seeking. For example, they feared that seeking legal help would result in retaliation by their partner, potentially exacerbating the abuse (“it would just get really messy and tumultuous and expensive, even more tumultuous than things already were” [woman/girl, 18–24, White]). They also described apprehension about how the legal help-seeking process itself would potentially put them in contact with their abusive partner through court proceedings. As one participant explained, “in some cases you have to see the other person who’s been causing you harm in court. . . .that would make me just not do it” [woman/girl, 14–17, White]. Participants sometimes felt that *legal help did not fit with their relationship dynamics*. For example, some participants reported not wanting to negatively affect their partners by seeking legal help, worrying about the consequences they could face (e.g., having something on their record, school suspension), or preferring other options to get their partners support (e.g., help with substance use). Other participants were optimistic that problems in their relationship would resolve on their own or wanted to give their partners a chance to change. A participant elaborated that often people do not seek legal help because “you still care about that person to an extent and . . . you don’t wanna go through the legal process of like slapping a DV [domestic violence] anything on their record” [woman/girl, 18–24, White]. At times, participants framed potentially abusive behaviors as misunderstandings that would sort themselves out, wanting to believe they were not in a bad situation. Both in worrying about the impacts of legal help on partners and believing in partners’ capacity for change, some participants noted the hope, given their young age, that their partners could learn and develop different relationship skills. Participants also shared several reasons for not wanting to disengage from or leave their partners, including financial dependence and shared housing or children.

In relationships with family and friends, participants worried about the *rumors and social consequences* of seeking help, including negative effects on friend groups or their reputation, having rumors circulating, or feeling isolated/ostracized. One participant explained, “They might have been instilled with so much fear that unless they’re with that person, they won’t have any support system. And if they go get legal help, then that person who’s abusing them is . . . just gonna leave. Their only support system, and they’ll be left alone” [woman/girl, 14–17, Asian]. Participants shared how *parental attitudes and family norms*, including those related to dating and relationships, impacted willingness to communicate with parents. One participant shared, “I come from a family where partner violence and abuse in those ways is really common . . . and also where victim blaming happens a lot. So even when I had reached out to my family, they had told me that it was my fault for not fixing my boyfriend” [woman, 14–17, Asian].

Systems Level. Participants repeatedly expressed a *lack of trust in legal systems*, generally feeling like legal services would be ineffective or that their concerns would not be taken seriously. A participant summarized: “I feel like the system is kind of set up not in a way that protects victims . . . Because most of the time when women specifically go to court or like try and get legal protection, it always ends up doing more harm than good” [woman/girl, 18–24, Asian]. Sometimes, the lack of trust stemmed from not being taken seriously based on age, racial and/or gender bias of lawyers, police, and other court system actors, or beliefs about what constitutes IPV. A participant shared, “I do think that there is a possibility of the protection order being denied just ‘cause of the way I look or the race I belong to or my age” [woman/girl, 14–17, Asian]. Other times, participants felt the legal system was undependable or ineffective through inaccurate identification of the primary abusive partner, lack of CPO enforcement (sometimes resulting in victims becoming defendants through acts of self-defense), and witnessed experiences of friend and family members. One participant explained, “I asked you guys [legal system] for help and you guys basically denied me of my help. So, I took it into my own hands . . . they need to do a better job of caring” [woman/girl, 18–24, Black or African American].

Some participants reported a *lack of good information about CPOs*, which dissuaded them from engaging in legal help-seeking. This included participants’ own lack of knowledge or misperceptions about CPOs and the legal process. For example, some participants wanted to know more about what legal help looks like and what qualifies for legal help (“what does the legal help look like?” [man/boy, 18–24, Asian]). Several noted they had never heard of CPOs, did not know that legal help for IPV was possible, or

shared inaccurate information about CPOs. Legal processes often felt confusing and overwhelming, and some participants said they would not know where to start if they did not know someone who had been through the process.

Participants described *logistical challenges* that would discourage them from pursuing a CPO, including money, time, language barriers, and complexity of the process. As one participant elaborated: “because when it’s like multiple websites and multiple pages and steps . . . you almost convince yourself that it’s not worth it because it’s so intense and arduous of a process” [woman/girl, 18–24, White]. Participants also shared how *lack of proof/evidence of IPV* was a barrier to engaging, noting that much harm (e.g., over the phone, in person) was unable to be documented and may result in a “he said, she said” scenario. Some noted that a lack of physical evidence might lead to them being questioned or having their concerns dismissed. A participant shared, “I think they would immediately dismiss what I was trying to say . . . Prove it, prove it. And, when it comes to sexual assault, it’s like how can I even do that? . . . Besides just being like, please take my word for it” [woman/girl, 18–24, White]. They also brought up the unique challenges technology (e.g., vanishing text messages) introduces in documenting IPV.

Societal Level. Participants described perceptions of *victim blaming*, noting that individuals who perpetrate violence often receive sympathy or get defended, while people experiencing violence get blamed for not fixing the problem, asking for it, or dressing a certain way. This perception and exposure to others’ experiences (e.g., in the media) was seen as evidence that they might also be blamed if they sought help. One participant described, “in social media nowadays, whenever a woman does talk about issues that she’s had, it always seems like the person who committed the act gets defended. Girls are always told we’re asking for it and stuff like that, and that we shouldn’t act a certain way if we don’t want things to happen” [woman/girl, 18–24, Asian]. Participants described broad-ranging *cultural stigma* (e.g., sexism, racism, homophobia) that posed barriers to legal help-seeking through stigma associated with being an IPV survivor and stigma associated with participant identities. A participant elaborated on the implications of racism in help-seeking, “I think definitely there’s also a huge racial divide here where some people are treated better than others based off of how they look. And so, if you are someone who is a person of color trying to engage with authorities . . . that could definitely sway people from seeking help” [woman/girl, 18–24, Black or African American].

Facilitators of Legal Help-Seeking

Relationship Level. While described as a barrier when the abuse was not perceived as severe, participants noted how *abuse characteristics* could, in other circumstances, facilitate legal help-seeking. This was especially noted when the abuse was felt to be severe (e.g., physical harm) or persistent (e.g., stalking). They also shared how negative impacts on their daily life/mental health, property damage, and threats to others would be reasons to seek legal help. A participant explained, “I think if it’s a situation where I’m actually fearing about my safety, I would. I wouldn’t go necessarily . . . if it was an emotional situation, I think I would just end it there and then; seek other types of help” [woman/girl, multiracial, 18–24]. Participants highlighted how the *need for physical safety*, either for themselves or others (e.g., children, parents, friends), also served as a strong motivator for legal help-seeking.

Some participants articulated how CPOs often felt like a *last resort option* for those seeking help/support in an abusive relationship (“ . . . it’s seen as kind of a scary thing to do that against another person. Even if they’re causing you a great amount of harm, it seems drastic . . . so I guess it kind of is a last resort” [woman/girl, 14–17, White]). While participants reported not initially turning toward a CPO, they did perceive this form of legal help-seeking as a valid, worthwhile option in certain circumstances (e.g., safety concerns). Lastly, participants described how a *CPO champion*, or a relationship with a key person (e.g., parent, advocate), helped them understand options and navigate through the legal system. A participant shared how working with a DV advocate made filing a CPO “pretty easy because she already knew what she was doing . . . but, if I was doing it on my own, I probably wouldn’t have known what to do. I wouldn’t have known how to submit files. I wouldn’t have known how to submit screenshots, nothing” [woman/girl, 18–24, Black or African American].

Systems Level. Some participants expressed *perceptions of legal system effectiveness* based their own experiences receiving legal help in the context of IPV and those of family members and friends. Furthermore, some participants shared more specifics about how loved ones’ experiences with CPOs meaningfully led to improved safety and well-being. One participant described: “from what I’ve observed in my sister’s relationships . . . once something was filed with the court or once it was just outside of the relationship between my sister and her partner . . . it helped” [woman/girl, 18–24, White]. Participants described the benefits of having a *third party to enforce rules* in the context of IPV. Through a CPO, participants articulated how a judge and the legal system can help establish boundaries for the

abusive partner and, in doing so, take some of the responsibility and pressure off survivors (“some sort of authority that can help them get the help they need . . . because sometimes it’s not just emotional. Sometimes you need to physically be able to distance yourself from a person safely with that, with actual consequences for the other person” [woman/girl, 18–24, Asian]). Participants explained how they were motivated to seek CPOs because of the potential for meaningful *consequences for abusive partners*, helping them realize the gravity of their behaviors. One participant reflecting on legal help-seeking wondered, “Maybe I taught him something, you know? And he realized, oh shoot, what I do like my words, my actions actually do have severe impact in a person’s life, and actually am hurting them and causing significant damage” [woman/girl, 14–17, Hispanic/Latina].

Recommendations and Solutions to Increase Access to Legal Help-Seeking

Participants described a desire for *better advocates*, or to have people in legal systems and law enforcement systems who truly care about survivors (“making sure that people that are working . . . on those cases really understand the detrimental effects [of IPV] and they understand like having empathy toward all different kinds of cases” [woman/girl, 18–24, multiracial]). Participants highlighted the need to *strengthen laws/policies* to better serve the needs of AYAs such as ensuring anonymity/protection from repercussions before a CPO is granted, not requiring contact with the abusive partner, making the CPO process faster, and reducing harm/trauma while going through the CPO process. As a participant explained, “if it was done in a way where partners don’t have to see each other . . . I think it’d be easier to get legal help to know if for whatever reason protections are dismissed, if there’s some sort of protection in place afterwards for fear of like retaliation” [woman/girl, 18–24, White]. Participants also articulated wanting to *improve parental notification/permission* rules for youth seeking CPOs. Some participants expressed how parental notification or permission would dissuade them from seeking a CPO. Participants highlighted specific reasons (e.g., family norms around dating, queerness, “not everybody has a parent who cares” [woman/girl, 18–24, Black or African American]), while some noted that this could be problematic, even if it was not an issue for them personally. Participants articulated nuance between parental permission and notification, with parental notification feeling more acceptable with potential modifications (e.g., notification going to a guidance counselor rather than parents). Finally, other participants expressed a combination of ambivalence, being okay with, or even wanting

parental permission or notification when pursuing a CPO, depending on their relationship with their parent(s).

Participants shared the need to *improve and increase access to resources in schools*. Participants suggested school-based education as a tool for prevention and supporting youth in harmful relationships. They highlighted a range of ideas for education programs, particularly incorporating youth feedback into programs and broadening the curricula beyond a narrow focus on sex education and/or physical harm. Several expressed how high school is a particularly important time to learn about healthy relationships as relationship habits are forming and youth experience some of their first serious intimate relationships. Participants noted that well-trained school staff, especially counselors, could help facilitate both legal and non-legal help-seeking. Some participants reported negative personal experiences with school staff, highlighting the need for more high-quality, well-resourced school-based mental and behavioral health professionals. One participant shared, “I feel like [my sister’s] counselors are not very equipped to deal with students dating and that sort of thing. They’re mostly catering toward their academics and their future goals, which is definitely important. But, unfortunately, some people have problems now and because of that they’re not able to think of their future” [woman/girl, 18–24, Asian].

Other participants more generally discussed the need to *develop and expand accessible community resources*. For example, participants described the need for more accessible legal services, including hotlines for legal help and more general information to help individuals know where to start with legal action (e.g., how and where to seek a CPO). Participants recommended putting resources in schools, community centers, workplaces as well as using posters, advertisements, and social media to ensure accessible information for those seeking help. Lastly, participants shared forms of help they would have liked or benefited from, especially mental health support and relationship counseling, as well as medical help and trauma-informed care. A participant elaborated on the value of these services:

I would definitely encourage schools, community centers . . . city hall, police, public places to have . . . relationship resources. So that it . . . just becomes commonplace that if you are experiencing some kind of harm . . . you know that that’s where you go for resources or someone to talk with or . . . just like open up more ways and channels for people to access the resources that are out there. Beyond going to domestic places that are labeled as like domestic violence centers. ‘Cause I think that someone who—if you only think that you can go there for that, that might put people off [woman/girl, 18–24, White].

In her response, the participant highlights the need for multi-disciplinary community resources, separate from, but complimentary to those offered by domestic violence service agencies.

Discussion

This research highlights the need for comprehensive resources and strategies to support AYAs as they seek legal help for experiences of IPV and has implications for practices and policies that restrict adolescent knowledge of and access to CPOs. Participants described barriers to and facilitators of help-seeking spanning all levels of the socioecological model. Overall, participants identified far more barriers than facilitators to legal help-seeking, which may reflect existing literature describing how barriers for help-seeking for IPV survivors may be exacerbated for AYAs (Bundock et al., 2020; Cardenas et al., 2024; Zinzow et al., 2022). Notably, many barriers were interrelated or compounded one another (e.g., fear of contact with a partner may be exacerbated by lack of trust in legal systems granting and enforcing protections). This finding underscores the need for additional resource-building and problem-solving to create and improve existing pathways connecting AYAs to legal help following IPV. To that end, this discussion focuses on the policy and practice recommendations proposed by participants that address barriers and amplify facilitators across all levels of the socioecological model, contextualized along existing literature and highlighting multiple pathways to affect change for AYAs.

Participants echoed prior research highlighting how various *advocates*—empathetic, dedicated, and knowledgeable actors within the legal system (e.g., attorneys, law enforcement)—could make a difference in the lives of AYA IPV survivors (Hester et al., 2025; Messing et al., 2021). Improving the knowledge of these personnel about dynamics of IPV and what IPV behaviors are eligible for CPOs can meaningfully address numerous barriers identified by our participants. For example, while privacy and confidentiality are challenging to maintain in a legal environment where seeking a CPO requires the description of personal experiences with IPV, legal system personnel can provide clear information around what is not confidential and the spaces/persons who can offer confidential support (e.g., IPV advocates). This could render CPOs a more available option for AYA IPV survivors who report privacy/confidentiality concerns (Ashley & Foshee, 2005; Bundock et al., 2020; Palmer et al., 2025). Furthermore, individuals working within the legal system can work toward earning the trust of AYA IPV survivors by taking survivor-centered approaches to handling CPOs, consistently taking all cases of AYA IPV seriously, equitably administering CPOs, and rigorously enforcing

CPOs and addressing violations (Cardenas et al., 2024; Hefner et al., 2022). Relatedly, those working within and around the legal system need additional training on the ways in which social identities and systems of oppression impact the legal help-seeking process and outcomes, and work to develop practices around cultural relevance and equity for AYA survivors (Bagwell-Gray et al., 2025; Cardenas et al., 2024). Lastly, professionals working with AYAs affected by IPV would benefit from training to best understand AYA development, the implications of IPV during these developmental periods, and developmentally tailored prevention and intervention (Cutter-Wilson & Richmond, 2011; Eisman et al., 2021; Exner-Cortens et al., 2017; Storer et al., 2025).

Relatedly, participants noted how *parental notification/permission* could limit the accessibility of CPOs for some IPV survivors who are legal minors (Lee et al., 2023). While family members can be an important source of support, AYA IPV survivors often seek help informally from friends/peers first and are hesitant to disclose to parents (Bundock et al., 2020; Mapes & Cavell, 2021). Some participants felt that parental notification in lieu of parental permission could increase accessibility of CPOs, while other participants wondered whether other safe adults (e.g., school social worker) could be notified instead of parents. These suggestions underscore the importance of AYA survivor input on which adults participate in their CPO process. For AYAs who may be isolated from adults due to challenging family circumstances, dedicated outreach may be needed to support them in understanding help-seeking options and facilitating their pursuit if they so choose (Cattaneo et al., 2016).

Laws/policies improvements were also highlighted as a potentially important way to increase CPO accessibility and better address the needs of AYAs. Courts could think through improved strategies to address the noted relationship barrier of fear of contact/retaliation (Bundock et al., 2020). This could include, for example, further use of online hearings that were started during the COVID-19 pandemic or other considerations for and protections to the IPV survivors during court appearances (e.g., staggered appearances by petitioners and respondents; Miller et al., 2025; Moyer et al., 2022). This could also involve clearer expectations for prosecutors and courts to address CPO violations, which impact perceptions of justice and accountability (Hefner et al., 2022). Participants also described how witnessing those who perpetrate harm were held accountable had meaningful implications for their healing (Hester et al., 2025). This is likely, in part, due to societal validation of the survivor experience, and may also increase survivor sense of safety (Decker et al., 2022).

Participants consistently discussed the need for *school and community resources* that focus on the experiences and needs of AYA survivors and

provide clear, accurate, and accessible information. AYAs underscored the need to simplify process for requesting and enforcing a CPO. This overall critique—of an overly complex, opaque process to request and enforce a CPO—is consistent with the literature investigating barriers to legal help-seeking among both adult and AYA IPV survivors (Messing et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2021). This also reflects existing research that formal entities often have limited procedures and skills to assess for and respond to IPV (Khumbchandani et al., 2012, 2013; Moore et al., 2015). At times, our participants shared misinformation about CPOs (e.g., that CPOs are only appropriate for severe physical or sexual IPV or unavailable to them based on their age). Improved school and community resources (e.g., IPV-trained school counselors) could address misinformation, render formal services more accessible, and offer a streamlined process that could make it easier to pursue a CPO, particularly in times of heightened safety concerns or distress (Messing et al., 2021; Palmer et al., 2025). As noted in other research, participants discussed the need for IPV prevention education to be presented in schools (Farmer et al., 2023; Sheng et al., 2024). Having these resources embedded in schools and across communities could also minimize concerns about stigma and associated feelings of embarrassment or shame described by participants as knowledge about the prevalence of IPV becomes more widely known and understood.

Limitations

Respondents were in one jurisdiction, and majority of respondents identified as women/girls and White or Asian. Additional studies using an intersectional lens are needed to better understand perceptions and experiences of youth in other jurisdictions and with diverse identities. There is evidence that IPV survivors from racial/ethnic minoritized communities justifiably engage with and perceive the legal system differently than White survivors (Cheng et al., 2022; Holliday et al., 2020; Ogbonnaya et al., 2023). In addition, interviews were conducted virtually, and recruitment was also partially conducted via social media, potentially precluding youth without internet access or computer literacy from participating. However, virtual (vs. in-person) data collection may have allowed youth to be more candid, and social media recruitment allowed us to reach participants who had no familiarity or interaction with service agencies or legal systems. Participants may have been reflecting on IPV experiences from several years prior; however, these are highly salient experiences that support adequate recounting. Lastly, study participants reflected a range of engagement with the legal system. Given the small proportion of our sample who filed a CPO and concerns of participant

confidentiality, we did not examine how responses did or did not differ based on specific legal help-seeking experiences.

Areas for Future Research

This study highlights multiple areas for future research. AYAs consistently brought up the need for school-based prevention programs. While some IPV prevention programs (e.g., Dating Matters) have research supporting their effectiveness among middle schoolers (DeGue et al., 2021; Niolon et al., 2019), there is an opportunity for further work to examine their potential application in younger populations, continued improvement of these programs, and effective implementation (Debnam & Temple, 2021; Piolanti & Foran, 2022). While this study did include some AYAs who pursued CPOs, subsequent work should further explore the experiences of AYAs who have gone through the CPO process. Additionally, research examining how other key persons (e.g., attorneys, court personnel) perceive AYAs interfacing with the CPO process is needed. Such work could inform guidance and/or interventions (e.g., trauma-informed care toolkit) for these individuals to best serve AYAs in the CPO process. Work is also needed to examine how barriers of social processes (e.g., racism, sexism) could be addressed through more culturally responsive programming (Cardenas et al., 2024). Finally, further research is needed on CPO policy implementation for AYAs and the effectiveness of CPOs for AYAs (Adhia et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2023). Such a policy analysis would benefit from consideration of structural and political factors that influence implementation to best inform effective and sustainable public policies.

Conclusion

This qualitative study with AYA IPV survivors identified facilitators of and barriers to legal help-seeking across levels of the socioecological model. The barriers identified underscore the need for changes to practice, policy, and resources to ensure that legal help-seeking for IPV, including CPOs, is available to AYAs. Recommendations provided by participants suggest opportunities for change, including improved services across schools, communities, and within the legal system, to better serve the needs of AYA IPV survivors.

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ORCID iDs

Anna E. Bender  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3995-0882>

Mary A. Kernic  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4763-2729>

Avanti Adhia  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3582-2990>

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the University of Washington Institutional Review Board.

Consent to Participate

Informed consent was obtained from all participants for this study.

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Data are not publicly available to protect participant anonymity but can be requested through a restricted data use agreement via the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research data archive.

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Author Biographies

Anna E. Bender, PhD, MSW, is a Postdoctoral Scholar in the School of Medicine at the University of Washington. Drawing upon experience as a clinical social worker, her multidisciplinary research focuses on the effects of early trauma and adversity on children and adults and strategies to prevent and address interpersonal violence exposure across the life course.

Leah Hardenbergh, MPH, received her Master of Public Health in Epidemiology with a focus in maternal and child health from the University of Washington. She currently works in state policy research, incorporating her public health background into projects on education, transportation, and the criminal legal system.

Megan Moore, PhD, MSW, is Sidney Miller Endowed Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Washington. Her research focuses on eliminating disparities and improving services and long-term outcomes for persons after injury and increasing the impact of injury research through the science of patient, caregiver, and community partner engagement.

Mary A. Kernic, PhD, MPH, is an Emeritus Research Associate Professor of Epidemiology at the University of Washington. Her extensive experience in IPV research has primarily focused on examining the impact of civil and family law procedures and interventions and their impact on the safety and well-being of IPV victim-survivors and their children.

Avanti Adhia, ScD, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Child, Family, and Population Health Nursing and Department of Epidemiology at the University of Washington. The goal of her research is to prevent intimate partner and sexual violence by understanding the causes and consequences and evaluating the role of laws, policies, and interventions in reducing violence.