Intimate Partner Violence and Housing Instability
Joanne Pavao, MPH, Jennifer Alvarez, PhD, Nikki Baumrind, PhD, MPH, Marta Induni, PhD, Rachel Kimerling, PhD

Background: The mental and physical health consequences of intimate partner violence (IPV) have been well established, yet little is known about the impact of violence on a woman’s ability to obtain and maintain housing. This cross-sectional study examines the relationship between recent IPV and housing instability among a representative sample of California women. It is expected that women who have experienced IPV will be at increased risk for housing instability as evidenced by: (1) late rent or mortgage, (2) frequent moves because of difficulty obtaining affordable housing, and/or (3) without their own housing.

Methods: Data were taken from the 2003 California Women’s Health Survey, a population-based, random-digit-dial, annual probability survey of adult California women (N=3619). Logistic regressions were used to predict housing instability in the past 12 months, adjusting for the following covariates; age, race/ethnicity, education, poverty status, marital status, children in the household, and past year IPV.

Results: In the multivariate model, age, race/ethnicity, marital status, poverty, and IPV were significant predictors of housing instability. After adjusting for all covariates, women who experienced IPV in the last year had almost four times the odds of reporting housing instability than women who did not experience IPV (adjusted odds ratio=3.98, 95% confidence interval: 2.94–5.39).

Conclusions: This study found that IPV was associated with housing instability among California women. Future prospective studies are needed to learn more about the nature and direction of the relationship between IPV and housing instability and the possible associated negative health consequences.

Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is associated with increased risk of physical injury as well as long-term negative health and mental health consequences.1–4 Intimate partner violence may also be a barrier to education and employment,5,6 increasing abused women’s risk of poor economic outcomes. Intimate partner violence is more prevalent among lower income women, and prospective studies have demonstrated that the effects of IPV may also prevent women from escaping poverty. These prospective data reveal that past exposure to violence predisposes women to unemployment and poverty, and poverty further increases a woman’s risk for subsequent victimization.7,8 One of the most important economic outcomes associated with IPV may be unstable housing.

Previous research has demonstrated that IPV is associated with homelessness,9–13 yet there have been few studies examining IPV and other forms of housing problems. Extant research has primarily focused on samples selected for housing problems, namely women in domestic violence shelters.14,15 Up to 50% of these women cited at least one housing problem such as difficulty paying rent, being denied housing or threatened with eviction, and having to move because of partner harassment.15 Housing instability may include difficulty paying rent, mortgage, or utility bills, frequent moves, overcrowded living conditions, or doubling up with family or friends.16–20 Housing instability warrants further investigation because it has been associated with shelter use and homelessness,10,11,18,20 the negative health consequences of which have been well established.21–25 Furthermore, housing instability itself may also be associated with negative health outcomes such as accessing health care.16,17 A better understanding of the relationship between IPV and housing instability may help identify services that are most important to assist women experiencing violence.
This is the first analysis of housing instability and IPV in a population-based sample of women. The aim of this study is to examine the relationship between recent IPV and unstable housing. Based on previous research, it is expected that women who have experienced IPV in the last year will be at increased risk for housing instability. This is evidenced by: (1) being more than 30 days late paying rent or mortgage, (2) frequently moving households because of difficulty obtaining affordable housing, and/or (3) being without their own housing.

**Methods**

Data for the current study are from the 2003 California Women’s Health Survey, an annual probability survey of California women, sponsored by the California Departments of Health Services and Social Services and conducted by Survey Research Group.\(^{26,27}\) The response rate for the 2003 survey was 72%, yielding a sample of 4397 women. Women with complete data for all study variables were included in the analysis, yielding a sample size of 3619 women (82.3%).

Intimate partner violence items were adapted from the Conflict Tactics Scale.\(^{28}\) Items included physical violence, sexual violence, threats of violence, stalking, and emotional/psychologic abuse in the last year.

Housing instability was assessed with the following three items: Over the past 12 months (1) was your household >30 days late paying the rent or mortgage? (2) have you been without your own housing for any period of time? (3) and among women who reported having to move more than once in the last 12 months, have you had difficulties finding safe, adequate, or affordable housing?\(^{29}\) Women who reported yes to any of these questions were coded positive for housing instability.

Chi-squares were used to examine the association of housing instability with the following variables: age, race/ethnicity, education, household income below federal poverty level, marital status, and children under age 18 living in the household and past year IPV. Variables significant (\(p < 0.10\)) in the bivariate analyses (Table 1) were retained for the multivariate logistic regression to obtain adjusted odds ratios (AORs) and 95% confidence intervals (CIs). Although the sample closely approximates the population of California women, poststratification weights were used to reflect the age and ethnicity distributions according to the year 2000 Census. The data were analyzed in 2006.

**Results**

Approximately 8.2% of the sample (297 women) reported housing instability in the last 12 months. One hundred and seventy women (4.7%) reported being >30 days late on their rent or mortgage, 108 women (3.0%) reported being without their own housing, and 89 women (2.5%) moved more than once in the last year and had trouble finding safe, adequate, or affordable housing. Table 1 presents the characteristics of women who experienced housing instability compared to all other women. Women who experienced housing instability...
instability were more likely to be younger, African American or Hispanic, not to have completed high school or college, have a household income below the federal poverty level, be separated or divorced, living in a household with children under the age of 18, and to have experienced IPV in the last year. AORs and CIs are provided in Table 2. In the multivariate model age, race/ethnicity, marital status, poverty, and IPV were significant predictors of housing instability. After adjusting for covariates, women who experienced IPV in the last year had almost four times the odds of reporting housing instability than women who did not experience IPV (AOR=3.98, 95% CI: 2.94–5.39).

Discussion

This exploratory investigation of housing instability and IPV in the lives of women suggests that this issue merits further attention. Although considerable research has documented poor health among homeless women, this is one of the first studies to document the epidemiology of the difficulties obtaining and maintaining housing experienced by women and their families. The demographic profile of women who reported housing instability describes a group of women at risk for poor health and social disadvantage. Women with unstable housing were primarily African American or Hispanic, separated or divorced, and living in poverty. Because two thirds of women who reported housing instability had children in the home, future investigations should focus on the health impact for both women and their children. These results revealed an alarming prevalence of past-year IPV among housing unstable women, at 30%.

The multivariate model revealed a robust association of IPV to housing instability, even after accounting for race/ethnicity, poverty, marital status, and other shared risk factors. These cross-sectional data cannot fully describe the nature of this relationship, which is likely bidirectional. Women who separate from or divorce violent cohabitating partners may face housing instability as a result. Alternatively, women who are economically dependent on their cohabitating partners may be more vulnerable to relationship violence. Approximately half of all women who leave an abusive relationship will return. Among shelter residents, 53.3% of women cited economic needs as the reason they returned to a past abusive relationship. Despite the complex nature of this relationship, housing instability may be a preventable factor that exacerbates the health consequences of violence. Future research could focus on the effects of housing instability on health status and access to care among IPV-exposed women.

There are important limitations to this exploratory study. The design is cross-sectional; therefore, temporal or causal relationships between variables should not be inferred. Additionally, these estimates of housing instability may be conservative, as women without a telephone in their home would be excluded from the telephone-based survey. Despite these limitations, this is the first study to identify an association between housing instability and IPV in a representative sample of women. Further study could determine whether housing instability represents a point of intervention to prevent the negative health consequences of IPV.

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