Domestic Violence and Housing Problems

*A Contextual Analysis of Women's Help-Seeking,
Received Informal Support, and Formal System Response*

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This study examined housing problems and homelessness after separation in a sample of 110 women who had experienced domestic violence. Of the sample, 38% reported homelessness. Similar percentages reported housing problems (e.g., late paying rent, skipping meals, threatened with eviction). Predictors of more housing problems included experiencing a greater severity of violence, contacting fewer formal systems, having less informational support, and receiving a negative response from welfare. Women's odds of reporting homelessness were reduced by 30% if police officers responded positively. These findings highlight the importance of changing system responses in an effort to reduce women's housing problems and risks for homelessness after separation.

Keywords: *domestic violence; housing; system response*

Women who are abused by intimate male partners report a myriad of physical and psychological consequences (Campbell, Kub, Belknap, & Templin, 1997; Campbell, Sullivan, & Davidson, 1995; Dutton, Haywood, & El-Bayoumi, 1997; El-Bassel et al., 1998; Kemp, Green, Hovanitz, & Rawlings, 1995; Koss, Koss, & Woodruff, 1991). In addition, women also experience economic burdens. For example, some are economically dependent on their partners and may encounter obstacles if they leave them (Aguirre, 1985; Horn, 1992; Shepard & Pence, 1988). Women who separate may have to move to substandard housing; they may also end up

without housing. This experience reflects the double burden that women face as victims of domestic violence[1] and as potential members of a growing population of homeless, low-income single mothers.

In this research, we examine the role that informal support networks (family, friends, and church) and formal systems (welfare, shelters, police, and courts) play in helping or hindering women in their attempts to secure independent housing after separating from their partners. Previous studies on domestic violence and homelessness have primarily included women from battered women's shelters or homeless shelters. To ensure a more diverse sample of women who seek help from various formal systems, we recruited women from three types of agencies: welfare, shelters, and criminal justice. In describing women's housing experiences, we considered two questions: (a) whether informal support influences women's housing status and (b) whether contacting formal systems and their ensuing treatment affects women's housing. We begin by reviewing the literature on domestic violence and homelessness and the responses women receive from informal support networks and formal systems.

HOMELESSNESS AND ITS LINK TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Previous research suggests a relationship between domestic violence and female homelessness (Browne & Bassuk, 1997; Bufkin & Bray, 1998; Goodman, 1991; Metreaux & Culhane, 1999; Toro et al., 1995; Zorza, 1991). Women may have to find new housing to escape from their partners' abuse. Particularly for low-income women, the search for new housing is increasingly difficult because few low-income housing units are available and federal programs developed to assist women by paying a portion of their rent (e.g., Section 8) have waiting lists of more than 2 years (Choi & Snyder, 1999). In addition, women who move to public housing communities experience the threat of eviction as a zero tolerance policy holds them accountable for criminal acts committed by family members, which may include abusive partners

(Renzetti, 2001). This policy is especially problematic because research documents that women continue to be at risk for abuse even after they separate from their partners (Fleury, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2000; also see Hardesty, 2002, for an excellent discussion of this topic).

THE IMPACT OF INFORMAL SUPPORT NETWORKS ON HOUSING PROBLEMS

Family and friends often provide different types of support to help women cope with abusive relationships (e.g., emotional, informational, tangible). However, although *emotional* support may be helpful, *tangible* support may be necessary for women to separate from their partners (Bowker, 1984; Donato & Bowker, 1984; Tan, Basta, Sullivan, & Davidson, 1995). For example, tangible support (e.g., money, transportation) predicted battered women's cooperation with criminal prosecution in a sample of women whose partners had been charged with domestic violence misdemeanors (Goodman, Bennett, & Dutton, 1999). Without tangible support, women pursuing civil or criminal action may not have been able to get to the courthouse for multiple hearings or find child care so that their children did not have to witness court proceedings.

In addition, women may look to faith leaders for guidance. In fact, clergy and members of the church are a frequently contacted informal source of support (Gordon, 1996), especially among African Americans (Taylor & Chatters, 1988).[2] However, many religions reinforce the patriarchal system that subordinates women to men. Therefore, clergy may counsel battered women to stay with their husbands and pray for the abuse to cease (LaViolette & Barnett, 2000). Women have not found this strategy helpful. For example, in a sample of women who sought support from clergy, only 14% rated them as helpful (Horton, Wilkins, & Wright, 1988). Pastors in traditionally African American denominations, who may want to avoid publicity that reinforces stereotypical images of Black men as physically violent, pose additional obstacles, as they react indifferently to requests for help (West, 1999).

THE IMPACT OF FORMAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS
ON HOUSING PROBLEMS

A majority of battered women seek help from formal support systems (Gondolf & Fisher, 1988). In fact, in a sample of 419 women, less than 2% of the women had *not* sought any help (Hutchison & Hirschel, 1998). Rather, 39% had used two to three different sources, and 26% had used four to five different sources. In a review of 12 studies, the criminal justice system was the most widely used service, whereas women's shelters were among the least often used service (Gordon, 1996). Although law enforcement is among the most frequently contacted formal support system, battered women also report them to be the least helpful (Hamilton & Coates, 1993). Thus, the act of seeking help does not always guarantee women's safety. Indeed, some types of responses by formal support systems may actually exacerbate the violence in women's lives (Ellis, 1992). In fact, there is evidence to suggest that women may be more likely to experience postseparation violence from their partners if systems fail to help women to become economically independent of their partners, to live separately from their partners, and to hold their partners accountable for the violence (also known as the dependence-availability-deterrence model; see Ellis, 1992, for a complete description). This model can also be used as a framework to consider how formal support systems (specifically welfare, shelters, and the justice system) affect women's housing and risks for homelessness after separating from their partners. Furthermore, in addition to documenting the effects of specific actions taken by formal support systems, it is important to note how these systems treat women who seek help (Grigsby & Hartman, 1997).

THE WELFARE SYSTEM

Women may gain independence from their partners by seeking financial support from the welfare system. However, changes in welfare laws, combined with caseworkers' negative attitudes toward victims of domestic violence, create a difficult climate for women seeking assistance. The Personal Responsibility and Work

Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) mandates that women be employed within 24 months of initial enrollment in welfare and also places a 5-year time limit on a woman's ability to receive benefits. Women in violent relationships may have difficulty meeting these new requirements as their partners interfere with their attempts to work or go to school (Raphael, 1996). In fact, one study assessing the effects of PRWORA found that women who experienced physical abuse had approximately one third the odds of working at least 30 hours per week for 6 months or more during the following year than women who had not experienced such abuse (Browne, Salomon, & Bassuk, 1999). As a result, women experience a catch-22. Those who do not work to appease their partners may jeopardize their welfare benefits. Conversely, women who work may experience a "backlash" (Riger & Kreiglstein, 2000) because batterers who feel threatened by women's outside contacts and potential income may become more abusive as they attempt to reassert control.

To reduce the potential deleterious effects of the new welfare requirements, most states have adopted the Family Violence Option, which allows states to temporarily waive time limits and work requirements for women who self-disclose domestic violence (Raphael & Haennicke, 1999). However, its implementation has been difficult, as states have had to create procedures to determine whether applicants are victims of domestic violence and, if so, procedures to inform women of their eligibility for temporary waivers. Screening often falls to caseworkers who may be reluctant to talk with their clients about domestic violence. Some caseworkers are also resentful of their increased workloads; now, they are required not only to verify eligibility but also to serve as "quasi social workers" (Levine, 2001, p. 216). In response, a few states have employed domestic violence providers in Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) offices as a means to ensure that women are screened appropriately and consistently given information about waivers. Those agencies who have taken this step report positive effects (e.g., increased comfort level of TANF caseworkers in talking with women about domestic violence, increased referrals as more women self-disclosing domestic violence are connected with services) (Raphael & Haennicke, 1999). Consequently, women's ability to achieve economic independence, including the ability to live separately from their abusers,

may be, in part, related to successful implementation of the Family Violence Option, changes in caseworkers' attitudes about their roles in the welfare system, and the degree of service coordination between domestic violence agencies and TANF offices.

SHELTERS

Shelters can also provide a safety net to battered women after separation. Most offer temporary shelter, support groups, legal assistance, and children's programs. Recent legislation (Violence Against Women Act, 1994, 2000) increased funding for battered women's shelters (Brooks, 1997); however, many still operate with inadequate funding. To augment governmental support, shelter directors frequently seek funding from outside sources, but accompanying restrictions limit how shelters expend these funds (Roberts, 1997). For example, some funds do not allow shelters to provide services to women who plan to return to their batterers, have addictions, or belong to minority groups (Donnelly, Cook, & Wilson, 1999; Loseke, 1992).

In addition, shelters typically turn away homeless women if they are not currently abused but have been in the past (Donnelly et al., 1999; West, 1999). This situation is ironic, as many women cannot be housed at a battered women's shelter when they leave their abusive partners because many shelters consistently operate at capacity. Yet if these same women become homeless while gaining safety, they may become ineligible for shelter housing and community-based services.

JUSTICE SYSTEMS

Battered women seek help from the criminal and civil justice systems for protection against abuse and to hold their partners accountable for the abuse. However, these systems have been widely criticized for poor treatment of women and an inability to protect women, both of which could be key intervening variables in women's homelessness (Bufkin & Bray, 1998). For example, in a study of 50 battered women, 50% reported that police officers minimized their injuries, 33% encountered objectionable questions and comments by judges, and 51% reported that prosecutors asked whether they provoked their abuse (Erez & Belknap, 1998).

Given these experiences, women may seek help initially, but if treated poorly, they may be less likely to contact the police again (Fleury, Sullivan, Bybee, & Davidson, 1998). Consequently, women may be unable to prevent future incidents of violence while remaining in their homes, and often relocation is associated with homelessness as women are unable to find affordable housing.

Furthermore, in the civil justice system, women's petitions for protection orders do not necessarily guarantee protection from their partners. Judges may deny women's petitions or may refuse to evict their batterers. Without judgments for the batterer's eviction, women and their children are forced to abandon their homes (Mullins, 1994; Zorza, 1991). Even for those who successfully obtain a protection order, women consistently report that they are "not worth the paper they are written on." Women are frustrated to learn that orders may not take effect immediately after the judge signs them. In fact, protection orders may not be valid until police officers serve the batterer and enter the order into a registry that acts as a repository for information contained in the order. Changes have been made in some states (e.g., Georgia, where this study was conducted) to provide women with immediate protection after the judge signs the order; however, this policy is not the norm. Furthermore, although the order is valid, women must still carry a copy of the order with them until it has been entered into the registry, making it more likely that women will have problems getting the order enforced should they need to contact the police to report a violation. In many cases, police officers do not arrest men for violating protection orders, even if the order has been fully processed and entered into the registry (Chaudhuri & Daly, 1992; Finn & Colson, 1990, 1998; Harrell & Smith, 1996). Without an arrest, it may be more difficult to hold men accountable for the violence they perpetrate against their partners.

LIMITATIONS OF THE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND HOMELESSNESS LITERATURE

Existing data focus on the relationship between domestic violence and homelessness; however, homelessness is at the extreme of a continuum of housing problems. Research should broaden the scope of homelessness to include various housing problems,

not simply lack of housing. For example, housing problems could include paying bills and rent late, selling belongings or eating less to pay rent, being turned away from renting, or being threatened with eviction. In addition, the effect that informal networks and formal support systems have on women's housing must be delineated. Therefore, this study tested the following hypotheses: (a) Informational and tangible support received from women's informal networks will be negatively related to housing problems and homelessness, and (b) women who contact more formal systems and who are treated more positively by these systems will report fewer housing problems and episodes of homelessness.

METHOD

SAMPLING CRITERIA AND SCREENING PROCEDURES

We recruited women from three agencies in the Atlanta metropolitan area: welfare, the criminal justice system, and shelters. To be included in the study, women must have lived with and been separated at least once from their partners for at least 2 weeks within the past 3 years. To avoid inflating the rate of homelessness, we asked women recruited from shelters (who by definition would be homeless) about a separation prior to the current separation and within the past 3 years (if they had separated previously).

Women must have also experienced physical or sexual violence, including threats of harm, during the separation period. We used these screening criteria only at the welfare office because, by definition, women at the shelter and in the criminal justice system had experienced violence from intimate partners.

RECRUITMENT AND SAMPLE

The first author, and five undergraduate research assistants who received course credit for their participation, recruited women and conducted interviews. We recruited women who contacted the welfare system for benefits in two counties, DeKalb and Fulton. Interviewers approached and screened women in waiting areas or as they attended GED classes. If they met criteria,

interviewers described the study and asked them to participate. Research assistants conducted interviews in a quiet corner of the welfare office. In addition, staff from the domestic violence assessor unit assisted with recruitment in one office.[3] In both counties, interviewers screened 166 women for eligibility, with 113 deemed ineligible. Of the remaining 53 eligible women, 47 consented, 2 refused, and 4 began the interview but terminated it when their caseworker called them. The response rate for the welfare office was 89%.

We also recruited women from the DeKalb County solicitor's office. Interviewers called women with criminal cases pending against their partners for domestic violence and asked them to participate. Interviewers met women at their homes or at a nearby park or restaurant. Of 145 files obtained from the solicitor's office, 25 were ineligible because women had not separated from their partners. Of 120 eligible women, 39 women completed interviews, 26 refused, and 55 could not be reached (i.e., disconnected phones, $n = 20$; unreachable after eight attempts, $n = 22$; no longer at the number listed, $n = 7$; and wrong numbers, $n = 6$). The response rate was 33%. Women who completed interviews were similar in age and race (M age = 32.0, 90% Black) to those who refused (M age = 32.3, 88% Black) and those who could not be contacted (M age = 30.8, 87% Black). However, women who participated were more likely to be married (48%) than those who refused (24%) or those whom interviewers could not contact (38%).

Women staying at one of three battered women's shelters comprised the shelter sample. In one shelter, a member of the staff approached women, described the study, and invited women to participate. Interviews occurred in a private shelter office. In addition, staff at the domestic violence assessor unit in the DeKalb County welfare office referred women from two other shelters in that county. Staff arranged with interviewers to meet women at the welfare office or to give them women's contact information. Regardless of recruiting strategy, all women approached from shelters agreed to participate. We compensated women recruited from the solicitor's office and the shelter with $15.00 and women recruited from the welfare office with a $15.00 gift certificate for groceries. This method did not jeopardize women's benefits.

Our sample of 110 women (n = 37 welfare system, n = 39 criminal justice system, and n = 24 shelters) provided power of .84 for medium effect sizes with $p < .05$ (Cohen, 1992). Of the women, 82% were African American (5% White, 5% Latina, 1% Asian American, 1% Native American, and 6% other), 68% were Baptist or other Protestant, and 64% had lived with or were currently living with their partner but were not married. Of the sample, 66% reported current employment, and 54% reported monthly income of $1,000 or less. Most women had completed high school (31%) or had attended college (37%). The sample was about equally split between women who brought in either none of the income or less than half (53%) and those who brought in more than half to all of the household income (47%) when compared to how much their partners brought in. On average, women were 30.2 years old (SD = 8.1, range of 19 to 53 years) and had two children. The average length of separation was 4.8 months (SD = 5.4, range of 2 weeks to 33 months). When asked what factors led to the separation, 44% reported threats of violence from their partners. Other reasons included increasing violence severity (40%), partner's alcohol or drug problem (31%), partner's incarceration (23%), partner's infidelity (9%), general discord and arguing (8%), or partner's initiation of abuse toward children (6%). Categories were not mutually exclusive.

MEASURES

Questionnaire Development

We created an index of housing problems and a measure of formal system response because none existed in the literature (see Tolman & Rosen, 2001, for a four-item index of material deprivation that is similar to the Housing Problems Index, HPI, created for this study; compared to the index of material deprivation, the HPI includes an expanded list of problems connected to women's housing after separation). The first author drafted questions on housing problems and formal system responses based on 7 years of experience working with women and then conducted key informant interviews at a battered women's shelter, a homeless resource agency, and a nonprofit housing assistance program. The goal of the interviews was to elicit feedback on the validity of the

housing questions. All informants stated that items represented the universe of problems that low-income women may face. The first author also conducted a focus group composed of 5 women from a battered women's shelter (1 White, 1 Latina, and 3 African American) to explore the wording and appropriateness of formal system response questions. Women stated that the questions were easy to understand and held meaning for them based on their personal experiences. This feedback, along with comments from informants, established face validity for the measures.

Criterion Variables

We assessed housing problems with the HPI, a 10-item index that lists women's problems in accessing new housing or maintaining their current housing in the year following separation from their partners. Responses to the index were dichotomous (yes or no), with more problems associated with more yes responses. Women were also asked whether they were without a home for at least 7 days. We considered women homeless who stayed with friends and family as well as at shelters, motels, transit stations, cars, and parks. Staying with family and friends was considered homeless because living conditions of family and friends may already be compromised and stress associated with doubling (and sometimes tripling) up may lead to women being asked to leave without notice. If women reported they were homeless after separation, follow-up questions were asked to determine where women stayed first, second, third, and so forth, until they became housed again. We also asked women what would have been most helpful in preventing them from becoming homeless.

An exploratory correlation of the HPI showed that two items measuring homelessness were not significantly correlated with the rest of the index. Thus, the HPI was modified to reflect two separate concepts: housing problems and homelessness. A new homelessness variable was computed such that if a woman reported either being homeless immediately after the separation or having to leave her home within 1 year of separation, then she was considered homeless. Demographic variables (i.e., income, education, and number of children) were not related to the new eight-item HPI; however, income was related to the new

homelessness variable ($r = -.30$). Subsequent analyses were conducted separately: first, with the new eight-item HPI and then with homelessness as dependent variables.

Predictor Variables

The Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) assessed three forms of victimization: psychological, physical, and sexual. Participants reported how often in the 6 months prior to separation and up to the first year after separation they had experienced each form of violence. Response formats ranged from 0 (*never happened*) to 6 (*more than 20 times*). The total scale had excellent reliability ($\alpha = .94$).

The Received Social Support Scale measured women's requests for assistance from family, friends, and their church (Kaniasty & Norris, 2000). Received support was categorized by type (i.e., emotional, informational, and tangible) and source (i.e., family, friends, and church, including faith leaders and church members). Questions about expressions of interest, encouragement, and availability assessed emotional support. Whether women were given suggestions on what actions they should take, how they could change the situation, and where they could go to get the things they needed tapped informational support. Finally, offers of money, things other than money (food, clothing), a place to stay, and child care characterized the degree of tangible support offered to women. Each of these 10 items was asked three times to gauge how often their family, friends, and church provided each type of support. The response format ranged from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*many times*). Thus, the total scale included 30 items ($\alpha = .91$).

The Formal System Response Inventory measured women's help-seeking from welfare, police, courts, or shelters. Questions assessed whether the respondent needed assistance from a particular system, whether she contacted that system, and if she did not, reasons why. We summed the number of systems women contacted for help (e.g., welfare, police officers, temporary protective order [TPO] courts, and shelters). In addition, respondents who had contact were asked how satisfied they were with each system on a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very*). Women who had missing data on this item (e.g., they did not have contact with the system) were scored to the mean. System positiveness was ascertained by

TABLE 1
Women's Housing Problems and Homelessness

Problem	n	%
Sacrifice bills to pay rent	55	50.0
Have credit problems	51	46.4
30 days or more late paying rent	44	40.0
Homeless when first separated	42	38.2
Eat less or skip meals to pay rent	36	32.7
Give up or sell belongings to pay rent	35	31.8
Threatened with eviction	30	27.3
After separation had to leave home because of financial problems or partner harassment	27	24.5
Stay at a weekly motel	18	16.4
Turned away from renting	17	15.5

NOTE: Categories are not mutually exclusive.

women's satisfaction with the actions taken by each system, with higher scores representative of more positive responses from systems. Women's overall ratings were established after being asked four previous questions about their experiences with both emotional and tangible responses from systems (e.g., whether the system treated them respectfully, was unbiased toward them, and gave them an opportunity to voice their wishes and what specific actions were taken by the system, such as arresting their partner, granting a TPO). Finally, we asked respondents two final questions about what resources and responses women need to separate from abusive partners.

RESULTS

WOMEN'S HOUSING PROBLEMS AND HOMELESSNESS

Table 1 presents women's housing problems and homelessness in the year after separation. Housing problems were quite prevalent, with 25% to 50% of women reporting at least one problem (e.g., sacrificing bills, being late paying rent, skipping meals, being threatened with eviction). Also, 25% reported having to leave their home within the first year after separation because of financial problems or partner harassment. Of the women, 38% (n = 42) reported becoming homeless immediately after separating from their partners.[4] Of the 42, 43% stayed only with family or

friends, 17% used only homeless shelters or battered women's shelters, and 19% used a combination of family, friends, and shelters. Another option was to stay at a motel, with 12% using this strategy. When women ran out of money, their experiences became consistent with the first two groups: either staying with family or friends, or in shelters.

When asked what would have prevented them from becoming homeless, women listed reasons such as the following: having money, credit, or a job (n = 12); having access to community resources (n = 9); not getting involved with their partners (n = 8); and having the house/apartment in their name (n = 5). Women also recognized the importance of the justice system (n = 8). For example, if law enforcement would have arrested their partners or if their partners would have been forced to stay away, then they would not have had to leave their homes. Others complained about the process of getting a TPO, reporting that it took too long, did not last long enough, and did not afford the degree of protection they expected.

Approximately half of the women left their homes (n = 54); the other half stayed while their partners left (n = 56). Women's housing problems were not related to whether they stayed or left; however, women who left were more likely to have a later episode of homelessness, $\chi^2(1, N = 110) = 31.79$, $p < .001$. Women were more likely to leave if their partners were not arrested for violence, $\chi^2(1, N = 110) = 16.50$, $p < .001$; if their partners threatened to hurt them, $\chi^2(1, N = 110) = 8.18$, $p < .01$; or if their partners had an alcohol or drug problem, $\chi^2(1, N = 110) = 4.80$, $p < .05$. Filing a TPO was not related to whether women stayed or left their homes.

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF ABUSE

As expected, because of eligibility requirements for inclusion in the study, the prevalence of abuse during the time of separation (6 months prior to separation to the first year after) was quite high. All women reported experiencing psychological abuse. Similarly, 97% reported minor physical abuse (e.g., being pushed, grabbed, or slapped), and 89% reported severe physical abuse (e.g., being punched, choked, or slammed against the wall). Although sexual abuse was less prevalent than psychological or physical abuse, a substantial percentage (64%) reported that their partner made

TABLE 2
Means for Received Support From Informal Support Networks

Source	*Emotional*	*Informational*	*Tangible*	*Total*
		Support Type		
Family	3.16	2.42	2.42	2.67
Friends	3.21	2.60	2.14	2.65
Church	1.79	1.43	1.27	1.50
Total	2.72	2.15	1.94	2.27

NOTE: The range is 1 to 4.

them have sex without a condom, insisted on sex when they did not want to, or used threats or force to make them have sex at least once during the time of separation.

INFORMAL SUPPORT NETWORKS

When sources of support (family, friends, and church) were collapsed by type, women received more emotional support than informational, $t(109) = 10.71$, $p < .001$, or tangible support, $t(109) = 14.22$, $p < .001$. When types of support were collapsed by source, family and friends provided equal amounts, $t(109) = 0.24$, $p = .81$, but family provided more support than churches, $t(109) = 10.81$, as did friends, $t(109) = 13.02$, $p < .001$ (see Table 2). Regarding the church, slightly more than 50% ($n = 36$) of women who wanted to talk with their faith leaders actually did. When women who did not were asked why, women reported that they did not think their church would listen or help, they did not feel comfortable talking about it, they were too embarrassed, or they were afraid they would be told simply to work it out. Women who did go reported, on average, that their faith leader was "mostly supportive" of their wishes (either to stay in the relationship or to separate from their partners).

FORMAL SYSTEM RESPONSE

Although we recruited women from specific agencies (i.e., welfare, solicitor's office, and shelters), many contacted other systems as well. In the sample of 110, 70% ($n = 78$) contacted welfare, 76% ($n = 83$) called the police, 39% ($n = 43$) filed a TPO, and 30% ($n = 33$) stayed at a shelter. Women contacted an average of two systems ($M = 2.15$, $SD = 0.88$). Overall, women were somewhat to

mostly satisfied with system response ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.05$). How-ever, women's experiences with formal systems varied depend-ing on the systems they contacted. Women who contacted welfare or the police, on average, were somewhat satisfied with these sys-tems, and women who filed a TPO or stayed at a shelter were mostly to very satisfied with these systems.

Not all women who reported needing help contacted systems. Reasons women did not seek help although they needed it also differed across systems. More than half of the women who did not seek help from welfare ($n = 5$) thought they would not get help. One woman said, "I went before when I needed help, and they turned me down." Another said, "It would be a waste of time because they require too many documents." Women reported that they did not seek help from law enforcement or the court system because they were afraid of retaliation from their partners ($n = 7$), they did not want their partners to be arrested ($n = 2$), they did not think the police would do anything ($n = 2$), or worse, they thought that the police would arrest them ($n = 2$). Reasons for not getting a TPO stemmed from a lack of knowledge about the TPO process. Three women did not know how to file a TPO. Four women incor-rectly thought only women married to their abusive partners or those with injuries could obtain a TPO. Two others believed that it cost too much money. In this county, no fees are required to file a TPO petition, and obtaining one is not dependent on physical wounds or marital status. Others did not feel confident in the abil-ity of the TPO to protect them. Women reported not staying in shelters because of their children. They did not want to disrupt their children's lives even more by taking them to a shelter. Some were too embarrassed to go to a shelter.

Suggestions for Formal System Response

In open-ended questions, interviewers asked women what needed to be changed or improved to ensure their safety. In all, 75 women (68%) made specific comments about one or more of the five systems in this study (welfare, police, TPO courts, solicitor's office, and shelters). The majority of the 75 women responded with suggestions for the police ($n = 41$). Women reported that police response time was slow. Many women demanded that police receive more training so that they understood the serious

nature of domestic violence. Women also wanted officers to better enforce TPOs and to look for partners who leave the scene.

Some women identified necessary changes for the welfare system ($n = 18$). Most contended that the welfare system should help women regardless of their employment status. One woman said,

> For welfare, if you are making anything at all, they don't help. They need to have an understanding of the situation and how hard it is to get on your own and to start over. It makes women go back because it's hard to get back on their feet.

Most women also said that they thought caseworkers should be more respectful and understanding. Some thought that caseworkers should receive domestic violence training.

Relative to other systems, women rarely mentioned desired changes in the TPO courts and solicitor's office ($n = 5$ for each system), but several did wish that the process to obtain a TPO did not require them to face their abuser. One woman described her experience:

> When I went to court for a TPO, he was there. He could hurt me. There was no safety, no supervision. Also, it wasn't private—so many people in the courtroom. The good thing is that the advocate was there. I should have been safe in court, but I didn't feel safe. Nobody supervises you when you walk out. I felt like I was going to have to defend myself all over again.

Most women who provided comments about the solicitor's office wanted the office to give men harsher sentences, even for a first offense. Others would have preferred more communication from the solicitor's office about their partner's case.

For shelters ($n = 6$) the most common response was the need for better trained staff: "Staff seemed real indifferent, like they couldn't relate." Others said that the shelter environment could be nicer and more comfortable. Woman also believed that shelters should provide more help with finding housing and other resources.

In addition, women offered many general suggestions, not specific to any system. Many women ($n = 24$) suggested the need for support groups, counseling, education about abuse, and assistance to relocate. Others ($n = 5$) reported no needed changes, and

for 6 women, interviewers inadvertently skipped this question. Not all responses from women were negative. One woman reported that the police were helpful in providing her with extra referrals. Another conveyed her appreciation that the solicitor's office pursued charges against her husband so she did not have to. Finally, one woman said that the shelter was quite helpful: "They were a good resource. They listened to me and guided me. They didn't minimize what had happened. They gave me resource numbers to call."

MULTIVARIATE ANALYSES

Before testing study hypotheses, we conducted a MANOVA to examine group differences, defined by recruiting site, on demographic, predictor, and outcome variables. Differences ($p < .05$) in income, $F(2, 106) = 12.72$; education, $F(2, 106) = 8.68$; age, $F(2, 106) = 4.42$; and number of children, $F(2, 106) = 8.43$ were significant. Tukey B post hoc tests revealed that women in the welfare and shelter groups reported lower incomes and more children than women from the solicitor's office. In contrast, women from the shelters and solicitor's office were older and had more education than women from the welfare offices.

Differences also existed on predictor and outcome variables; however, Tukey B post hoc tests revealed that these differences were not consistent. The welfare and shelter groups reported higher levels of violence, $F(2, 106) = 5.77, p < .05$, than the solicitor group. Women from the shelters and solicitor's office reported fewer housing problems than women from welfare $F(2, 106) = 4.84, p < .05$. Women from the shelters received lower levels of emotional support, $F(2, 106) = 3.24, p < .05$, and contacted more systems for help, $F(2, 106) = 9.96, p < .05$, than women from either the welfare or solicitor's offices. As for homelessness, 100% of shelter women became homeless. In contrast, 57% of women in the welfare group and only 33% of women from the solicitor's office became homeless, $\chi^2(1, N = 110) = 27.16, p < .001$. There were no group differences on informational support, tangible support, and ratings of system positiveness.

To examine whether the length of time from when the woman separated to when she was interviewed was related to her

TABLE 3
Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis
for Variables Predicting Housing Problems

Variable	r	B	SE B	β	Adjusted R^2	ΔR^2
Step 1					.08*	—
Welfare	.29*	1.01	0.40	.23*		
Shelter	−.04	0.78	0.53	.15		
Step 2					.22*	.14*
Violence severity	.44*	0.75	0.13	.48*		
Step 3					.31*	.09*
Emotional support	.03	0.04	0.13	.04		
Informational support	−.03	−0.32	0.13	−.27*		
Tangible support	.28*	0.45	0.14	.35*		
Step 4					.38*	.07*
Number of systems contacted	−.10	−0.70	0.22	−.28*		
Welfare positiveness	−.13	−0.38	0.15	−.20*		
Police positiveness	.05	0.21	0.13	.14		

*$p < .05$.

responses, women were split into two groups: those who were interviewed 6 months or less to the separation ($n = 71$) and those who were interviewed more than 6 months from their date of separation ($n = 31$). Time from the separation to the interview was not related to predictor or outcome variables.

To control the effects of these group differences, we entered dummy coded variables for groups as covariates in our regression models. The solicitor group was used as the reference group. These dummy coded variables were not used in the logistic regression model predicting homelessness because homelessness was universal for shelter women. Instead, income, which was significantly related to homelessness, was used as a covariate.

PREDICTORS OF HOUSING PROBLEMS
AND HOMELESSNESS

Results from a hierarchical multiple regression analysis indicated that emotional support was not related to housing problems and informational support was negatively related to number of housing problems. In contrast, tangible support was positively related to housing problems, with more housing problems associated with more tangible support (see Table 3).

TABLE 4
Summary of Logistic Regression for Variables Predicting Women's Homelessness

Variable	B	SE	Odds Ratio	Wald Statistic
Income	−0.35*	0.17	0.70*	4.36
Violence severity	−0.03	0.18	0.97	0.04
Emotional support	−0.07	0.16	0.93	0.17
Informational support	−0.10	0.17	0.91	0.33
Tangible support	0.18	0.17	1.20	1.06
Number of systems contacted	0.63*	0.29	1.87*	4.80
Welfare positiveness	−0.06	0.20	0.94	0.11
Police positiveness	−0.35*	0.18	0.70*	3.88

*$p < .05$.

The second hypothesis examined the effects that contacting formal systems and system responses had on the extent of women's housing problems. Results indicated that contacting formal systems was negatively associated with housing problems. Furthermore, in the final step, positive treatment by the welfare system negatively predicted number of housing problems. System responses for TPO courts or shelters were not included in the hierarchical multiple regression or the following logistic regression because of ceiling effects. That is, 95% of women who filed TPOs and 90% of women who stayed at shelters reported being mostly to very satisfied with that system's response. Together, predictor variables accounted for 38% of the variance in housing problems.

A different set of variables predicted homelessness in the logistic regression model (see Table 4). Income was inversely related to homelessness. Women with higher reported incomes were only about 30% as likely to become homeless as were women with lower reported incomes. In contrast to the first analysis predicting housing problems, informational support and tangible support were not significantly related to women's reports of homelessness. In addition, the number of systems contacted related positively to homelessness, suggesting that women without a home were almost twice as likely to contact a greater number of systems for assistance. Finally, police officer response was inversely related to homelessness. Women who reported a police officer response as positive were 30% less likely to report homelessness after the separation compared to women who did not report a positive response.

WHAT RESOURCES DO WOMEN NEED?

With an open-ended question, we asked participants what resources women needed should they choose to separate from their partners. To analyze these responses, we first documented all mentioned resources. Most women (n = 85) listed specific resources such as child care, child support, housing assistance, counseling, more shelters, and monetary support. Then, through an iterative process of combining conceptually similar responses, five core categories emerged that captured most of the responses (Spradley, 1979). Categories included general assistance with resources, housing assistance (including transitional housing), more shelters, special monetary assistance for victims of domestic violence, and counseling services.

The most frequently mentioned response was general assistance with a host of resources (e.g., legal, utilities, day care, child support, financial, education). Next, women reported a need for more housing options. One woman said,

> They should have housing grants for women in emergency situations. You shouldn't be on it forever, just for emergency situations. Even for 6 months, they'll put you up, and then you can leave and make room for the next one. Women need transitional housing. That's what keeps women in the situation—they want a roof over their head for themselves and their children.

Women also called for more shelters. Many said that they made repeated calls because shelters were always full. Some women believed that victims of domestic violence should receive special monetary assistance to gain stability. One woman suggested "funds be made available to help domestic violence victims (with no special guidelines) so they can move to new housing."

In addition to tangible assistance, women also need emotional assistance, such as counseling services. Specifically, respondents said that counselors who have experienced domestic violence would be more understanding and helpful to women during this time.

Finally, rather than listing either tangible resources or emotional support, some women reported that survivors of domestic violence need a comprehensive response from their community. As one woman said,

When women leave, they need counseling. They need a better chance to get housing so they can get on their feet. They need help for the first 6 months. They need ways to get jobs and child care so they don't have to go back.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated women's experiences with housing problems, informal networks, and formal systems after they separate from abusive partners. Previous research suggests that domestic violence and homelessness are linked; however, with few exceptions (e.g., Tolman & Rosen, 2001), studies have not expanded the concept of homelessness to include other housing problems. This study extends the field's knowledge by exploring additional housing problems and by investigating the role of informal support networks and formal system responses in reducing these problems for women. Rather than only focusing on the strategies and individual characteristics of women who try to free themselves from abusive partners, this study emphasized the importance of contextual factors. Thus, system-level rather than individual-level change is highlighted. Furthermore, previous studies have examined samples mainly composed of White women. This study considers the experiences of African American women (Coley & Beckett, 1988; Reid, 1993; Saris & Johnston-Robledo, 2000; Torres, 1991). Moreover, our recruitment strategy ensured inclusion of women who sought help across multiple systems (i.e., welfare, shelters, the justice system).

In this sample of women who were seeking help and who had separated from abusive partners, 25% to 50% reported a range of housing-related problems. Moreover, 38% reported that they became homeless immediately after separation. An additional 25% reported having to leave their homes during the year after separation. Housing problems and homelessness, however, were not related. Hence, economic adversity, as reflected in the HPI, may not precipitate homelessness in victims of domestic violence. Rather, homelessness for domestic violence victims may result from contextual factors, such as a sudden and urgent need to be safe from an abuser. When women are asked what would have prevented them from becoming homeless, although mentioning typical economic factors, many also recognized the importance of

being able to stay in their homes and forcing their partners to leave.

To date, research has conceptualized the process of separation from an abusive partner as a process of leaving (Grigsby & Hartman, 1997; Lerner & Kennedy, 2000; Strube, 1988). System responses (e.g., shelters must increase their capacity) are predicated on the assumption that women must leave their abusers, which also means leaving their homes. In contrast to these assumptions, more than half of this study's sample did not leave their homes after the separation; instead, their abusers left. These data suggest the need for researchers and advocates to reconceptualize the process of separation from one of leaving to one of gaining safety. We add that our findings may reflect the racial composition of our sample. A majority of research on the process of leaving has used samples of White women. It is possible that this process differs among women of various ethnic and racial backgrounds.

This study also assessed the role of informal networks and formal system response in predicting women's housing problems and homelessness. The data show that it is important to consider these contextual variables, as they account for an additional 16% of the variance in housing problems after controlling for violence severity. The inverse relationship between informational support and housing problems and the lack of relationship with emotional support are intuitive because although family, friends, and church can listen and provide encouragement, without information or resources, women will have greater housing problems. In contrast, tangible support and housing problems were positively related. Longitudinal designs are necessary to determine directionality, but in their absence, it is plausible to suggest that women with more housing problems seek out, and thus report, more tangible support. Of course, after receiving tangible support, women may report fewer housing problems.

Surprisingly, women's housing problems were negatively related to the number of systems contacted, which at first glance seems contradictory to the relationship between tangible support and housing problems. Women who reported more housing problems actually contacted *fewer* systems for help. It could be that women thought they would not be eligible to receive help so they did not even try. Anecdotally, women reported that it is difficult to

get help to maintain their housing. Rather, they were more likely to receive help after they became homeless, and even then, resources were limited. In this study, women who reported homelessness after the separation did actually contact more systems for help.

In addition to the number of systems contacted, the nature of that contact seemed to affect women's housing. A positive response by the welfare system was related to fewer housing problems. Respectful treatment of women may help them remain in the system long enough to receive benefits that can prevent or reduce housing problems. Conversely, women who have negative experiences with the welfare system may give up before receiving assistance. These findings suggest the need for training of welfare caseworkers. Although domestic violence assessor units are in place to assist women in filing paperwork for TANF, food stamps, and similar aid, caseworkers often believe that women disclose domestic violence so that they will be referred to the unit with the hope of getting out of work requirements. Consequently, unit staff must convince caseworkers of the importance of referring victims of domestic violence. In one of the offices for this study, as caseworkers became more educated about domestic violence, some began to see the utility of the unit and referred women for further evaluation. In these cases, domestic violence survivors may be more likely to get the services they need to achieve economic independence.

As for police officers, although the character of their response may not directly affect a woman's housing problems, it may indirectly link her to additional services. For example, when officers arrive at the scene of a domestic dispute, they may give women information on filing a TPO or provide them referral information for a local battered women's shelter (Jaffe, Hastings, Reitzel, & Austin, 1993). Some states, such as the Commonwealth of Virginia, mandate this action (Cook, Woolard, & Russell, in press). Therefore, if women receive information from police officers, then they may begin to obtain the resources necessary to reduce housing problems.

In addition to providing women with TPO and referral information, it is necessary to hold batterers accountable for their actions through arrest (Steinman, 1990). In fact, data from this study suggest that arresting batterers allows women to remain in

their homes, thereby reducing their likelihood of becoming homeless. However, officers may be less likely to arrest batterers if they do not believe in the utility of police involvement in domestic disturbances (Feder, 1997). Accordingly, officers must be educated on the importance of arresting batterers, not only to prevent future victimization, but also to ensure that women and children do not have to leave their homes.

That women in this study contacted a variety of services for help during the separation process makes the implementation of coordinated community response programs to assist victims of domestic violence essential (Shepard & Pence, 1999). When women separate from their partners, they need a variety of resources (e.g., housing, employment, TANF, childcare, and transportation) (Sullivan & Rumptz, 1994). Specifically, the need for transitional housing is clear as women often report that 30 days in a shelter is not enough time for them to get back on their feet. Therefore, agencies must come together to provide a coordinated infrastructure of services that will ensure that survivors of domestic violence are not revictimized for seeking safety (Cook et al., in press).

This study can serve as the catalyst for future research projects. We encourage additional research to characterize women's experiences of separation. Who leaves? Further research is also needed to distinguish between housing problems and homelessness. Subsequent research could expand on differences in how domestic violence survivors experience both housing problems and homelessness compared to other populations of homeless women.

Our conclusions are tempered because some relationships tested in this study require confirmation with longitudinal research. For example, the relationship between tangible support and housing problems was positive instead of negative. The direction could be a result of examining relationships using cross-sectional data. Furthermore, recruitment strategies may have affected how well our sample represents women within each system. Women from the solicitor's office were recruited by phone. Many women's phones were disconnected, or they could not be reached after multiple attempts. Both are problematic because they signal the potential for sampling bias, in that these women may be different from the women actually recruited. As for the

shelter sample, rates of homelessness may have been inflated by including this sample, although we tried to control for this by asking women about a previous separation, if they had one. For 12 of the 24 shelter women, this was not their first separation; however, the remaining 12 were separated for the first time and thus were considered homeless, as they had been residing in the shelter for more than 7 days when we conducted the interviews. But even for those who had been separated previously, all 12 reported being homeless then as well. It could be that women who contact shelters for help have different circumstances that affect their housing (e.g., less support by informal networks, greater threats to safety) than women who contact other systems for help during the time of separation.

In conclusion, the findings emphasize the importance of changing the way systems respond to women who are seeking safety for themselves and their children. Both informal networks *and* formal systems can play a role in creating environments that are more helpful to women, thereby giving them the support to escape from abuse without experiencing the stress of housing problems and the fear of homelessness.

NOTES

1. Throughout this article, we use the gender-neutral term *domestic violence*. However, the focus is on male violence against women, as women are much more likely than men to be victims of domestic violence.

2. Some studies have chosen to place the church in the category of professional services (see Hamilton & Coates, 1993; Neighbors, Musick, & Williams, 1998), whereas others have chosen to delineate women's help-seeking into either social help (with the church falling into this category) or legal help (see Hutchison & Hirschel, 1998). For this study, faith leaders and church members were viewed as sources of informal support, as research suggests that in African American communities the church takes on this role rather than a more formal one (see Taylor, Chatters, Burns-Hardison, & Riley, 2001).

3. These units are now in many welfare offices across the country and exist to assist women who have self-disclosed domestic violence.

4. Only 4 women reported homelessness both immediately and during the first year after separation.

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