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ABSTRACT *Although recent research has documented that partner violence places women at risk of homelessness and material housing instability, sparse evidence yet documents the existence or importance of psychological housing instability for this group. We draw from 45 women's reports of their experiences of housing instability across three periods: while living with their abusive partner, immediately after leaving the partner, and long after leaving. Housing instability—material and especially psychological—was a major concern for women across all periods, along with co-occurring social, familial, financial, mental health, and violence related problems. In the absence of coordinated services models, access to and navigation of available services to address these simultaneous problems posed important challenges for these women. The concept of housing instability should be expanded to include psychological instability, and, for women who are experiencing abuse, should be considered alongside numerous social and health problems that exacerbate housing precarity.*

Introduction

One of the fundamental obstacles faced by a person seeking to end a relationship with a partner who is abusive is where to live. Despite the nearly self-evident nature of this problem, the body of research on the relationship between intimate partner violence (IPV) and housing instability is small and fragmentary, and innovative conceptualizations of this

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relationship go unleveraged. New conceptual perspectives take housing to be a multi-attribute phenomenon and posit that it is via specific attributes that housing shapes people's experiences of social phenomena, including health, family relations, partner violence, etc.

In this paper, we report on findings from a study of women who had recently experienced partner violence and were asked about their perspectives and experiences of housing instability. We draw from the emerging literature on housing instability to facilitate a greater understanding of the myriad contributors to housing instability and the specific links to partner violence. We end with a discussion of the implications of our findings for improving available services for women living with IPV.

Background and Rationale

Several studies have documented the high risk of housing instability and homelessness as a consequence of partner violence (Baker *et al.*, 2003; Browne & Bassuk, 1997; Jasinski *et al.*, 2002; Levin *et al.*, 2004; Metraux & Culhane, 1999; Shinn *et al.*, 1998). Pavao *et al.* (2007) compared housing instability among women who reported experiencing past-year IPV versus those who did not; housing instability was measured by late mortgage/rent payments, being without one's own housing, and moving more than once over a 12-month period (Pavao *et al.*, 2007). Those who had experienced partner violence had almost four times the odds of experiencing housing instability compared to women who did not report partner violence. In a more recent Canadian study, Ponic *et al.* (2011) examined housing instability among women in three provinces who had ended relationships with partners who were abusive within three years of participating in interviews. The study found that the women were a heterogeneous group: about one-third did not move in the 6 months prior to, or after leaving a partner who was abusive, while just over one half moved multiple times during that period. Women who moved after leaving a partner who was abusive and who ended up living with friends/family or in social housing had lower incomes than those who did not move and those who moved to market housing at 6 months after leaving the partner (Ponic *et al.*, 2011). Ponic's data supports the idea that leaving a partner who is abusive does not always mean that the survivor must leave the home (Baker *et al.*, 2010; Breckenridge & Mulroney, 2007; Paterson, 2009) and highlights the need for expanded options to support the preferences of women in abusive relationships who want to safely stay in the home.

Despite these insights, there are major limitations to the existing literature on housing instability and IPV, leading to oversimplification of these co-occurring problems. To begin with, the definition of housing instability has been too narrowly conceptualized. There are not even agreed-upon definitions of housing instability, as reflected by the myriad measures used by studies within the IPV literature. Measures of housing instability are sometimes limited to the housing itself, such as difficulty paying rent or mortgages, inability to secure housing due to credit problems, paying 50 per cent or more of income to meet housing costs, eviction threats or notices, frequent moves, crowding, or doubling up with family or friends (Pavao *et al.*, 2007; Rollins *et al.*, 2012). Other definitions encompass related determinants that limit access to stable housing, including difficulty paying bills or moving because of partner harassment, or greater discrimination by landlords (e.g., refusing to rent to women known to be fleeing abuse) (Barata & Stewart, 2010). Sometimes, information on housing instability is lost as data on housing problems are combined into a single dichotomous or count variable, thereby precluding a nuanced

understanding of how each of the instability factors may be uniquely related to IPV or well-being (Pavao *et al.*, 2007; Rollins *et al.*, 2012).

The focus on what amounts to financial difficulties surrounding costs ignores other important aspects of housing described in the housing literature. Dupuis & Thorns (1998), Després (1991), Shaw (2004), Dunn (2002), and others describe material and meaningful (psychological) aspects of housing that go well beyond financial problems (Després, 1991; Dunn, 2002; Dupuis & Thorns, 1998; Shaw, 2004). Shaw's conceptualization of instability includes material measures, such as those typically measured in studies of housing and IPV—condition of the housing, risk of homelessness, affordability—but also the proximity of the home to resources or services (e.g., grocery markets, schools, health care), and features of the natural and built environment. Moreover, to make this a more comprehensive conceptualization of housing instability, she includes psychological aspects of housing, like the feeling of home as a refuge, the prestige a home and its neighborhood can provide, the ability to control the home environment, the effect of housing insecurity and debt on psychological stress, and concerns about the area surrounding the home, such as the neighborhood's cultural aspects or cohesion (Shaw, 2004). Women living with relationship violence, because of the abuse, are at heightened risk for experiencing each of these elements of psychological housing instability. Yet, too often, the psychological aspects of poor or unstable housing are omitted from current studies of housing instability in its link to partner violence.

A second major limitation of the literature relates to the lack of data on key co-occurring and contextual circumstances related to both housing and IPV that may complicate or exacerbate survivors' general and housing situations. Employment troubles, including low wages; underemployment; inability to get a job that pays at or above a living wage due to poor employment history resulting from partner violence; inadequate resources that limit one's ability to work, such as inability to afford child care; and unreliable transportation are common problems among survivors of abuse (Baker *et al.*, 2010; Glass *et al.*, 2007; Goodman *et al.*, 1999). The impact of these contextual circumstances on material and psychological housing instability, is rarely studied leaving an incomplete picture of how and why IPV may contribute to drivers and correlates of insecure housing. Other key co-occurring confounders or mediators include poor health, consideration of children's or pets' welfare (Paterson, 2009), substance use, financial problems, and returning to school—to name a few (Bassuk *et al.*, 2006). Not only do these co-occurring issues shape the relation between IPV and housing, but many could and should be considered part of interventions designed to assist women to improve housing and end partner abuse.

Our framework for this study is informed by the strengths of past research from diverse disciplines (e.g., sociology, health, psychology) concerning housing instability and partner violence, even while addressing the limitations described above. In our previous analyses of these data used here, we found that women with a history of abuse we reported on three key time periods in relation to co-habitation with an abusive partner, and on the associated social and health implications of the co-habitation status. Specifically, women's experiences with housing instability varied depending on whether they resided with the abusive partner or had left to live elsewhere (see Figure 1). We found three important periods during which housing instability was notably different: when women resided with the perpetrator, immediately after leaving, and long after leaving.

As women moved through each period, it was clear that IPV was a direct or indirect influence on women's experiences of both the psychological and material dimensions of
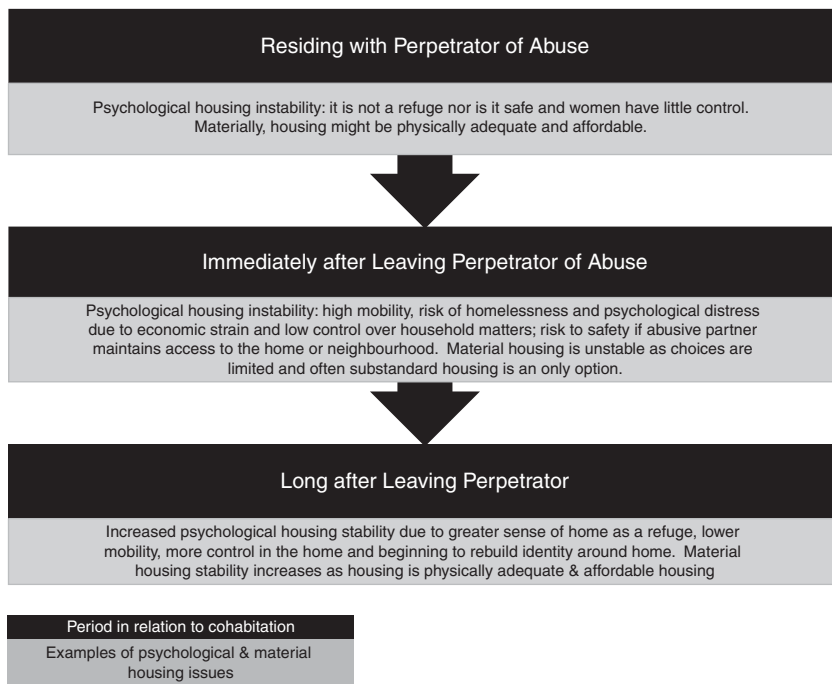
Figure 1. Conceptual framework for experiences of partner violence and housing instability.

housing. That is, women defined housing (in)stability through the causes and consequences of violence—isolation, unemployment, economic strain, loss of control over one's life, lack of safety, loss of identity, and psychological distress to name a few. Their perceptions and experiences of both the psychological and material aspects of housing during the three periods (summarized in Figure 1) guide our investigation on housing instability among this sample as do the expanded notions of material and psychological housing concerns described by Dupuis, Dunn and others (Baker *et al.*, 2010; Dunn, 2002; Pavao *et al.*, 2007; Shaw, 2004). We seek to contribute to the literature on unstable housing, in particular for women experiencing IPV, by going beyond documenting correlations between IPV and unstable housing to capture the processes by violence leads directly and indirectly to material and, in particular, psychological housing instability. We do so by listening to women's voices as a means of understanding the links between housing instability among women with past experiences of partner violence before and after leaving an abusive relationship. Moreover, we seek to understand how partner violence, creates social and economic situations that further exacerbate housing instability.

Methods

Recruitment & Data Collection

The Housing and Women's Health study sought to uncover explicit links between partner violence, the social determinants of health, health and housing stability. The study was conducted in five urban and non-urban regions of Ontario, Canada. Recruitment, which

involved handing out flyers describing the study to potentially eligible participants, was facilitated through a network of organizational contacts across the province, such as social housing authorities, women's centers, and social service centers, like the YWCA, which also allowed study staff to publicize the research at on-site program-related group sessions. Interested participants were directed to phone in to the study line to be screened for eligiblity: age 25–60 years, experienced domestic violence within 5 years prior to enrollment, and resided in one of three housing types (social, transitional, or market housing). We used a semi-structured interview guide to elicit meanings and perceptions of the health and housing experiences of 41 women with past partner violence. Each interview lasted approximately 70 minutes and was conducted in women's homes in a private area. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants received a $50 honorarium for each interview. We asked questions about topics specific to the definitions and experiences of housing instability during adulthood; experiences of partner violence, physical and mental health during periods of housing instability and stability; coping strategies during times of difficulty with IPV, housing and health; service utilization; and obstacles faced when seeking services. Our interview guide included questions such as: "In thinking of the periods of your adult life when you had unstable housing, were you also experiencing severe conflicts or domestic violence with your partner?" We did not provide any definitions of key concepts such as housing instability, health, and partner violence, rather were primarily interested in hearing from the women how they viewed and defined these concepts and we encouraged the women to share stories of their experiences with these issues. The stories were often used to support their ideas around housing, housing stability, co-occurring family, social, economic, and health challenges and were not intended to capture detailed histories of violence and housing and, therefore, often lacked detailed contextual information (e.g., her age at the time of the incident being described or what type of abuse was being experienced at that time or how family were involved for that particular incident) unless it was directly relevant for that story. Each interview lasted approximately 70 minutes and was conducted in women's homes in a private area. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants received a $50 honorarium for each interview. The procedures in the study were reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board of St. Michael's Hospital.

Analytic Procedures

For this analysis, we were guided in the generation of themes in our analyses by (i) the literature on housing instability including that from the health field, (ii) literature on IPV including that related to the social consequences living with abuse, and (iii) by our typology regarding periods of residing or not with the partner who was abusive which emerged early in our analytic activities for this study (see Figure 1) (Daoud *et al.*, in press). For key concepts like housing instability, relationship violence and abuse, and health, our data collection and coding process allowed themes to emerge without preconceived notions being imposed by the researchers. Each research team member separately open coded data line-by-line and labeling passages, making note of all themes of relevance to the main questions for this analysis related to housing instability. Three team members independently reviewed the women's statements in relation to the questions posed in sequence to participants regarding their assessment of periods of stable and unstable housing and what factors, including IPV were present in their lives at the time. Each research team member

also separately open coded data line-by-line and labeling passages, making note of all themes of relevance to the main questions for this analysis related to housing instability. Using NVivo 9.2 we compiled representative quotations to describe emergent themes and patterns. The team then consolidated themes by means of consensus. We selected unique themes of relevance to the analytical objectives on the intersection between IPV and housing instability. We did not define housing instability for participants. Thus, women's responses reflect their individual interpretations of this notion. Using information from preselected codes of relevance to the topic of the paper, analysts described patterns and trends within the narratives. The research team analyzed coded text for "representativeness" of a quote based on two criteria: (1) recurrence of a singular narrative across subjects or contexts, and (2) the ability of a narrative to "tell a story" or otherwise comment on the interrelatedness of themes. We summarized our findings according to the typology of describing the periods of residing or not residing with the partner, emphasizing descriptions of and issues contributing to housing instability (Daoud *et al.*, in press).

Findings

Sample Description

Women were living in one of three types of housing at the time of the interview with about half living in social housing, and the rest in market or transitional. At the time of the interview, women had been living in their current residences for 2.8 years but this average varied by type of housing. Women residing in market housing, social housing, and transitional housing were living in their homes for an average of 2 years, 4 years, and 0.9 years, respectively. About half the women were age 40 or under. The vast majority of participants were born in Canada with about half reporting being Caucasian with the rest being visible minorities. Just under half were living with children under 18. Most women were either separated/divorced or single. Few were employed at the time of the interview with most being either unemployed or living on disability benefits. A large proportion had higher education (college, postgraduate and university), yet about three quarters of the sample reported incomes below $20 000. While this was primarily a low-income sample, women in market housing had higher annual incomes on average, about $35 000 compared to those residing in social or transitional housing where the average income was closer to $17 000 a year. About three-quarters reported physical and verbal violence in the five years preceding the interview, a small minority reported experiencing only verbal violence. Two-thirds reported violence that had restricted their actions (controlling behavior). Our analyses were informed by the typology described earlier as we focus on the intersections between IPV (in its broader form) and physical and psychological housing instability (see Figure 1).

IPV and housing instability while residing with the perpetrator of abuse.   While residing with the perpetrator, many women reported housing was materially stable in that they experienced little mobility and had few to no experiences of instability such as being at risk of eviction or arrears in mortgage and rent payments. Yet, for most of our participants, they reported that it was the violence, its determinants and consequences that made housing unstable for them. Women felt trapped, isolated or controlled in their homes which made their housing psychologically unstable.

I was living in a big house but without peace because I was abused. Even the kids were abused. Mentally. Physically. Sexually. Every which way. And it didn't matter what size of house it is. It's the condition of living. That's how it is. (W42)

Housing was psychologically unstable because the home was not a place of refuge. Participants described how the home did not support feelings of well-being, safety, security or control over their lives. For example, they could not enjoy their home and reported strategies to avoid both it and the violence.

The fear of going home. Say it could be a day from work because you didn't know what the person was going to be like, if they were going to be angry or in a good mood. And when they drank it got worse, and, um, times when you need to try and go to bed because you wanted to get away from it. (W71)

Violence also prolonged psychological housing instability, as it caused women to live in unhealthy situations much longer than they wanted. Due to violence and, in particular, the control exerted over her, one woman reported being "basically trapped like a little trapped animal. Trapped in my own home, trapped financially, trapped psychologically, everything (W82).

IPV and housing instability are also embedded within a myriad of co-occurring health and social circumstances that further complicate and exacerbate survivors' situations when living with the perpetrator. Women in our study clearly articulated how IPV interfered with or affected their family life, health, financial independence, employment, and social support networks, which, in turn, had immediate and lasting consequences for their housing instability.

In the area of financial problems, many women reported that the perpetrators stole rent money, lied about paying bills, or failed to pay rent on time.

I remember I would have to change my PIN number all the time because he would make me give him my PIN number and he would take all the money out of the account … being in an abusive relationship, even if you were in stable housing, somehow and some way they would find a way to drag you down. (W29)

Women in stable housing reported that one key tactic of abuse related to finances caused housing instability. Financial abuse that created both material and psychological housing instability resulting from partners who stole money or otherwise financially manipulated them. One woman described how lies about finances led to eviction.

I'll never forget the day that I found out that we were evicted. I found the eviction notice in the glove box. He had been lying to me since October that he was paying the rent. We were in March. He got the eviction notice back, I believe it was end of February or early March. I got the letter like March 5 and they were going to be changing the locks with the sheriff on March 12. I was pregnant. (W29)

Controlling and manipulating behavior around money also caused long-term damage to women's finances and financial independence making securing future housing unattainable.

This woman reflects on how events in her life were manipulated by her partner so that 'everything I worked for my whole life is completely gone.'

> I allowed him in my house basically to help me not only financially but to help fix it up he was a carpenter. So literally within a month of him moving in he tore apart my kitchen and left it like that for a year and a half. So and then in that same time frame he convinced me to leave the job that I had for twenty four years so that we could open up our own business. Which of course I did but we never opened up our own business because he was too busy doing crack and drinking and womanizing and all kinds of fun things. So. But so for financial reasons you know, he kept on going out and coming back and apologizing and going out and coming back and apologizing and then I guess the use as far as crack or alcohol started increasing and there started the violence. (W82)

As in the above quote, women often mentioned substance abuse issues, which seemed to go hand in hand with financial troubles and abuse. They spoke often of partners' gambling, alcohol, and drug addiction. In several cases, women reported struggling with their own substance abuse issues, as was the case for this woman:

> Well, I got kicked out of housing six years ago because of drug addiction. That's been a huge factor in my unstable life, is my addiction. I've been addicted since I was a young teenager. So that led into my adult life and that's why I've had to keep moving. Either because of violence, bad relationships and running from Children's Aid, basically because of my lifestyle. Yeah. So that had a huge influence on where I lived and how I lived. It wasn't good. It wasn't healthy. (W31)

Women who were employed said IPV affected their work life with the fall out of abuse leading in some cases to job loss. Women attended work while physically and emotionally traumatized, expressing feelings of stress and fatigue. In one woman's words: "I felt like I was kinda being rolled out … like the thinnest you can get something" (W57). When women talked about periods they lived with a partner, they nevertheless reported high levels of isolation during this period, a feeling that contributed to psychological housing instability. The following participant saw herself as someone active, who liked to work, yet violence led to isolation for her, a feeling she associated with her apartment.

> And then living with him, it was very difficult as well, because he was very jealous, very controlling, and he wouldn't let me go to work, or even having any friends. So he would go to work, and I would stay in the apartment building like at the 14th floor, stay there with my kids, gotta wait until he comes home from work, so I can get out, you know about 5 in the afternoon, maybe have supper, you know in the summer time, and maybe go out and do something with the kids. So that was very isolating situation for me. (W70)

As conflict and stress escalated in the household, and their safety was severely compromised, many women were forced to make decisions to leave the relationship and the home, with or without the support of services, family or friends.

Immediately after leaving the perpetrator of abuse.   The second period, as depicted in Figure 1, describes the intersection of IPV and housing instability immediately after leaving the relationship or being left by the perpetrator. For women in our sample, this period lasted up to six months. Sometimes this period was experienced more than once as some women reported leaving more than one abusive relationship, or returning to and leaving a partner more than once. Material housing instability takes precedence over psychological housing insecurity because while housing, finances, employment, social support, and health were precarious while living with an abusive relationship, leaving the home that she shared with the perpetrator throws a woman's life into chaos with dramatic consequences.

Women face high mobility during this time period, living on the run, in and out of shelters, or even experiencing bouts of absolute homelessness. When participants were able to secure a roof over their heads, they described having to settle for less-than-ideal housing due to financial difficulties, but also because of poor credit, employment or housing histories, which compromised their housing quality.

> And so of course you have to go maybe to a landlord or a building that doesn't seem to care about a lot of things, so maybe they didn't keep up their houses or their apartments as well as they could have so that was a problem. Just you know, sometimes you are just lucky enough to get a place and then afterwards you realized that it wasn't an ideal place. (W74)

Leaving does not guarantee that women are fully free from physical and verbal abuse, stalking, or controlling behavior by their ex-partner. Heightened safety concerns, which grow more urgent in this period, contribute to the absence of feeling safe no matter where women end up immediately after leaving. One participant, who left more than one perpetrated of abuse, reported that "my ex husband broke into my house and started to strangle me." Subsequently, after leaving another partner she "was just full of fear you know because he followed me so much. I used to have to get picked up to go to work at that point." (W39)

Some women, unable to afford housing after leaving, were forced to return to the abusive situation. Others went back because they were unable to secure housing during the short timeframe allotted by limited-stay shelters. Still others returned to housing and situations that were psychologically unstable while awaiting subsidized housing. One woman, who was having difficulty staying at the shelter with her daughter due to the living conditions there, said she moved home to a potentially volatile situation, but lied to her partner in the short term.

> So that's when I snapped and they said ok, well, you know, just go back and don't say nothing and, I didn't, I just waited my time till [the housing office] called me saying they had a house for me because without housing supports I would have never been able to afford to come live on my own. Never. In a million years. Unless I was in some, you know, low life little rinky dink crappy place, and who wants to bring up your kid like that. (W69)

When violence continued or even escalated after leaving, employment was impacted. Though women reported trying and needing to continue working to keep a roof over their

heads and meet basic needs, they were often in jeopardy due to the effects of IPV, including stalking.

> I could no longer stay at my job because of the partner I had. When I had moved out abruptly, the police were involved and I ended up in a women's shelter. Thinking I could continue working was really not a good idea. There was an altercation and I wasn't offered any assistance, there was a scene, just walked out of the grocery store and couldn't come back. From that point on, ah, employment was more than difficult because of moving to so many different places. (W54)

Struggling with immediate poverty and homelessness, participants also reported problems living without necessities such as furniture, good food, and even a bed to sleep on, impacting her sense of being at home. Reflecting back to this situation, a woman living in social housing at the time of the interview, and who had attempted several times to run away from her abusive partner, reported this struggle and her feelings of isolation and loneliness.

> Pretty much since 2002 I went through a lot of struggles. I am grateful for housing, but at the same time housing was very difficult, because at that time I was trying to conquer too many things at once. So, I don't know if that's the right way to approach it, I did have unstable housing … spent 6 months in the shelter [Okay] uh, finally I couldn't take it, I left and my worker knew it, knew that I was at my wits end uh, I stayed with a buddy for a month and I got this, and I was so grateful and I moved in here, I had nothing, I had nothing well I had a wall unit that's in my bedroom that was somewhere else, but I came in here and I didn't, I didn't care. I, I slept of the floor for like 2 months but with welfare and all that, they helped me get a bed, but I didn't care. But at the same time it was another huge transition because I was alone again, I had no one to talk to. (W12)

When women were able to access women's shelters for support, both material and psychological aspects of housing improved. Many women said that despite some issues with living in the shelter, such as limited privacy and space, they were very grateful for the shelters' safe atmosphere and the caring and compassionate staff and for meeting other women in support groups. Meanwhile, shelter staff was critical in assisting women in finding affordable housing for the longer term. However, some women reported that time frames of up to two years in transitional housing were too short. As described above, these women had to return to unstable housing situations for the short term. The following participant in particular did not have enough time to either become eligible to move into social housing or find another suitable alternative, resulting in a return to her abusive partner.

> It has been really great here the last year. It has been absolutely wonderful. I don't want to leave. I really don't, but it's only for a year. It is transitional housing but it's stable and there's people here to talk to if you should choose to do that. You have weekly meetings with the support staff that does work here, and you are obligated to attend life skills training once a week, which is not one of my, you know, favourite things to do but it's part of the programming so you do it. I am very upset that I am going from being here back into the same situation that brought me here. Like that,

for me, I'm looking at it going, 'How can that be possible? How?' So I'm a little upset leaving, but being here has been great. (W22)

Some women had less positive experiences with shelters and felt lack of space and privacy contributed to feeling stuck and restricted, which impacted their psychological housing instability, even if they felt a sense of safety.

I feel safe living there [Okay] but other than that [Okay] if I have my way I want to leave tomorrow or this afternoon. I am grateful that I have a place now that I can sleep but I feel very, very unstable. Like there's a lot of things I cannot do because I am there. So, I feel restricted . . . at least nobody is coming there to do anything to me or whatever, or nobody, they're not going to give my information to anybody if ever anybody calls and asks me. (W01)

In summary, material and psychological housing instability worsens rapidly immediately after leaving the perpetrator. Physical instability worsens because of loss of financial stability, increasing mobility, few options for affordable housing, and risk of homelessness. Psychological housing instability worsens due to ongoing abuse issues, which contribute to safety concerns in the new housing situation, and when substandard or poorly furnished housing is the only affordable option. Shelters play a key role in creating a hosing that is both materially and psychologically stable upon leaving the perpetrator, as the following woman described.

I don't believe that I could have accomplished what I have accomplished today without this housing and the counselling at the women's shelter. I mean, I am grateful for my meetings as well, but I have to say the most comforting was knowing that I had this place and it just gave me a second chance to live a worthwhile life, compared to what I was living and where I was. I was going nowhere. Like when you say hit a dead end road, I was beyond that. (W26)

Our data suggests that even with the support of shelters, too few services exist for women immediately after leaving to simultaneously address the multiple issues they face, and women are often too overwhelmed to successfully navigate multiple systems to access the necessary supports that are available.

Long after leaving the perpetrator.   Women in our sample reported that many months to a few years after leaving the perpetrator, both IPV and housing instability usually improved. For women in our sample, this phase usually covered the period up to two years after leaving. Housing tended to be more psychologically stable for women in comparison to their situation before leaving the abusive relationship, and this had some favorable effects for women's health and stress levels. Our data suggest that financial independence, employment, and social support networks took time to rebuild. The process of attaining financial stability, however, was difficult for women who suffered financial abuse. It took many years to recover their financial standing.

With the boy's father, like I said, he always got me evicted. So he didn't pay pretty much three months of rent. The one place was seven fifty alone. Hydro bills I had in

my name, gas bills I had in my name, cell phone bills, cable bills, satellite bills. All of them. I'm just starting now within the last six months to a year to work back my credit. It was really tough. I struggled. (W29)

Financial supports of all types remained important in this period to ensure women could maintain housing stability. This gave them hope to eventually transition to more permanent housing that better suited their needs and goals.

Well current housing is great. I would love to stay here. My son loves his school. Yeah. They love the house. It's comfortable. It's just unattainable for us on our own. (W25)

Without financial or emotional supports, women remain vulnerable to psychological and physical housing instability as many complex concerns remain. This participant described her struggle of managing and maintaining stable housing in the longer term. While this woman considers her housing to be "solid", balancing the physical demands of maintaining a property, with escalating costs, and declining ability to earn income adds to her stress and the management of her trauma.

Financially I still struggle because this place is costing me more now. My child care (business) isn't up. It's tough, right. It cost me seventeen hundred dollars in oil … I don't have a lot extra. I am managing, except for the fuel. I had to reach out to get help for that. And they understand because they know my post-trauma issues and emotional. But physically it's a lot of work, the yard and cleaning. I get tired just because of my own stuff. I get tired. For the most part, it is a solid house … I'm very frustrated because I'm at a point where I feel it's not going to get better. I am tired of dealing with stuff, I don't feel stable because of that anxiety and depression. (W27)

Almost all women living in social housing reported accessing supports and services available to them, such as subsidized daycare, social services, and health care, which aided in re-establishing employment. Others attended support groups for women, or worked to free themselves from substance abuse issues. They reported having more space available for themselves and their children than in shelters, and home was safer and healthier for the family. One woman who was living in social housing at the time of the interview described how her housing provided stability.

It's my place. I chose to be here because I wanted to. It's clean, it's safe … it's an opportunity for me to provide a nurturing environment for my kids. It's away from so much of the negativity that I've left. It's my haven. My little nest. (W65)

Also in the area of psychological housing instability, the women said they felt like their current home was more a reflection of themselves, and they attached more pride to their homes. These are common examples of how meaning is created within the home (Després, 1991; Dunn, 2002; Dupuis & Thorns, 1998). Yet, safety was an ongoing consideration for women, as they reiterated that their housing was stable because it provided security at the entrance, or was not on the ground floor, for example. A few women reported that they still lived with safety concerns. These women were afraid at home and nearby; one woman's

former partner knew where she lived and had recently assaulted her in public, and another felt unsafe in her current housing due to neighborhood safety concerns.

> A couple weeks ago I was just walking to the corner store and I seen a car pull up behind me and I figure it was someone pulling up because there a couple nursing homes then I hear a car door shut and I turn around and he was just in the parking lot and then came up behind me and grabbed my arm and just like started yelling at me and whatever and so on. So that is a worry. It's like okay so if I go anywhere what is he going to be doing? Waiting here? So. (W76)

> My current housing suits me very well, I like the independence, I like to have my own space, I feel comfortable here but I don't feel safe. I've been, I've been harassed and attacked twice since I've lived here. (W06)

Others said they were still vulnerable to initiate contact with their former partners who continued to be abusive. One woman in our study who was having trouble making ends meet described how she allowed her former partner, the father of her children, back into the home to look after her children. This had drastic consequences.

> I was working and paying this girl a whole bunch of money, like for daycare and stuff and like, right, and so I'm like, yeah, I'm not making ends meet either even though I am in housing and my, my costs have gone up a bit, it's not market rent, but I was spending all this money on daycare … So I'm like, sure, come here for a month and then watch the kids for me, I'll give you a bit of money, and find a place to stay. And then I got the crap kicked out of me. (W60)

Some women said that at this stage they were able to reflect on the abuse they had experienced, in part as a step in the healing process, but also to better understand how the trauma from that period of their lives still lingered and caused them distress.

> I get very upset because the conditions I have are the result of somebody else's behaviour. Somebody else's issues. When I look at both of those people—one is my father and my partner. My ex-partner. They seem to be doing quite well. You know? They still have their houses. They still have their jobs. [long silence] As much as I try, [starts crying] I think I've dealt with everything and I'm okay, and everything comes back again. It's like a non-ending battle of memories and nightmares and flashbacks. (long silence) And then the effects it has on the children. (W37)

Some women continued to experience loneliness and fears for the future. Raising children as a single parent, and struggling to find relationships with new partners were cited as difficult. For some women, achieving material stability was one hurdle, but, as single women, creating meaning in their housing remained challenging.

The following participant noted that many women are tempted to return to the abusive relationship rather than face life on their own.

> And I don't want to be alone for the rest of my life. A lot of times women, in my predicament, they don't, you know I've been learning this in the group, they don't

want to be alone but their self esteem is so low, because their partner's you know, putting them down so much, and they're not worth it or anything so they always end up going back to their partners. (W69)

Beyond the issue of living single, barriers to employment also persist this period, partly due to availability to work, especially among women who solo parent long after leaving.

Probably the biggest obstacle that I have ever found for me is employment. Not that it's not available, but that it's hard to—I mean even here and now it's hard to manage being a single parent and not knowing anybody in the area and working, because it's not like you can just say, "Hi. My name is [name] and I can only work nine till three". Nobody hires you like that. So child care has been the big one. Like I did receive subsidized child care when I moved here and went to school but it ends at five-thirty. After five-thirty there is no child care and it's like, "Okay. Now what?" I can go to school until five-thirty, which has me missing half an hour every day of my classes, but then how to I work? So extended hours for child care have always been the biggest setback for me. (W22)

In summary, once women have been away from abuse for a period of time, the process of rebuilding her life and life with her children begins. While distancing herself from frequent abuse enables recovery to start, she is not fully free from the trauma of abuse and its social and psychological consequences.

Discussion

While research on housing and IPV is growing, there is still a need for more information on key transition periods and housing mobility and instability (Ponic *et al.*, 2011). Our data show the impact of experiences of partner violence on the meaning of a secure home and housing instability. Shaw (2004), Dupuis & Thorns (1998), and Dunn (2002) report that a home provides high levels of security when it: is a location where individuals can feel most in control of their lives; is safe; is a place of stability; and stable enough to enable identity construction (Dunn, 2002; Dupuis & Thorns, 1998; Shaw, 2004). As reported in our study, women who are experiencing IPV are not afforded such security because the emotional and physical abuse that takes place in their homes disrupts feelings of safety, stability, and control over their own lives. The home in these situations is not a refuge from the threats of the outside world, but rather the main source of stress and danger to its occupants. Few other problems threaten psychological housing instability in this same way.

Moreover, our data emphasize the ways in which perpetrator's use of financial abuse tactics—through manipulation of financial stability, disruption of employment, or increasing the risk of homelessness—impacts not just material housing stability but also psychological aspects of a secure home. Women in stable housing, while living with a perpetrator of violence, were repeatedly subjected to financial abuse directly impacting their ability to keep existing or acquire new housing. The material and psychological consequences of financial abuse stayed with women long into the third time period when women were attempting to rebuild their lives.

While our findings, which represent the priorities reported by our participants, emphasize the importance of the psychological aspects of housing instability, studies of

IPV and housing too frequently ignore these (Pavao *et al.*, 2007; Ponic *et al.*, 2011). Most studies examining the links between housing and IPV focus on financial aspects of housing (e.g., late rent or mortgage, evictions, affordability of housing), and mobility (e.g., frequency of moves, related issues) (Pavao *et al.*, 2007; Ponic *et al.*, 2011; Rollins *et al.*, 2012). Future studies measuring or defining housing instability cannot continue to ignore the importance of the psychological components of housing.

Our findings also show that the risk and severity of housing instability differs according to whether women still reside with a partner who was abusive and, if no longer living with the partner, by how long it has been since she left. At the same time, despite the benefits of distancing themselves from abuse after women have been out of the shared home for a long period of time, remnants and scars of abuse continue to impact women's lives, as illustrated by our findings. Our study also supports the findings of previous research showing that the period immediately after leaving a partner may be the most disruptive to all aspects of women's lives, and if applicable, children's lives, impacting everything health and financial well-being, to employment stability and having a place to live (Hirst, 2003; Menard, 2001; Ponic *et al.*, 2011). At the time of, or immediately after leaving a partner who is abusive, women often have had little time or resources to ensure a safe and smooth transition out of the home for themselves and their children, and may or may not already have secured alternative housing. The stress of securing and maintaining housing, including ensuring financial security and employment stability, may increase at that time, compared to when a woman still resided with her partner, or to the period long after leaving. This is also a time when safety is a constant concern as violence may escalate during this time (Barata & Stewart, 2010; Campbell *et al.*, 1998; Edwards, 2004).

Our findings have implications for policies and services. Many policies focus on material housing stability, for example, providing subsidized or temporary affordable housing for victims of violence. Yet, mitigating psychological instability—issues of safety, promoting feelings of home, ensuring that new housing is a refuge—is often not considered when designing services for victims of violence. Critical services such as case management could help women navigate support from multiple sectors to address the psychological instability as well as material housing instability and contribute to reduction of chaos of this transitional phase.

While housing instability was a major challenge for women during all three time periods, our findings confirm what has been extensively reported in the previous work (e.g., Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Baker *et al.*, 2003; Bassuk *et al.*, 2006; Buel, 1999; Campbell *et al.*, 1998; Galano *et al.*, 2013; Hardesty & Chung, 2006; Hughes *et al.*, 2011) that women living with IPV or its aftermath also experienced a range of co-occurring challenges that add to her hardship, such as severe psychological health distress, financial and employment instability, insufficient social support, and parenting challenges. The impact of these additional challenges in our sample was often intertwined (e.g., housing and financial instability, insufficient support and parenting challenges) such that the experience became overwhelming and their collective impact could not be separated or considered merely additive to the housing hardships women faced. Yet, many studies of housing and IPV fail to consider these simultaneous challenges (Pavao *et al.*, 2007) or may do so in a manner that insufficiently portrays the extent and severity of the co-occurring issues. Rollins *et al.* (2012), in their longitudinal study of housing instability among survivors of IPV, also examined employment difficulties but did so by measuring whether any days were missed from work in the six months prior to the interview. Women in our

study reported fear of safety at work, violence spilling over into the workplace, as additional concerns that should be considered in research examining employment issues. Our findings reveal that narrow conceptualizations of housing instability oversimplify womens experiences. Moreover, such evidence leads to incomplete recommendations for support for the myriad housing and non-housing needs of women living with IPV.

The differences in housing needs among women still residing with their partner and those who have left should not detract from the main finding that women living with IPV and its aftermath need more options for affordable, safe, and accessible housing. As well, women impacted by IPV need multiple supports and assistance to enable them to address their economic, social support, emotional, trauma, parenting, and health issues. Too few comprehensive, cross-sectoral supports exist for women experiencing IPV (Melbin *et al.*, 2003; Menard, 2001). One key needed form of assistance is to ensure that all women, and those in her support network, are aware of the nature of the existing services and how to safely access them (Menard, 2001).For the women in our study, just knowing the names or general types of programs available simply wasn't enough; they needed to know what each service or support could do, as well as help accessing those appropriate to their needs.

Our findings suggest that women appreciated the multitude of resources and services available to them while living in transitional housing such as counseling, parenting programs, and life skills. Yet, at the same time, they identified areas for improvement, such as the need for greater flexibility to meet varied needs, as well as lengths of stay that could accommodate the real time required to locate affordable and suitable housing. This confirms previous findings showing that time periods in transitional housing contribute to women's capacity to become stably housed (Hughes *et al.*, 2011; Melbin *et al.*, 2003). Short stays in transitional housing may force women back into unstable housing or even back to an abusive partner. Meanwhile, some research suggests that for women who do not have or want long-term social housing, stigma from landlords about their IPV histories may delay and preclude locating suitable market housing (Barata & Stewart, 2010; Jategaonkar & Ponic, 2011). Our data suggest that transitions often take longer than the duration for which many supports are available. Women may need such supports for several years to prevent the risk of returning to an abusive partner by assisting with issues of loneliness, isolation, recovery from trauma and greater financial supports to achieve economic independence.

One limitation of this study is that, given our recruitment strategy, which relied on service providers to publicize our project, women who never or rarely accessed services, or who were able to stay in their homes after ending an abusive relationship were likely underrepresented in our study. Not all women who leave end up moving (Breckenridge & Mulroney, 2007; Ponic *et al.*, 2011), and we were not able to capture their experiences here. Yet, previous research indicates that the themes we identified are also relevant to women who use market housing after leaving a violent relationship (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Baker *et al.*, 2009, 2010; Campbell *et al.*, 1998; Galano *et al.*, 2013; Jategaonkar & Ponic, 2011). Jategaonkar and Ponic (2011) explored very similar themes—housing, violence health—in interviews with women in British Columbia who had left abusive relationships. They found that poverty, financial hardship, poor health, and physical and psychological housing instability were strong themes among the 45 participants.

Our study builds on and extends the growing body of evidence on the negative impacts of partner violence on housing instability. In particular, our findings confirm the value of

prioritizing women's own voices when unpacking intersecting longitudinal processes to help uncover the complexities as viewed from their perspectives. Future research that builds on these findings to examine implications for design of interventions would also benefit from relying on women's own perspectives and voices. While our typology of residing with or having left perpetrators was useful for this analysis, future research could confirm and further characterize the three periods in other low income populations or among other subgroups such as immigrant women who may or may not have access to the same resources as the women in our sample (Campbell *et al.*, 2003; Gilroy *et al.*, 2014; Hyman *et al.*, 2006). Some outstanding questions include how best to help women long after having left a partner achieve sustained housing stability and more fully rebuild their lives. It is unclear how for long they need myriad supports but our data suggest that 2 years may not be long enough. Finally, future research should be designed around an expanded definition and measurement of material and psychological housing instability and take into account the co-occurring contextual and health conditions that complicate the definition of psychological and material aspects of the home. This would more accurately characterize the impacts of IPV and help inform the range of supports needed by IPV survivors.

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