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Housing strategies for addressing domestic violence and abuse

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Introduction

Abusers who enact violence create inherently unstable, chaotic, and dangerous conditions which subsequently threaten survivors’ fundamental housing needs. Many survivors are forced to either stay housed with their abusive partners or leave their homes. Leaving can result in either immediate placement into a housing program such as a crisis shelter or an experience of prolonged homelessness. As such, intimate partner violence (IPV) and housing instability become inextricably linked (Breiding, Basile, Klevens, & Smith, 2017). The aim of this chapter is to describe the interpersonal and community conditions that lead IPV survivors to seek out housing support across multiple sources. We discuss the best available evidence on formal housing interventions for survivors, primarily drawing on empirical studies based in North America, Australia, and the United Kingdom, as well as strategies that survivors employ to obtain housing from their informal networks. We describe the limitations of formal and informal sources and conclude with critical next steps for research, policy, and practice that will advance current housing interventions.

What is housing instability?

Housing instability can be broadly defined as not being able to obtain and secure stable housing. It can encompass homelessness but is also distinct because a person may have a physical roof over their heads but live in an environment that is not fit for habitation. While the definitions vary across studies, researchers tend to operationalize housing instability using three shared indicators: (1) a count of the number of moves within a set period of time (i.e., the period of time varies from one year to three years); (2) current inability to meet financial obligations to maintain housing (i.e., issues of paying rent or mortgage, evictions, foreclosures); or (3) involuntary or undesirable moves to live with family or friends (i.e., also known as doubling up; Adams et al., 2018; Burgard, Seefeldt, & Zelner, 2012; Dichter, Wagner, Borrerro, Broyles, & Montgomery, 2017; Park, Fertig, & Metraux, 2014; Pavao, Alvarez, Baumrind, Induni, & Kimmerling, 2006; Sullivan, 2016; Wilson & Laughon, 2015). One national study in the United States included
denial of affordable housing into their definition of housing instability. This definition included how aspects of the housing system can perpetuate housing instability (Breiding et al., 2017).

Despite the varied definitions, few researchers have asked survivors to define housing stability. Woodhall-Melnik and colleagues (2017) are an exception. They interviewed a diverse sample of 41 Canadian female survivors to understand what constitutes becoming stably housed. Survivors stated that housing stability encompassed material and structural stability, affordability, comfortability, and longevity. Achieving stability would result in security, calmness, independence, control, and freedom. Housing stability would also mean more consistency in their daily routines, an increase in the ability to build and sustain strong social networks, and opportunities to think more strategically about their future. Mother-survivors described stability as relational—they were not safe unless their children felt safe. Survivors’ definition also incorporated quality of life and affordability indicators that enhance previous definitions of housing stability.

**Housing instability and intimate partner violence**

IPV and housing instability are highly associated and mutually reinforcing experiences. In a national population study based in the United States, 46.3% of female IPV survivors reported that in the last year they worried about their ability to pay their housing expenses. Unstably housed women more likely to report IPV relative to women who did not report recent housing instability (Breiding et al., 2017). In a 2003 statewide study of California residents, women who experienced IPV were four times more likely to report housing instability compared to women who did not experience IPV (Pavao et al., 2006). An overwhelming majority of survivors in small qualitative, community-based research studies describe how their partners’ abusive physical, sexual, and financial behaviors created uninhabitable living conditions (Phipps, Dalton, Maxwell, & Clearly, 2019; Yu et al., 2018). A recent scoping review, which included studies from across the globe, found that severe physical and sexual abuse histories significantly contributed to survivors’ homelessness (Phipps et al., 2019). While multiple studies have described how IPV can contribute to housing instability, it is also possible for housing instability to increase risk of experiencing violence. Meth (2003) conducted focus groups with nine women living in shack settlements in South Africa. Survivors discussed the lack of material protection and privacy typically provided by a house increased their vulnerability to violence. Taken together, violence is a significant contributor to housing instability and vice versa, especially for women.

**Housing instability, intimate partner violence, and health**

There are number of well-documented social, psychological, and physical health repercussions that arise as a consequence of having a violent partner and experiencing housing instability. When survivors were not stably housed or experienced homelessness, they were significantly more likely to be traumatized, feel depressed and anxious, experience higher rates of physical and sexual abuse compared to women who were stably housed (Gilroy, McFarlane, Mad-doux, & Sullivan, 2016). The chaos inherent in involuntary moves over a short period of time also contributes negatively to health (Burgard et al., 2012). This is true for survivors, and their children. Unstably housed school-aged children, compared to children who have stable housing, are significantly more likely to report a mental health problem (Bassuk, Richard, &
Generally, housing instability significantly lowers survivors’ quality of life, places them in increased danger, and worsens overall individual and familial health (Phipps et al., 2019; Rollins et al., 2012).

**Survivors’ pathways to housing instability**

The pathways to housing instability and subsequent homelessness are maintained through unequal relational power dynamics and abusers’ oppressive interpersonal behaviors which keep survivors without consistent access to stable housing. Many pathways begin with interpersonal relationship dynamics. For example, Canadian survivors described having their material needs met, but the abuser contributed to psychological or emotional instability (O’campo, Daoud, Wright-Hamilton, & Dunn, 2016). The abuse led survivors to strategize about how best to keep themselves and their families safe while also staying housed (Clough, Draughon, Njie-Carr, Rollins, & Gladd, 2014). In one study of 138 Australian women, 26% chose to stay with their abusive partners, while 67% relocated (Diemer, Humphreys, & Crinall, 2016). Survivors described often choosing to stay with their partners because there were no alternative housing options. For many survivors leaving meant that they would eventually end up homeless because they did not have the financial resources to live independently (O’campo et al., 2016; Clough et al., 2014). Survivors from another Australian–based study who stayed in their relationships developed strategies for saving money and actively searching for independent housing as a way to protect their children from being housing unstable. Some survivors were specifically motivated to maintain their current housing because they felt more equipped to protect their children from the trauma of abuse than from the trauma of homelessness (Meyer, 2016). Moreover, many survivors also did not want to compromise the quality of their current housing for lower-quality housing in unsafe neighborhoods (Clough et al., 2014).

**Survivor’s relocation from the abusive home**

Survivors are often forced to leave their housing due to the severity of their abusive partners’ behaviors (O’campo et al., 2016; Zufferey, Chung, Franzway, Wendt, & Moulding, 2016). Survivors reported being severely physically assaulted, being kicked out of their homes by their partners, or being left with abuser-generated debt which made it difficult to afford their homes (Tutty, Ogden, Giurgiu, & Weaver-Dunlop, 2014). Some survivors became immediately homeless after leaving an abusive partner. They described sleeping in their cars, in parks, and on the streets (Lang, 2015; O’campo et al., 2016; Zufferey et al., 2016). Survivors who were able to move often transitioned into housing that was located in unsafe neighborhoods, provided a lower sense of safety, or was poorer quality compared to the housing they left with their abusive partners (Hetling, Dunford, & Botein, 2019; Zufferey et al., 2016). In other studies, survivors left and move into new places, but the relationship separation increased their partner’s violence, resulting in survivors having to relocate multiple times in order to maintain safety (Yu et al., 2018; Zufferey et al., 2016). In addition to navigating violence from within the relationship, survivors who lived on the streets or in shelters reported being physically or sexually assaulted and believed they were at heightened risk for experiencing violence in the future (Tutty et al., 2014). Some survivors who left their partners ended up moving back because it was impossible to find a safe, permanent place to stay (Lang, 2015; Meyer, 2016).
Women who became homeless after leaving a relationship described being without a home for a prolonged period of time, and even when they were able to secure permanent or temporary housing, it took multiple years to recover from surviving homelessness and abuse (Meyer, 2016; Tutty et al., 2014).

**Economic abuse contributes to survivors’ housing instability**

Economic abuse contributes to housing instability for many survivors (Doud et al., 2016; Sullivan, Bomsta, & Hacsaylo, 2019). Common abusive tactics include stealing rent money from survivors, refusing to pay bills, or lying about paying bills. In a study conducted in the United States, some abusers did not tell survivors about overdue notices or simply abandoned survivors, leaving them to fulfill the financial responsibilities and pay all debts amassed during the abusive relationship (Sullivan et al., 2019; Zufferey et al., 2016). Economic abuse also compromised survivors access to income. Some survivors had to reduce their work hours or lost their jobs because their abusive partners engaged in sabotaging behaviors (O’campo et al., 2016; Sullivan et al., 2019). As a result of abuse, many survivors did not have the financial means to pay rent or mortgage. Evictions and foreclosures due to violence all contributed to survivors’ housing instability and hindered survivors’ ability to access housing in the future (Doud et al., 2016; Clough et al., 2014; O’campo et al., 2016). For example, if a survivor is evicted for not paying the rent, has poor credit, or is without consistent employment, landlords will label them as risky, which will lower the possibility that survivors will be considered for safe housing options.

**Survivors’ informal housing options**

If survivors leave their partners, they typically choose two housing options: informal and formal. Informal housing means moving in with family members or friends. This housing option requires that survivors have strong relationships with their social support networks, and that those networks can support their short- or long-term housing needs. Studies have identified this as doubling up and it is a common first step for many survivors (Baker, Billhardt, Warren, Rollins, & Glass, 2010; Zufferey et al., 2016). Some survivors create informal housing arrangements such as working in exchange for a room in a home. Informal housing can also include staying in the home where they live and removing the abuser using a personal protection order. However, the abuser often makes it difficult for the survivor to actually stay in the home due to stalking and ongoing violations of the personal protection orders (Diemer et al., 2016). Therefore, survivors may choose to seek out more formal housing options, which is described next.

**Survivors’ formal housing options**

Formal housing options for survivors vary significantly. One option is to rent an apartment or house at market rate. This option is difficult to access because it depends on the affordability of the housing stock. Most survivors cannot choose this option unless they, or their social networks, are well-resourced (Clough et al., 2014). Outside of the traditional housing market, housing programs are the most commonly utilized among survivors. Survivors make attempts to access immediate crisis housing from domestic violence shelters, general homeless shelters, and/or transitional housing programs (Tutty et al., 2014). Permanent supportive housing provide long-term options for survivors. And, some survivors are able to access supportive housing vouchers, rapid rehousing, or Housing First programs which allows them to transition into the traditional housing market while also receiving supportive advocacy.
Housing strategies

and financial assistance from programs. All of these formal housing options are in high demand and low in quantity. There is often not enough funding for housing programs relative to the prevalence of homelessness and housing instability (Gezinski & Gonzalez-Pons, 2019).

Survivors engage in sustained outreach to multiple systems to receive housing support (Lang, 2015). Across studies in the United States and Canada, survivors commonly described how difficult it was to actually qualify for placement in housing programs. Survivors were required to disclose significant and personal details about their life in order to prove that they were abused and homeless. This burden of proof and high barrier entry policies were time consuming, unsupportive, and revictimizing (Clough et al., 2014; Jeffrey & Barata, 2017). Few survivors felt that the housing programs truly understood the urgency of their situations while trying to escape a violent partner (Yu et al., 2018). However, when survivors were able to make a connection to a formal housing program, many believed that it put them in a better position to maintain their housing stability. Housing programs helped survivors get connected to housing resources, financial assistance, and provided the time necessary to stabilize their lives (Lang, 2015).

Most of the evidence on survivors’ housing needs come from women living in domestic violence shelters or transitional housing programs (Klein, Chesworth, Howland-Myers, Rizo, & Macy, 2019). These studies primarily describe what brings survivors to shelters (experiences of abuse) and relative satisfaction with shelter programs. Yet, very few studies discuss the short- and long-term outcome of using a domestic violence shelter while attempting to obtain housing stability. In addition, many studies on housing instability range from 15 to 819 participants, which makes it difficult to obtain predictive and generalizable results. There is outcome data to describe the impact of housing interventions on IPV survivors, but the evidence is limited (Klein et al., 2019). Survivors’ complicated experiences with traditional housing markets and formal housing programs are discussed in greater detail in the following sections.

Traditional housing market

Obtaining housing stability through the traditional housing market was not a viable option for many survivors because housing stock was unaffordable and/or they could not access high quality apartments in nice neighborhoods (Gezinski & Gonzalez-Pons, 2019; Meyer, 2016). Survivors across multiple studies described issues qualifying for a home due to poor credit, having evictions on their record, or experiencing other financial barriers that were a direct result of the abuse (Wilson & Laughon, 2015; Sullivan, Lopez-Zeron, Bomsta, & Menard, 2019). Landlords in the traditional housing market in the United States also discriminated against survivors by refusing to rent to them, charging additional fees, or placing them in subpar units in unsafe neighborhoods (Clough et al., 2014; Gezinski & Gonzalez-Pons, 2019). Traditional housing, while preferred by survivors because it offers the most control over housing quality, safety, and neighborhood selection, is also the most inaccessible and difficult housing option.

Domestic violence and general homeless shelters

There are two primary sources of immediate, crisis housing support options for survivors: domestic violence (DV) shelters and general homeless shelters. DV shelters are short-term, crisis housing responses specifically designed for survivors who are actively fleeing an abusive relationship and are the most commonly studied housing response for IPV survivors (Klein et al., 2019). Survivors who are accepted into shelters tend to have immediate housing needs
due to the high lethality of their abuse. Domestic violence shelters often require proof of abuse to qualify for services. This can include recent episodes of physical violence, a high score on a lethality assessment, or presence of a personal protection order. Survivors who meet shelter criteria are provided temporary stays ranging from 21 days to 60 days and offered supportive advocacy services to help them in finding long-term housing support. Many found the material resources offered by shelters to be helpful in their housing search. Yet, survivors across multiple shelter-based studies have described that the short shelter time limits do not allow enough time for, qualify, and obtain safe and reliable long-term housing (Lang, 2015). Those who were unable to find long-term housing were forced to return home to their partners after their shelter stay (O’campo et al., 2016). In addition, violations of strict domestic violence shelter policies could also lead to survivors being removed from shelter further perpetuating their housing instability (Lang, 2015).

The transition to a domestic violence shelter can be difficult for children. In a Norwegian study, young children of survivors described how the disruption of their routines in schools or separation from their friends was difficult to process. Given the temporary nature of shelters, it was also difficult for children to make friends at the shelter and then leave them soon after. For some children, the burden of keeping the shelter a secret and being far from home contributed to their feelings of isolation. Other children simply felt shame for living in a DV shelter (Øverlien, 2011). Overall, there are significant trade-offs for families to live in a shelter. It is difficult for survivors to negotiate the conflicting emotions of their children, while also navigating individual and familial safety and trying to obtain stable housing.

Homeless shelters are designed for the general homeless population and are often segregated by gender (man versus woman) and/or familial status (single versus family). Entry into these shelters range from low to high barrier. Often these shelters allow people to stay nightly, but residents are not allowed to be there during the day. Women who enter into the general homeless shelter system often report histories of violent victimization (Phipps et al., 2019). While understudied, a few scholars have described how stays domestic violence shelters then led to stays in general homeless shelters. Evidence suggests that survivors who were not able to meet entry criteria at domestic violence shelters but were in immediate crisis sought support from general homeless shelters (Gezinski & Gonzalez-Pons, 2019). Stylianou and Pich (2019) examined how social identity and reason for discharge from a domestic violence shelter in New York City influenced future housing placements. They found that single survivors whose first language was not English, who did not have a work history or income, or who were removed from shelter based on a rule violation were most often discharged to the general homeless shelter system (Stylianou & Pich, 2019). Both sheltering options do not offer stability given its short time limits and crisis orientation; however they can provide temporary respite from relationship violence if survivors are able to access these services.

Transitional housing

Transitional housing provides individuals and families with longer-term housing stays as they prepare for more permanent and stable housing options. Housing stays can range from 12–24 months and are typically offered to those who have been in a shelter. Case workers offer supportive housing services to residents in order to obtain stability in a permanent unit. These programs are designed to be “bridge” programs between crisis housing and permanent supportive housing to help individuals develop their “readiness” for housing. Mothers in domestic violence shelters with young children and those who had more income
were likely to be discharged to a transitional housing program compared to other housing options (Stylianou & Pich, 2019). Transitional housing programs provide survivors more time being housed than emergency shelters, yet it is not entirely clear whether and how participation in these programs support long-term housing stability (Klein et al., 2019; Meyer, 2016).

**Permanent supportive housing**

Permanent supportive housing provides people who are homeless a designated set of apartment units and supportive services. People are eligible for this program if they do not have the resources to obtain housing on their own, have been homeless prior to entering the program, are living in an emergency shelter or transitional housing, have a disabling condition, or are being discharged from an institution. Few studies have examined survivors’ experiences with this housing option. Hetling and colleagues (2018) interviewed eight women who lived in permanent supportive housing in New York City. Survivors described the benefits of living in long-term permanent supportive housing. Specifically, they were not stressed about having to move or adhere to impending time limits. This housing option allowed survivors to care for themselves and plan for the future. Despite the benefits, the housing complex was still located in an unsafe neighborhood with violent crime. Survivors also described not being in control of their housing because they had to abide by restrictive policies and curfews. As such, permanent supportive housing provided long-term support but may not be able to offer the full scope of stability, specifically comfort, independence, and freedom.

**Subsidized housing**

Subsidized housing is a governmental rental assistance program in the United States that provides housing support to individuals and families. This support encompasses housing choice vouchers, public housing, and private subsidized housing. Limited studies focus on survivors’ experiences with subsidized housing. Stylianou and Pich (2019) found that survivors who exited a domestic violence shelter in New York City and went to subsidized housing were in the shelter for a longer time compared to people who went into the general homeless system. One possible explanation for this finding is the significant amount of time it takes to actually qualify for assistance. Subsidized housing provides long-term stability, yet survivors were being offered poor quality rental units and often forced to live in unsafe neighborhoods due to discrimination by landlords and stigma associated with using a voucher (Doud et al., 2016; Jeffrey & Barata, 2017; Meyer, 2016). Similar to findings about permanent supportive housing, while survivors were housed, they did not actually feel like they had much choice or control over their housing. Survivors did not believe they were able to choose better alternatives nor were they in a financial position to move (Jeffrey & Barata, 2017). Subsidized housing provided an opportunity to maintain material stability over a period of time. However, similar to permanent supportive housing, the options were limited for survivors and safety was a continued concern.

**Domestic violence Housing First programs**

Housing First (HF) is an approach that immediately intervenes on threats to housing instability. Within this approach, HF advocates seek to stabilize individuals prior to loss of housing. In this
model, people are immediately housed and then advocates work with residents on other issues (e.g., substance abuse, mental health issues). Traditional housing models require that case workers deem individuals “ready” for housing prior to actually being housed. Housing First has been adapted for the domestic violence field and outcome data for helping survivors achieve housing stability via this approach is in its infancy. The DV Housing First model is comprised of four components: survivor-driven, flexible funding, mobile advocacy, and community engagement (Sullivan & Olsen, 2016). Survivor-driven approaches mean that all services are based on survivors’ expressed needs. Mobile advocacy is the practice of meeting survivors where they are and actively working to mobilize resources on their behalf. Community engagement requires mobilizing community as a way to build support networks to increase housing stability. Flexible funding focuses on providing immediate financial assistance to survivors (Sullivan & Olsen, 2016).

Recently, researchers conducted a longitudinal evaluation of one component of DV Housing First, flexible assistance in Washington, DC. They examined how the receipt of low-barrier funding influenced survivors’ housing stability (Bomsta & Sullivan, 2018; Sullivan et al., 2019). Results demonstrated that when survivors were provided with flexible assistance, 40% were able to stay in their original homes as desired. Some survivors received subsidized vouchers, others transitioned into housing after being homeless, and a few voluntarily moved in with family members. Survivors most often requested grants to directly support with rent and utilities. Other requests were for cell phone bills, transportation, and food. No matter what the request, the financial assistance supported survivors’ ability to maintain safety, reduce stress, and helped maintain stability for themselves and their children (Bombsta & Sullivan, 2018; Sullivan et al., 2019). There was a notable contribution that flexible funding had on the lives of children and their mothers. Flexible funding provided an opportunity for mothers to offer their children stability—not having to relocate their children. They could keep the same routines, same friends, and same familiar environments. This made children happier and more comfortable (Bombsta & Sullivan, 2018). Some mothers have to send their children away to live with other relatives while they focus on building housing stability, this separation can have detrimental impacts on families (Wilson & Laughon, 2015). Flexible funding provides immediate support for stability which reduces the chances for involuntary separation supporting families to stay together (Bombsta & Sullivan, 2018). Components of DV Housing First improve housing stability and most align with survivors’ definition of stability (Woodhall-Melnik et al., 2017).

**Limitations of current IPV and housing instability research**

This brief overview describes the domestic violence field’s best available evidence on housing responses designed to help survivors maintain housing stability, yet has limitations. First, much of the current literature is based on shelters and transitional housing programs. While necessary for immediate crisis intervention, these housing programs are not designed to support long-term stability. They become pass-throughs to enter into other programs or, unwillingly going back to the abuser. In addition, there is very little information about survivors’ experiences over time (see Sullivan et al., 2019, for exception). Most of the literature is based on correlational quantitative designs that explore associations between stability and other indicators, or qualitative exploratory designs that seek to understand how survivors’ make meaning of their experiences with violence and instability. Longitudinal designs, either qualitative, quantitative, or mixed, would help researchers...
evaluate what actually contributes to obtaining housing stability. Also, research at the intersections of IPV and housing instability do not pay enough attention to system-level practices. The overemphasis on individual indicators of housing instability and the underemphasis on structural indicators may contribute to why a majority of studies focus on understanding or changing survivors’ behaviors and attitudes (e.g., counting the number of moves), rather than changing how the housing system itself operates (e.g., the continuous reduction in affordable housing stock).

**Housing and intersectionality**

Based on their social identities, survivors do not have equal chance of experiencing housing instability or homelessness, nor an equitable ability to obtain safe housing. Being young, a person of color, being poor, or being disabled and experiencing IPV all predict instability (Pavao et al., 2006). For example, women of color were more likely to report higher rates of violence compared to White women subsequently increasing risk of housing instability (Breiding, Chen, & Black, 2014). Due to structural racism, sexism, and classism, Black people and women also tend to occupy tenuous minimum wage jobs that do not provide adequate income or benefits that allow them to easily afford market-level rent (Burgard et al., 2012). In one statewide study, young people and Black people were more likely to report having to move multiple times in a year, moving because of housing costs, living with family members or friends, or being homeless. Evictions were more commonly reported by women and Black participants than men and White participants (Burgard et al., 2012). Other social identities also influence access to housing support. Survivors with disabilities reported limited to no accessibility to traditional domestic violence shelter programs. Survivors experienced barriers related to physical access to buildings or the inability to bring personal assistants into shelters (Lightfoot & Williams, 2009).

Given the state of the evidence on housing instability among IPV survivors (mostly qualitative, smaller samples, correlational), it is difficult to determine the predictive relationships among social identities, housing instability, and violence. Researchers can employ intersectional approaches in order to understand for whom and under what conditions multiply marginalized survivors become housing unstable and subsequently gain stability. Intersectionality supposes that individuals experience simultaneous oppressions shaped by social forces that uniquely contribute to social life (Hill Collins & Blige, 2016). An intersectional analytic approach provides researchers an opportunity to build survivor-responsive housing options by exploring sociohistorical and political contexts that influence housing response, applying an analysis of power, and understanding how holding multiple social identities influences survivors’ access to power. Currently, housing studies with IPV survivors often do not explicitly take into consideration the differential experiences of violence by social identity, and to our knowledge, few studies explored how the simultaneous experience of racism, sexism, ableism, classism, and other types of oppression influence the ability to reach housing stability.

**Future directions for policy, practice, and research implications**

There are myriad of ways scholars and practitioners can continue to support survivors in obtaining housing stability, as well as develop and evaluate effective responses across housing systems.
Some critical opportunities for progression include developing a more inclusive definition of housing stability, consistently employing intersectionality in research methods, developing creative alternative solutions to obtaining housing stability, and building programs that increase survivor power.

**Develop inclusive definitions of housing instability**

The development of a clear and consistent definition of housing stability/instability that is inclusive of survivors’ diverse and complex experiences would be beneficial to the domestic violence field. If the act of living in a home where abuse occurs fundamentally makes survivors unstably housed, and then it would reduce the heavy burden of proof survivors experience when they seek out support from housing organizations. In addition, the indicators of housing instability are often rooted in individual characteristics and experiences, rather than systems characteristics. Many of the prominent housing instability indexes align with this perspective, and as such, create interventions that continue to require individuals change their behaviors rather than making significant changes in the housing system. For example, a system-level inclusive definition of housing instability could include the number of times that housing programs deny survivors entry, the length of time that people have been on a waiting list for housing, the number of years that the housing list has been closed in a city, the reduction in number of grants for subsidized housing, or reduction in number of landlords who accept vouchers. An incorporation of system indicators would contribute to a more expansive and equitable housing response that allows researchers to identify mutable indicators in housing systems that can be leveraged to support system-level change.

**Incorporate intersectionality into housing responses**

Housing responses that do not focus on structural racism, structural misogyny, wealth inequality, and their intersections, are not sufficient responses to the complex problem of housing instability. As such, scholars must think clearly and purposefully about how intersectionality informs the conceptualization and response to housing instability among survivor populations. If not, it is possible that studies will reify and endorse mainstream practices that were designed primarily to help those who have the greatest access to social power and limit and create barriers for those who do not traditionally have access to social power. Currently, the housing field remains unclear about the right options for survivors of color and those who hold historically marginalized and disenfranchised identities. There is some promising evidence that demonstrates that implementing an anti-racist approach to a housing program design may improve long-term housing outcomes among Black people (Stergiopoulous et al., 2016). Innovative and culturally relevant solutions to housing that are well-researched can help build responses that are diverse, complex, and equitable.

**Develop or identify alternative housing responses**

While domestic violence shelters are critical for immediate crisis response, they are also ripe for reimagining. Survivors should have more options to respond to crisis beyond calling the police, being displaced from their home, and potentially experiencing prolonged homelessness. One understudied alternative housing response could be to find ways to resource informal
community networks. Given that friends and family are the first points of disclosure for many survivors and often the “first responders” to remedying housing instability and preventing homelessness, they could be critical points of intervention. Future housing response strategies and research about such strategies could valuably focus on the potential of informal community networks.

**Ensure all housing responses build survivors’ power**

Empowerment theory undergirds the domestic violence movement – which supposes that choice is a critical component of safety and increased power. Housing responses that increase survivor choice, at a fundamental level, is critical to how the field should move forward with future housing advocacy. Housing is a human right which means that survivors should be able to choose how they want to live, where they want to live, and what they need to obtain stability. Future research should continue to provide evidence on empowerment-based program-level, state-level, and federal policies that promote safety and increase power. Using a holistic, survivor-driven version of housing stability, researchers can incorporate attainment of freedom and choice into their evaluations of housing programs. Survivors deserve the time and space to regain dignity while achieving housing stability.

**Conclusion**

In sum, IPV is a direct, or indirect, reason why many survivors experience housing instability or homelessness. While it varies in its definition, survivors who report housing instability desire a housing response that provides an opportunity to rebuild in their lives, supports them in regaining power, and promotes their long-term physical and emotional safety. The housing options for survivors vary, ranging from staying in their relationships, going to short-term shelters or longer-term housing programs, staying with friends, or entering into the traditional market with or without financial support. Both the housing and IPV fields are ripe for innovative approaches that are multi-level and intersectional with the long-term aim of severing the connection between IPV and housing instability.

**Critical findings**

- Women with abusive partners are more likely than those without abusive partners to report experiencing housing instability. Abusive interpersonal dynamics create uninhabitable and unsafe living conditions.
- Housing instability is often defined at the individual level as the number of moves within a defined period, inability to meet financial obligations to maintain housing, and/or doubling up involuntarily with family or friends. This definition rarely includes structural indicators such as availability of affordable housing.
- Intimate partner violence survivors describe housing stability as security, calmness, independence, control, and freedom. Stable housing would also provide consistent daily routines, ability to build and sustain strong social networks, and an opportunity to plan for the future. They incorporated quality of life and affordability indicators that are missing from other definitions of housing stability.
- Survivors choose to stay in their homes with their abusive partners or leave their homes to get away from their partners.
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- Survivors who leave their partners are at increased risk of being homeless. In order to avoid homelessness, survivors may move in with family members or friends or pursue formal housing options such as the traditional housing market, shelters, transitional housing, permanent supportive housing, rapid rehousing, or Housing First programs.

**Implications for policy, practice, and research**

- Develop a housing stability definition that is inclusive of survivors’ diverse and complex life experiences.
- Incorporate more system-level indicators of housing instability.
- Develop housing responses that do not require immediate displacement of survivors.
- Acknowledge that housing instability is outcome of structural racism, structural misogyny, wealth inequality, and their intersections. Develop structural interventions that directly attend to these issues.
- Given that friends and families are often first points of disclosure and sources to remedy housing instability, resource informal community networks.
- Increase available evidence about the longitudinal impact of current housing responses on survivors’ housing stability.

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Housing strategies


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