Crisis Information Concerns:
Information Needs of Domestic Violence Survivors

Abstract

The personal crisis of coping with or escaping from a violent relationship requires that survivors have accurate, current, appropriate, and contextually-useful information. Police and shelter staff, who are the governmental and private sector first-responders, make substantial efforts to provide that information both at the moment of crisis and in the often lengthy period of after-shocks. Their repeated efforts to more fully anticipate and understand survivor information needs over time are informed by interactions with large numbers of survivors.

Growing from this reservoir of knowledge and experience, this ten-city study uses in-depth interviews with 19 intimate partner violence (IPV) survivors, 14 shelter staff, 10 shelter directors, and 14 police officers to identify information needs in IPV survivors’ efforts to escape from or cope with IPV. The person-in-progressive-situation model of everyday-life information seeking (ELIS) theory provides the analytic framework. Analysis revealed three progressive situations with attendant clusters of information needs: (1) considering a change from an abusive situation, (2) adjusting to change while in the shelter and/or criminal justice system, and (3) preparing for post-shelter and/or post-police life. In addition, continual legal information needs form a fourth situation since law and regulations weave throughout all three of the progressive situations.

Service and research implications are discussed.
I had this assumption that I would go to the authority, to the police and there was some big database that was going to spit out my information to any and all programs so that all I had to do was tell one person. Like go to the police and it would spit it out to a database that would go to the AFDC, to the food stamps, to the Medicaid, to the school programs, to any program that myself and my children qualified for having no job, no money and no education ... That I would have that information dispersed into all these little cubicles. But, in fact, they are a bunch of little cubicles that don't talk to each other. And the fear factor of having to repeat that information 20 times to 20 different organizations because A doesn't talk to B doesn't talk to C doesn't talk to D. [Survivor]†

Problem statement

Individuals facing personal crises have information needs that differ from everyday information needs -- perhaps in quantity but certainly in kind. The needs themselves differ because the nature of a crisis is to compress and heighten stress while the crisis itself can impact the individual’s focus, priorities, and perspective. These matters also affect which of the available information channels are perceived as potentially helpful.

In the case of intimate partner violence (IPV), particularly long-term violence, the crisis stretches out over cycles that shape cognitive, affective, and behavioral interactions (Shurman & Rodriguez, 2006). The cycles will vary and may overlap but generally they consist of the abuse cycle, which pertains to the abuser, and the change cycle, which pertains to the survivor. In the former, the abuser moves from courtship behaviors in the “honeymoon” phase through increasingly negative verbal assaults and ends in violence. In the “change” cycle the survivor moves through reiterative, often non-linear steps toward a relative degree of safety (Caetano, Field, Ramisetty-Mikler, & McGrath, 2005; Fugate, Landis, Riordan, Naureckas, & Engel, 2005; Logan, Shannon, Cole, & Walker, 2006; Miller, 2006; Stover, 2005). Understanding the information components of the
survivor’s change process requires examination of a full range of personal and social needs. IPV survivors’ situations exemplify the complexity of personal crisis information experiences. Although each is certainly unique in all its nuances, the spectrum of concerns and the patterns among experiences combine to provide insights that can strengthen information support for this vulnerable population.

Examination of the very term “intimate partner violence survivor” can help to explicate key facets of the context in which this population exists. As the cited references exemplify, the language describing this population has shifted over the past forty years. Originally designated as “domestic abuse,” this type of violence is now more finely defined so that different forms of violence among related individuals are differentiated. “Elder abuse,” “child abuse,” and “intimate partner abuse” are all forms of “domestic abuse” in the sense that all are forms of violence (e.g., physical, mental, sexual) perpetrated by one member of a family unit against another member of that unit. The context of a daughter beating a mother, however, is far different from that of a husband beating a wife in terms of virtually all sociological factors, as well as many legal factors. Similarly, the original studies of this population focused broadly on their status as crime victims, assuming that all were battered wives. Over time, scholars examined more deeply the “intimate partner” relationship, recognizing the entire spectrum of its possible variations including co-habitants, dating couples, same-sex couples (for whom formal marriage is not, generally, a legal option), and female-on-male violence. Understanding the complexities of the relationship dynamic led rapidly to an understanding that the “victim” status was only one small aspect of this population’s life circumstance. In order to both denote respect for the fortitude required to live through abuse and to more fully
capture the social, economic, and psychological qualities of the IPV experience, the term “survivor” became more commonly used than the original term “victim.” (In the legal or criminal justice context, of course, the term “victim” is still used to keep the focus, quite naturally, on the “crime victim” status.) Thus the imprecise terms “battered women” and “domestic abuse” have fallen into disuse and the term “intimate partner violence survivor” is used to more accurately define the population.

The central focus of this study is the array of IPV survivor information needs, including those that are readily met by existing services and those that remain unfulfilled or problematic. The semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which provide the data for this study, were designed to encourage participants to explain and exemplify – within the limitations of privacy – the information needs they experienced in their movement towards a safer life.

Gathering input from police, who are usually first responders, and from shelter staff permitted additional layers of contextualization for the survivors’ input on their own information needs. This integration of insights from shelter staff and police officers provides more of the concrete background needed to move from a catalog of survivor information needs to the development of a contextualized information-need model that accounts for the progressive situations faced by survivors. Certainly the experiences of each survivor are, at the core, unique. Nevertheless, this study’s triangulation of perspectives gleans those commonalities which merit consideration in the implementation of information delivery to this vulnerable population. Every shelter and police contact that makes effective use of information holds the possibility of saving a life. Increasing that possibility, even to a limited extent, is this study’s major benefit.
The primary structure of this article reflects the situations that IPV survivors face; the initial elements provide context for those situations. The literature review explains the context of IPV concerns as well as IPV survivor information experiences. The theoretical perspective, research question, and research method sections elaborate on the research details. The findings are contextualized in terms of particular law-enforcement issues and then delineated in terms of the information needs encountered during the three progressive situations: initial consideration of a life change; during shelter and/or criminal justice engagement; and post-shelter, post-police planning. Also, those needs pertaining to the overarching area of legal concerns are discussed. The summary and conclusions include implications for research and service.

**Literature review: IPV context**

Both personally and socially, IPV is a particularly devastating and costly crime due, in part, to the long-term nature of its impact. Survivors often face a flood of legal, medical, housing, employment, childcare, and daily-living needs. Several public and private agencies are involved in their efforts to leave or lessen the impact of abusive relationships. Often hampered by depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Dutton, Green, Kaltman, Roesch, Zeffiro, & Krause, 2006; Houry, Kaslow, & Thompson, 2005), survivors have 50% to 70% more problems with their physical health (Campbell, Jones, Dienemann, Kub, Schollenberger, O’Campo, & Gielen, 2002, p. 1157) than their counterparts. The act of seeking help can actually undermine healing, particularly when the response is judgmental (Morrison, Luchok, Richter, & Parra-
Medina, 2006) leaving survivors feeling “guilty, depressed, anxious, distrustful of others, and reluctant to seek further help” (Campbell & Raja, 2005, 97).

Although IPV occurs in all socioeconomic communities (Heise & Garcia-Moreno, 2002), it has a disproportionate impact on those who lack the financial independence and legal resources to win the often lengthy fights for both personal safety and family rights in civil and criminal courts (Gillis, Diamond, Jebely, Orekhovsky, Ostovich, MacIsaac, Sagrati, et al, 2006). Those who can completely relocate may avoid these legal efforts but they will still require a degree of financial self-sufficiency that is generally unavailable to those who have been prevented from gaining an education and/or job as well as those who have primary financial and parenting responsibilities for young children (Wenzel, Tucker, Hambarsoomian, & Elliot, 2006; Datner, Wiebe, Brensinger, & Nelson, 2007). Black and Hispanic couples experience four to six times as many severe IPV attacks as their White counterparts (Caetano, Field, Ramisety-Mikler, & McGrath, 2005, 1039).

The social and workplace costs of this crime are also substantial, calling on government and private resources that, in some cases, are stretched past capacity by the prevalence of the problem (Centers for Disease Control, 2003). In addition to the annual medical and mental health costs (over $4 billion) and the lost productivity in terms of both workdays and lifetime earnings (over $8 billion), legal and social service resources are used daily to stop the generational cycle of abuse (Centers for Disease Control, 2003; Reeves & O’Leary-Kelly, 2007, 328). About 40% to 60% of abusers who have children will also abuse those children who, in their turn, develop major problems that again call
on social resources (Goelman, 2004; Jarvis & Novaco, 2006; Nelson, Nygren, McInerney, & Klein, 2004).

Studies indicate that 85% of IPV is male on female crime (Rennison, 2001; McClennen, 2005). Often under-reported and always difficult to measure (Waltermaurer, 2005; Bonomi, Thompson, Anderson, Rivara, Holt, Carrell, & Martin, 2006), IPV attacks against almost 5.3 million U.S. women aged 18 and older occur annually (Centers for Disease Control, 2003). Far from passive in dealing with the abuse, many of these women have developed a range of techniques for escaping abusers, protecting their children, contacting police, and trying to adjust or end their relationships safely (Elizabeth, 2003; Goodkind, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2004; Gillum, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2006).

While simply leaving might seem an obvious solution, the financial, legal, custodial, emotional, and safety issues can make even a small step, such as reporting the crime, extremely difficult for many survivors (Fugate, Landis, Riordan, Naureckas, & Engel, 2005). Torn between fear of their partners and a desire to protect them (Felson, Messner, Hoskin, & Deane, 2002), survivors may hesitate to call the police out of shame, guilt for having “provoked” the abuse, or sympathy for the abuser’s life problems (Anderson, Gillig, Sitaker, McCloskey, Malloy, & Grigsby, 2003; Zink, Jacobson, Pabst, Regan, & Fisher, 2006).

The point of separation is actually one of the most dangerous; estrangement is a primary risk factor in the murder of IPV victims (Campbell, Webster, Koziol-McLain, Block, Campbell, Curry, Gary, et al. 2003b, 1089; Dugan, Nagin, & Rosenfeld, 2003). Unfortunately, many of those at the greatest risk of being murdered will continually underestimate the degree of their vulnerability (Campbell, 2004). Before any permanent,
effective change can occur, survivors must be prepared both cognitively and affectively (Felson, Messner, Hoskin, & Deane, 2002; Shurman & Rodriguez, 2006).

**Literature review: IPV survivor information-seeking**

Only limited research has addressed the information interactions of IPV survivors. Their general preference for informal, rather than highly structured, information and support networks has been recognized for a quarter century (Grayson & Smith, 1981; Harris & Dewdney, 1994; Harris, Stickney, Grasley, Hutchinson, Greaves, & Boyd, 2001; Peckover, 2003; Gillum, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2006). The landmark 1994 publication of Roma Harris and Patricia Dewdney’s *Barriers to Information: How Formal Help Systems Fail Battered Women* identified 18 separate problems (p. 79) and 23 different entities that were expected to provide help (p. 80). Conducted in Canada in a pre-Internet information world, this study highlighted the range of problems encountered by survivors in their efforts to connect to appropriate information resources. For example, telephone directory entries that were expected to lead to aid often did not exist at all or led to entities that were not prepared to provide the type of aid sought (Harris & Dewdney, 1994, 92). Survivors were expected to need information on a place to stay, emotional support, professional counseling, money, protection, police assistance, medical attention, resources for children, and more (Harris & Dewdney, 1994, 79). Survivors were expected to get help from the obvious sources (e.g., women’s shelters, friends, and the police) as well as less common sources (e.g., taxi companies, the YMCA, and Alcoholics Anonymous) (Harris & Dewdney, 1994, 80).
More recently, a handful of studies examined the contextual factors in IPV information interactions. In order for survivors to obtain concrete assistance, three layers of service providers must be identified and managed: emergency aid (e.g., police), IPV-focused aid (e.g., shelters), and specialty social services for the general population (e.g., mental health services) (Harris, Stickney, Grasley, Hutchinson, Greaves, & Boyd, 2001). Email reference queries to public libraries generally yield some useful information but offer no cyber-safety instruction and little affective support (Westbrook, 2006). Some IPV survivors who use an electronic bulletin board need information on finances, law, mental health, domestic violence, and logistics; they use a rich array of resources to obtain what they seek (Westbrook, 2007). The nation’s police departments are using web sites to inform IPV survivors of their rights and the services which may be of use to them, but that coverage is incomplete and rarely emphasizes essential points (Westbrook, 2008). Certainly a better understanding of these information needs would help to make the most effective use of the scarce resources available.

Theoretical perspective

Given the relatively thin body of research on IPV information interactions and survivors’ urgent focus on their daily lives, the theoretical lens for this study lies in Jennifer Dunne’s “person-in-progressive-situation” model (2002). Proposed as a means of learning more about the progressive and complex information needs of IPV survivors, this model’s strength is its focus on the relationships among situations in which people find themselves. Dunne’s model is explicitly built from Bryce Allen’s “person-in-

The ELIS model presents active information-seeking as a problem-solving, life-mastery skill. The “mastery of life” aspect of ELIS is particularly relevant to IPV survivors who work at “keeping things in order” (Savolainen, 1995, 264, 259) against great odds. Integrating the cognitive and affective dimensions of human information interactions, the ELIS model values “practically effective information” (p. 272) as a means of restoring order to everyday life.

The crisis aspect of IPV experiences, however, requires that aspect of ELIS work that maximizes a focus on personal context as Allen’s person-in-situation model does (1997). Information needs must be examined in terms of their triggers (e.g., a survivor is stalked, which leads to a need for information on personal safety options) and their affective elements (e.g., fear of the abuser outweighs shame at telling a stranger about being stalked). This model puts the analytic lens directly on the nexus of cognitive and affective situational elements which frame IPV survivor’s information seeking. Both personal and situation constraints (Allen, 1997, 120-121) influence information-seeking choices of individuals.

Acknowledging the enormous impact of those constraints, Dunne’s “person-in-progressive-situation” model (2002) was proposed specifically to address the situational changes faced by IPV survivors as they move towards some form of a safer life, such as temporary shelter living, complete separation, or moving to a new state. Although the “progression” involved may be less of a trajectory and more of a foray/return for some
survivors, the connections among situations require analysis as part of the individual’s information context.

Applying the person-in-progressive-situation model to the information needs of IPV survivors requires that a firm relationship between the “situations” and the “information needs” be established. The situations can, of course, be parsed differently depending on the actor (e.g., survivor, shelter staffer, police officer), context (e.g., civil law, criminal law, shelter stay), or life circumstances (e.g., having children, a job, legal immigration status). The three progressive situations explicated later in the “Findings” section emerged directly from the data of this study: initial consideration of a life change, during shelter and/or criminal justice engagement, post-shelter or post-shelter planning. They are quite broad as befits the wide scope and limitations of this study but they were universally recognized by all actors regarding all contexts and all life circumstances.

In information science, a confusion about the definition of “information needs” is virtually axiomatic (Wilson, 2006; Case, 2006). The broader arena of “information concerns” alluded to in the title of this study includes information needs, user preferences, relevance criteria, information inaccuracies, and other factors involved in information experiences; as the subtitle indicates, only information needs are addressed in this article. Those needs are defined, for the purposes of this study, in terms of the person-in-progressive-situation model’s focus on using “practically effective information” in order to make progress towards moving from one situation to the next situation. Thus information needs in this context constitute those verbalized gaps in knowledge or understanding that hinder movement towards a desired goal. The information needs may have been recognized as such by the survivors or diagnosed as
such by the police and/or shelter staff but some ability to identify a gap is essential. Survivors progress through situations that regularly engender or trigger information needs.

**Research question**

This study identifies the information needs of the survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV) from the perspective of the survivors themselves and of the two groups of first responders who are most involved in their active contemplation of and movement towards change, namely shelter staff and police officers. (Given the small number of participants, no effort is made to compare the perspectives of survivors with those of the first responders.) Within that context, this study addresses the following research question:

- What are the information needs of Intimate Partner Violence survivors who are in contact with domestic-abuse shelters and police departments?

Future studies are needed to address the information needs of IPV survivors who are *not* already in the shelter system or in contact with police departments. Their information needs may be quite different from those identified in this study.

**Research method**

The data derive from a series of in-depth, in-person interviews. Over a ten-week period, interviews were held with 24 shelter staff, 14 police officers, and 19 shelter clients in ten cities. All of the shelter staff and clients were female; all of the police officers were male with one exception. The cities were purposefully selected to
maximize demographic diversity in terms of total population size, immigrant population size, number of square miles, and geographic location. Urban, suburban, and rural cities were included in ten different counties. Three of the five regions of Texas were included. Access to the major safe house and the police department for each city was sought via postal mail. In two cases the only safe house for the city was actually a regional entity and was located in neighboring rural town. The original intention was to obtain access to seven sites, and for this purpose ten communities were approached. When all ten agreed to participate the study was expanded to take advantage of this extended access.

The interviews included five to seven open-ended questions designed to elicit primary information concerns and needs. The first-responders were asked questions designed to elicit explanations of the types of information requested, needed, and provided in initial and follow-up contacts with IPV survivors, along with any difficulties encountered. Survivors were asked how they learned about the shelter, what information they needed currently, what advice concerning information they would give to new shelter clients, what suggestions concerning information they would give to shelter staff, and what information resources or systems have worked well for them. All participants were also invited to share any other information matters that they deemed important. These questions were, of course, properly phrased to avoid jargon, invite full participation, and ease clarification interactions.

At all shelters the director or staff administrator in most direct contact with shelter clients was interviewed; in several cases, additional staff volunteered to be interviewed as well. At most shelters, the director permitted shelter clients to be interviewed, either
those who were simply available and willing at the time or volunteers who had made special arrangements to be there during the site visit. At two sites, the shelter director specifically wanted the perspectives of shelter clients who spoke only Spanish to be included in the study. In both instances the necessary translations were handled by a bilingual, shelter staffer. At all police departments the police chief indicated the officer most closely charged with addressing IPV in the community for the interview. In four instances, additional police officers or civilian police employees in Victim Services volunteered to participate by virtue of their teamwork with the primary interviewee or their position as someone who worked heavily on IPV cases.

A total of 63 hours of audio-taped interviews were transcribed resulting in a total of 106,530 words. Personal histories and detailed descriptions of abuse were not transcribed or analyzed as part of the overarching effort to insure that no quotation could inadvertently identify an individual.

The data were analyzed using the constant-comparison method of content analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 339-344). Individual statements were classed into emergent categories that arose from the data, rather than being structured in advance of analysis. These coding categories were constantly compared to each other, as were the statements classed within each, so that the codes were gradually refined, clarified, defined, and exemplified to create directional, mutually exclusive codes. When several phenomena were indicated in a single piece of text, multiple codes were applied to the same text. Within the codes developed for each type of phenomenon, however, all codes were mutually exclusive rather than overlapping. Where relevant, codes were also directional
in nature to indicate, for example, affinity for or reluctance to use a particular information channel.

The criteria used to identify the information needs were rooted in the search for, desire for, or explicit lack of “practically effective information.” The act of searching for information was unambiguously described by survivors, police, and shelter staff in terms of activities and/or intentions to engage in activities. Desiring information was commonly described in all three groups in terms of frustrations so profound that little or no active searching took place but the desire was, nevertheless, clearly recognized.

Finally, shelter staff and police described the explicit lack of “practically effective information” in their observations of survivors. In addition, many survivors made statements which so clearly indicated a lack of information that those items were coded as such even though there was no intention to search for or a desire for the information. In some of these cases, the information need was so bound up with the fear of asking that nothing else mattered. For example, some survivors’ understanding of emergency protective orders was, by their own description, quite incomplete, indicating a need for information; however, they were so afraid of having the emergency protective orders lead to their abusers locating them that they neither sought the information nor desired to have it. Having that information may not, of course, lead to seeking the emergency protective orders; *not* having it, however, means that decisions are based on incomplete and/or inaccurate information.

Statements of seeking and desiring information were readily coded as such. Explicit observations that survivors lacked information from police and shelter staff were readily coded as such. Examples of survivors actually lacking information were coded as such.
only when “practically effective information” was clearly and fundamentally imperative for progression towards a safer life situation or for making informed decisions about whether or not to continue that movement.

HyperResearch was used to track the codes that grew from the interviews in a reiterative process over three cycles of code development. A total of 467 unique codes developed from the interview data and were applied a total of 3,259 times. Two interviews were chosen at random and re-coded from scratch; that coding was then compared with the original coding to determine the level of coding consistency. A code-recode consistency rate of 93% was obtained, exceeding the standard for this trustworthiness indicator (Miles & Huberman, 1994, 64).

In order to make explicit the degree to which confidentiality is maintained in this study, the quotations below deliberately fail to include any identifying information. Even the pseudonyms chosen by participants are omitted. While most of the statements are reproduced exactly as given, a few minor changes have been made for brevity or clarity when no substantive alteration in tone or content resulted.

The limitations include those common to qualitative studies although each is mitigated whenever possible. Only one coder’s perspective on the data is included; other scholars may have identified additional codes and/or applied them somewhat differently. That single-coder perspective is enriched, however, by the breadth of communities and individuals involved. The two translations by shelter staff may well have inhibited a full expression of information concerns that related to the shelter; the survivors probably hesitated to say anything negative about the shelter to a shelter staffer. The use of a staff translator, however, was more emotionally comfortable for the
survivors than involving an additional stranger in the interviews. Although undoubtedly limited, these translations did provide culturally relevant insights of great value. The state of Texas, as well as each of the involved communities, has its own social, cultural, and political perspective on domestic violence; the same study conducted in, say, Maine or Utah might find somewhat different results. Nevertheless, by utilizing ten different sites and three different stakeholder groups this study provides substantive depth and breadth. Of course the data are not nor are they meant to be statistically valid as a means of accurately representing the IPV survivor information experiences in any population.

**Context of the findings**

In reviewing the information needs that are explicated in the “Findings” sections below, it must be recognized that many shelters and victim services programs already make significant efforts to meet these needs. This analysis of information needs is not an indictment of either the shelter or police services. For survivors to say that they need information that has already been provided may indicate, among many other possibilities, that they recognize the need as a need worth sharing, that their information-seeking skills or information-management skills are still developing, or that they were not yet ready to absorb the information at the time it was first proffered. Also some cities in this study were too small and/or under-funded to be able to provide some of this information for their survivors.

In addition, the police function under significant legal restrictions that limit their information interactions and the services they can provide to survivors. Their actions are strictly bound by what the law permits them to do, regardless of their own willingness to
assist victims as fully as possible. They are not trained, funded, staffed, or hired as social workers. As the following analysis makes clear, survivors are sometimes confused and frustrated by these restrictions, despite all that police and shelter staff can do to help clarify matters for them. Survivors are in a state of crisis, sometimes suffering from PTSD, and frequently unfamiliar with the complexities of the criminal and civil justice systems. Police do a great deal to help survivors understand the restrictions placed on their actions, but they usually encounter the survivor at the time of the greatest emotional stress, which makes the initial information dissemination effort extremely problematic.

In terms of survivor confusions, the primary police restrictions pertain to (a) arrest evidence, (b) enforcement of civil law, (c) filing charges against an abuser, and (d) updates on the criminal justice process.

a) In Texas, police are able to and, within limits, required to arrest abusers, but they are legally restricted in their options by the requirement that the evidence for such an arrest must be worthwhile. For example, a woman who has been choked may defend herself by biting. Since bruises take time to form, police who respond quickly to a call may see bite marks on him and no marks on her. That evidentiary issue can, in some circumstances, lead to her arrest. Police often take great care to help survivors understand that if they continually document their abuse by repeatedly calling police, that documentation becomes part of the evidentiary decision-making process. Nevertheless, the restriction does cause confusion for some survivors.

b) The distinction between civil and criminal law is often confusing for survivors. Police are able to enforce criminal law but not, in general, civil law so that police are actually prohibited from actions that some survivors see as their responsibility. For
example, restraining orders are civil but protective orders are criminal; police can not enforce the former but they can the latter. From the viewpoint of a survivor whose spouse has just taken their child out of school unexpectedly, the police will help at times (e.g., if a protective order is on file and includes the child) but not at others (e.g., if only a civil restraining order is in effect).

c) Filing charges against an abuser is not an automatic act in all situations. A survivor can report abuse, talk to the police when they arrive, and receive documentation from the police. All of that, however, does not mean that charges have been filed. Although police may do their best to explain, both verbally and through documentation, the process that leads to filing charges, survivors frequently have problems understanding the nuances of the information they receive on this point.

d) Finally, the police may have some small influence over but never have any control over the rest of the criminal justice process. The district attorneys determine what cases will be prosecuted on what timeline. Police are not necessarily kept informed of that process or the outcomes. Since they are the first contact for survivors, however, police are often seen as the conduit to all of that information.

In all four cases, police, shelter staff, and survivors mentioned the difficulty inherent in such situations with a primary solution being a matter of information. This context helps to position the following findings in terms of the situations which survivors face.

**Findings on information needs**

Information is needed, and provided, in a number of areas directly related to the various situations faced by survivors as they handle critical daily matters such as
childcare, legal procedures, employment, and health. In each of these areas, survivors, shelter staff, and/or police officers recognized a life situation with a significant information component; these information needs pertain to the three broad situations, explained below, which were identified by all participants. These well-recognized situations (Kaukinen, 2004; Panchanadeswaran & McCloskey, 2007) faced by many IPV survivors were brought up, explained, and exemplified by all participants (survivors, police, and shelter staff) in terms of the information needs involved. Each of the three progressive situations explicated below involves an array of information needs that may bleed across or even tie directly to other situations. Each of these needs is explained in terms of the contextual factors so critical to progress-situation analysis and exemplified by participant statements.

**Initial consideration of a life change**

The initial progressive situation, considering a life change, arises when those first steps into the shelter and police support systems encourage survivors to consider making some type of change in their current life situation. That actual change, if it is ever made, may be anything from filing charges to temporary separation to divorce. The initial consideration of that change, however, is a much smaller step. Just considering the possibility of change generally creates four types of information need: abuse, the shelter, the police, and money. The cultural and world-view perspectives of survivors (Luna-Firebaugh, 2006; Ingram, 2007; Whitaker, Baker, Pratt, Reed, Suri, Pavlos, et al., 2007) as well as their personal circumstances (e.g., number of children, employment, abuse
(history) made each experience unique. Nevertheless, these four information needs were brought up in all ten cities and by members of all three groups.

**Abuse information:** Many need to understand what abuse is in legal terms as well as in terms of their own sense of self-worth. Survivors need to understand the nature, patterns, and cycle of abuse in order to recognize it as abuse. Understanding the escalating nature of abuse, particularly tactics used in the honeymoon phase, is important to developing a minimal sense of control over the situation. Understanding what exactly constitutes abuse can help survivors to recognize and verbalize concerns. That ability is critical in the face of the abusers’ efforts to minimize problems (e.g., “You’re not bleeding so it’s not abuse”) or escape responsibility for the abuse (e.g., “I wouldn’t have had to hit you if you’d had supper ready on time”).

- *I didn't want to see what my life was. I can't open my eyes. I basically needed information she [a shelter staffer] had.* (Survivor)
- *A domestic violence victim 9 times out of 10 doesn't quite see [themselves as the victim of a criminal act]. They see it as because of their actions or inactions this is why this particular thing happened to them, so they need to be educated about what's going on.* (Police Officer)
- *Probably the first thing that they are confused about is how a person who loves them can hurt them continually. So a lot of ideas about … that no one deserves to be treated the way they're treated.* (Shelter Staffer)

**Shelter and its services information:** Despite the increased number of full-service shelters and great strides in bridging people into shelters, many survivors are still unaware of the shelters, how to find them, and what services they offer. The high
quality of shelters, the expertise of shelter staff, and the wide array of services available in some communities also require information dissemination.

• *I've had some ladies say that they didn't even know this place was here until the police brought them over.* (Shelter Staffer)

• *I knew there was homeless shelters, but I didn't realize there was shelters for battered women.* (Survivor)

**Police – how to work with them information:** In those first interactions with the police, many survivors benefit from understanding how to work with them. Knowing what to ask, what is possible, and how to follow through on different procedures (e.g., filing charges) become part of that initial contemplation of major change. Properly working with the police can increase their physical safety, document their cases, and launch criminal justice proceedings. Information on these tactics and strategies is difficult to glean and lessons often come too late.

• *One thing that comes to mind that made my life easier is the card that the sergeant, he kind of counseled me, “if you're serious about changing your life you will do this, this, and this. You will document, you will report.”* I had the support of this particular sergeant and I'd pull out his card and say, “this sergeant suggested I do A, B, and C.” It validated my call to them. It made my life easier having that card, that kind of said, “I'm not a crazy person, I really have a reason for calling you out.” It puts you in a different light with them. (Survivor)

• *They called me and they were telling me I didn't qualify [for victim’s compensation] because I didn't make a police report. Well, [I had called] the*
police and told them what happened. How come they didn't make a report?

(Survivor)

Money information: As ELIS suggests, the use of information to solve concrete, daily problems depends, in part, on mastery of information resources. The issue of finding sufficient money to provide shelter and food may be the most fundamental exemplar. Some survivors think in terms of economic assistance to pay basic bills and meet special expenses, such as a child’s medical needs. Others are dealing with bad credit and even bankruptcy. Clear and explicit information on the agencies set up to help them manage some of these problems is doubly helpful. First, it moves some of them from thinking in terms of what the abuser provides (such as a paycheck) towards what the agencies can provide (such as food stamps or debt counseling). Making alternatives realistic and practical is an essential aspect of moving forward with consideration of a major change. Second, it supports their independence since they must be actively engaged in using the system (Felson, Messner, Hoskin, & Deane, 2002). The fear of not having enough money for survival essentials, however, can be paralyzing.

• [A common question we get is], “I'm scared I don't have any money to assist me. I'm having problems trying to relocate or move to a safer place and I just don't have the money. Are there services out there that can provide this for me?”

(Police Officer)

• Once they find out that they don't have money to pay the bills, to pay the rent, to buy the clothes, meals for the kids, then this is very, very hard for them, so they decide to go back with the husband. That's one of the main things. (Survivor)
*During shelter and/or criminal justice engagement*

The second progressive situation, engagement with the formal support systems of the police and shelters, introduces a new layer of information needs. Survivors are able to look ahead to some extent and also look at the abuse results a little more closely. That increased perspective can lead to questions about benefits, their children, relocation or transportation, and medical care. Solid information can, in many cases, lower the affective load of stress, tension, and anxiety (Nahl, 2005).

**Benefits information:** Although government benefits are often essential to economic escape from an abuser, the complexities of applying for and documenting the right to benefits can be daunting, especially for those who have had to relocate.

- *One of the ladies here who's new, she's never been on Medicare or any assistance, [but] we're able to help her out and let her know the ropes on how to get certain things.* ( Survivor, speaking of how survivors help each other)

- *Like for instance I heard you can get compensation for being abused, but I heard that through the word of one of us. They need to let us know about that up front.*

  (Survivor)

**Children’s concerns information:** The needs regarding children vary from the concrete (e.g., government aid, daycare) to the internal (e.g., learning parenting techniques for traumatized children). Information resources are not always available on the entire spectrum of needs but many survivors are willing to make extensive efforts to get this information.
• *What's been hardest for her is getting control of her children. They're always looking for somebody to blame for everything that's happened and she's the closest one to them, so they blame her. So that's the hardest thing for her. She actually would like information on that.* (Survivor via shelter staff translator)

**Relocation - other shelters, other cities information:** Some survivors are eager to learn about the possibilities of evading stalking or physical attacks by going to a shelter in another city. Others want to learn about the possibility of shifting to another shelter if transitional or low-cost housing is not available by the time their shelter term ends.

• *They need a listing to other shelters too. Because your time runs out here and you cannot do it in 30-60 days. The only place they refer you to is Salvation Army.* (Survivor)

**Transportation information:** Getting around to search for work, apply for social service support, and meet children’s needs is difficult in terms of both logistics (which bus to take and how to take it) and personal safety. Accurate information can be quite useful but is not always readily available.

• *[The information sheet they gave us] would say “places to get food.” But what it should have said was the bus numbers to get there ... So more information. They could put all that on a computer page, couldn't they?* (Survivor)

• *My abuser looks for me at the bus stop.* (Survivor)

**Medical care information:** Physical health, mental health, and substance-abuse care are frequently needed to deal with the aftermath of repeated abuse. Having information about the qualifications and specialties of those caregivers as well as some control over which ones to work with can be productive.
• *They could have more information on hand. … They don't know all the information a person would probably need to know. I would want to know what kind of doctor I'm going to be dealing with. I would like to know different things about a doctor so that I could … see the best person …. (Survivor)*

• *MHMR [Mental Health and Mental Retardation] for the kids and adults; [we need] information on that. (Survivor)*

*Post-shelter, post-police planning*

Finally, the third progressive situation grows from knowing that the shelter stay is quite temporary - usually no more than 30-60 days. Survivors are strongly encouraged to start thinking of their post-shelter situation as soon as possible. At the same time, some of them are moving from working with police officers to working with attorneys. That naturally complicates their information needs in the areas of housing, jobs, education, and basics of setting up house.

**Housing information:** Housing information is in constant flux in most communities but it is essential for final separation from an abuser. The fact that it requires an income, documentation, and deposits adds to the complexities of finding information on acceptable options for someone with an IPV history. Those complexities take so much time to navigate and prepare for that some people want extensive information right away and others need emotional support to deal with the pain of explaining their situation to strangers as they pursue housing options.

• *With the housing, they don’t give you information for it until you've been here a little over a month, maybe 6 weeks. And if you have the resources or finances they...*
should automatically be telling you, “There's this and this.” Cause there's a lot of housing programs that I'm just finding out about that they haven't even mentioned to me. (Survivor)

**Jobs information:** The lynchpin of independence, jobs break down into three different types and information is needed on each of the three. First, opportunities to apply for traditional, full-time, permanent jobs are needed to provide long-term security. Second, temporary, day-labor opportunities are needed to build a basic financial reserve and to encourage initial efforts at independence while hunting for full-time work. Finally, in-home employment is needed for those who have too many children to afford daycare or those with immigration concerns.

- **It's very, very important to have all the information [on jobs]. The first step to take is to get the information since you're in your home and you're planning what you're going to do if you have the information. The information that's more important is that the person won't be deported, the [help is available to get] work, and the psychological orientation.** (Survivor)

**Education information:** Although less commonly mentioned, the long-term effort to gain sufficient education to obtain a higher-wage job requires information on the options, even if they are not immediately explored. The natural tension between short-term and long-term goals complicates the analysis of educational information.

- **I want to go back to school, but I don't see them saying, “This is what you need to do.” They haven't even brought it up. They want you to get a job.** (Survivor)
• We have some come in that are at 7th or 8th grade level and they want to become teachers. … We're talking about 6-7 years. … But we need to look at steps which are attainable and not set you up for failure. (Shelter Staffer)

Basics (e.g., clothing, furniture, and house wares) information: Shelters and even victim-services programs offer basic items or track agencies that offer them. Knowing that such services are available supports the survivor’s growing independence.

• Right now I’m getting ready to move into an apartment. I'm kind of looking for information on how to get furniture and house-wares and things like that right now. (Survivor)

Legal concerns in making a life change

During all three of these progressive situations, most survivors are also dealing with a complex array of both civil and criminal legal information. Often ill-prepared to navigate the arcane language of the information disseminated about these crucial matters, they seek information on children, court procedures, Child Protective Services (CPS), criminal procedures, divorce, documenting abuse, documents, their own criminal records, and – of utmost importance – protection from their abuser.

Child custody, support, visitation information: The information on these issues needs to be kept in step with the criminal proceedings. Savvy abusers will delay criminal proceedings to avoid having criminal records as they move ahead on the civil front. In many cases, survivors feel overwhelmed, fearful, or blind-sided by the use of children’s issues as a weapon. Some do not know who to ask for what kind of
information since these civil matters are, from their perspective, integral to the
criminal matters.

• A lot of times officers will get called to the scene, asked questions of child
custody…. We'll let them know, “You need to contact an attorney or some other
organization that can help you with that but we can't really advise you on issues
of child custody or anything like that.” (Police Officer)

• We had a call last week, “My husband has the child and we're going through a
divorce.” Well, all I can tell you is too bad. What you should have done is gone
to the attorney general and set up your child support even if you were just
separated…. But you didn't. Ok, what I can tell you now is act like you want to
get back together with him and try to get back together with him if you want your
child back. And as soon as you’re able to, run with your child. … And we tell
them, “You watch your child like a hawk because he's going to try to steal that
child to get control of you.” (Shelter Staffer)

Court and police procedures information: Basic information on court proceedings,
both civil and criminal, can be critical to a survivor’s ability to complete the process
from the affective, cognitive, and behavioral perspectives. Affectively, many have a
fear of the unknown, of facing the abuser, of making mistakes in the courtroom, and
of being manipulated by the legal system. Cognitively, they need information from
the legal or criminal justice domain to determine matters such as what the police can
and cannot do for them. Behaviorally, they are less likely to return to the abuser
when they are able to complete court and police procedures effectively.
• The legal process is definitely something that is problematic. I think that a lot of it is just that unknown and just the fact that if you don't have an advocate with you or someone that can really guide you through that. They end up just going to court and being confused. Because the court system isn't set up to help inform you every step of the way; it's just following its proceedings. (Shelter Staffer)

• Court is very intimidating. They have to face their abuser. … They're afraid of anything they don't understand and they don't understand the legal system at all. (Shelter Staffer)

Child Protective Services (CPS) information: CPS is used as a threat by abusers and, occasionally, by police. CPS can be called even if no charges were filed against the abuser. In addition, there are certainly occasions when children are in danger and CPS must be involved. Understanding the parameters of CPS jurisdiction can alter the relationship from adversarial to cooperative.

• If your child was there when your spouse picked up the knife and your child saw that, we're obligated to call CPS. And that's our policy. That's not really a state law. That's our policy and we choose it. (Police Officer)

• There are some concerns that their children will be taken away. That once they open the door of exposing their life that somehow CPS and entities that can get involved with children will potentially remove their kids or see them as unfit moms in particular. And that's not necessarily not true. (Shelter Staffer)

Criminal procedures information: For both immediate and planning purposes, survivors need information on the basics of the following criminal procedures: filing and dropping charges; getting, using, and canceling protective orders; getting
emergency protective orders; and filing reports. Unfortunately, much of that information must be given at a time of crisis and it can be given in purely legal language. Additionally, survivors need help in seeing their active role in the process since their responsibilities are not obvious.

- [Shelter staff] talked to me about [protective orders], but I never had the courage to get up there and do anything like that ‘cause I didn't know if it's gonna take time or money. I never even went and asked anything about it. (Survivor)

**Divorce and property information:** Effective, affordable legal aid for divorce and/or property settlement is difficult to obtain. In some of the smaller communities of this study, the town’s most effective legal counsel was part of the abuser’s social network. Frequently the IPV survivor has been denied the opportunity to hold a job so that simply retaining an attorney requires far more money than is available. Finding any accurate information on how best to document, prepare for, and anticipate the divorce process can be valuable, as can emotional support.

- A lot of them want to get a divorce and get out but they can't afford it. So they'll give them that type of information for the [free] legal services. (Police, referring to Victim Services Officer)

**Documenting abuse information:** Proper, effective documentation can mean the difference between safety and danger, between keeping and losing the children. Learning how best to capture that information can be critical. Most advice on documentation, however, is given out piecemeal and in response to limited situations as different agencies in the support system do their part to help.
• Well, she got hit 10 times in the past, but she didn't call the police and the lady is saying, “This is has been an ongoing problem, I finally have decided to call the police.” And there's no documentation, there's no police reports, no prior police reports, no prior arrest reports, no prior calls to 911. She's taking it and taking it and taking it and finally she calls the police. Well, the judge goes, “You don't have enough for a protective order.” And you and I both know that they do, but most judges start out as defense attorneys and they have a different mindset.

(Police Officer)

Documents information: Keeping track of and getting proper copies of legal identification, children’s birth certificates, school records, and so on can be essential to obtaining basic social services. Gathering and hiding these documents in advance of escape is often included in safety planning advice. If the documents are left behind, however, managing to get them afterwards can be frustrating.

• When you go in to the office and you want to apply for emergency assistance, it's best to have every information on hand that they're gonna basically ask for. … For instance proof of residency; they give you a letter of residency here. Proof of any kind of income coming in, whether it's disability, child support, income from your job. … I told [another survivor] to make sure she had the children's social security cards on her and their birth certificates and some kind of ID - her ID, her social security, and her birth certificate and the kids’ as well. (Survivor)

Own criminal record information: Sometimes survivors have criminal records as a result of or directly related to their abuse history. Once that criminal record is on file,
then everything else becomes difficult, from housing to employment. Information on clearing such a record might encourage survivors to move ahead.

- *Now I have a criminal history. .. Now it's hard for me to do anything, get a job, get help with housing, get help with anything.* (Survivor)

**Protection from abuser information:** Understanding the techniques for and limitations of gaining legal protection from the abuser can be difficult when simple answers are not consistently available. Nevertheless, marshalling information on the array of services and options can help some survivors make the choice to move towards a safer life.

- *I've heard people say, “I can't file charges against him. He'll come back and he'll hurt me.” I say, “That's why we need to put a 24 hour hold on him. You need to get a protective order. Then you might want to consider moving someplace else where he doesn't know where you are. Unfortunately no, we can't protect everybody 24 hours a day. We have to respond to what's happening and you need to get yourself out of this situation.”* (Police Officer)

*Immigration-related information needs*

In addition, a particular subpopulation has special information needs that tie strongly to their legal status but also have roots in social and cultural factors. In addition to all the above-mentioned needs, immigrants may well face additional concerns arising from their immigration status, their lack of understanding of their rights in an unfamiliar legal system, language barriers, and concerns for their children. Although everyone involved may well rely on different information resources to meet these needs, police and shelter
staff did identify the same key information needs that survivors mentioned. Three kinds of information needs were commonly mentioned: legal information on cross-border abuse, legal information on immigration, and basic information on available resources.

**Abuse outside and within the U.S. information:** Since the abuse crosses national boundaries, survivors may be dealing with multiple sets of legal and social service information.

- *It's also helpful to have people know it's national, that … if your situation happened in another place, we'll help you make a report. The violence happened in Mexico and when she got here we helped her file a report in Mexico.* (Survivor via shelter staff translator)

**Immigration or residency information:** The abuse fear may be overwhelmed by the deportation fear. Having information that specifically addresses that deportation fear directly and in some detail can be useful.

- *They're afraid of deportation] especially if the husband is from here and she's an illegal alien. And we tell them, “That's not what we're here for and, in fact, there are programs that are set up to protect you because you're an illegal alien. We're not going to throw you back; you're a witness.” Make sure they know there's programs out there; they don't have to take the abuse.* (Police Officer)

**Resources information:** The basic concept of abuse as illegal may be just as unfamiliar as the array of services available. Factual, clear, detailed information in the appropriate language can be effective.

- *When you get into the shelter for the first time, you don't know nothing about anything.... So everything that she received at the shelter, counseling, protection,
everything, she didn't know. (Survivor, self-identified as an immigrant, via shelter staff translator)

Overlapping information needs

Finally, all of these information needs in all four of these broad categories overlap.

Consider the all-too-common case of a mother with preschool children. To get a job she needs childcare, which depends on documented immunizations, which depend on access to medical care, which depends on transportation. The needs may overlap so thoroughly that just tracking the requirements, hours, addresses, and phone numbers of all the different agencies can be a major problem. Certainly the combination of needs can be discouraging.

- [They have a chance] to find out what responsibilities are going to fall on them, as far as paying bills, making sure everybody's clothed and fed. A lot of these women don't know anything about these responsibilities because all that control was taken from them. Their decision skills are nil because they're not allowed to make decisions for themselves. (Shelter Staffer)

Summary and conclusions

This study's significance lies in the depth of data that result from its triangulation of perspectives. By working in three different regions of Texas and ten demographically different cities, this study triangulated community and cultural perspectives. By working directly with IPV survivors and two key stakeholder groups (i.e., the local police and the local domestic violence shelter staff), this study triangulated individual experiences from
multiple viewpoints. This multi-layered view of IPV survivor information needs at multiple sites helps fill one of the many gaps in our understanding of this population.

Information needs of IPV survivors who have interacted with police and/or shelter staff are rooted in a precarious balance between their immediate situations and their future goals. Survivors navigate between what is and what might be. That potential for significant change in their lives creates information needs concerning both the immediate basics of daily living and the decisions required for long-term change. While particular factors (e.g., immigration status, children) add layers of complexity to these needs, that underlying tension between the immediate and the long-term is involved in many information interactions. When major life changes become real possibilities for some survivors, then that potential future can create perceived information needs that are important to them (e.g., how to start getting a college education when they still need the G.E.D.) that outweigh their immediate information needs (e.g., how to support themselves and their children when they must leave the shelter).

On the immediate level, information needs arise at the first step away from violence in beginning to understand what constitutes abuse. The state mandates distribution of information to survivors by police at all domestic violence calls, and shelters frequently field calls on the nature of abuse from people who are not yet ready to move to the shelter. This essential information opens the door to contemplating and even actively seeking change.

The next progressive situation involves interacting with the first-responders who can be of assistance in getting away from the violence, i.e., the shelter staff and the police. Understanding the shelter system and services can be just as important as understanding
what police can and can not do for them. This bridge into the formal support systems requires survivors to articulate their needs, and that often centers on the essential need of money to pay for the basics of life from housing to food.

In the following progressive situation, survivors need information to help them function as shelter clients are encouraged to function, i.e., as self-reliant heads of household. They need information about the benefit structures established to support this function. Most of them need information as it applies to themselves and their children. A number of the children have specific, abuse-related needs involving school, health, and behavior. Those survivors who are staying in the area require transportation information so they can manage the benefit and child situations, while those who are trying to leave the area need relocation information. The neglected health consequences of abuse may also give rise at this point to medical information needs.

The final progressive situation examined in this study, post-intervention planning, recognizes that both shelter and police support are understood by all parties to be temporary resources. If survivors come to believe that they can live independently and safely, then the housing, job, education, and basics of living become primary areas of information need. Going back to Maslow’s hierarchy, survivors need information on a home, employment to pay for their essentials, an education to improve their lives, and those basics needed to launch that whole effort.

Throughout all of that daily-living work, most of them are also engaged in criminal and/or civil legal situations. Separation, divorce, property distribution, documentation, criminal charges against the abuser, custody arrangements, visitation arrangements, and that ever present, all-consuming need for fundamental physical safety require focused,
competent, knowledgeable interaction with criminal justice and civil legal systems. All of these systems move on their own schedule so that the survivors have little control over when they will need to suddenly get information about which procedure, form, system, documentation, or other factor.

As mentioned before, immigrants, both legal and undocumented, have an additional layer of information needs rooted both in their situation and, in some cases, their limited understanding of an unfamiliar legal system. Concerned for their children and often separated from their own family and social network, immigrant survivors may also face language and/or literacy barriers as they seek essential information on their rights in both criminal and civil courts.

Finally, every single individual in this study mentioned the constant overlap of information needs. It's just never one issue that we're having to deal with. It's just very very seldom do we have someone come to us, “I'm sorry, the only thing wrong with me is my husband is a batterer.” That just doesn't happen. (Shelter Staffer) People who have secure jobs, sufficient education, their own home, reliable transportation, a strong social network, supportive family, healthy children, competent legal representation, and effective medical care are not the ones who tend to go to police and shelters as a primary resource. For most survivors in this study, finding information on one problem simply generated a need for information on another problem.

Reflecting on the relationship between these findings and those of the original Harris and Dewdney (1994) study is paradoxical. On one hand, the information needs of IPV survivors have not changed much in almost a quarter of a century. Issues of escape, health, safety, law, and children still loom large. On the other hand, the rise in services
and resources has combined with significant changes in social attitudes towards IPV to create additional layers of need. Escape now involves several units within the criminal justice system, as well as civil court; safety now entails cyber-space, privacy, and other concerns that were simply not an aspect of the original study. While not at all surprising, the information needs delineated by this study have a level of complexity that requires further examination.

The person-in-progressive-situation model of ELIS theory provides a constructive analytic framework for examining the information needs of IPV survivors. The overlaps among their situations complicate the efforts of shelter staff and police to provide useful information. The affective responses to crises inhibit survivor efforts to effectively take in, understand, manage, and utilize information. The cognitive demands of IPV often frustrate survivors in their attempt to navigate government social service bureaucracies and the legal system. Further research should indicate specific service modifications that will enhance shelter and police efforts to meet the information needs of IPV survivors.

**Implications for Research and Service**

The IPV survivor information needs identified in this study include perspectives from survivors themselves, shelter staff, and police officers. All of these needs pertain to people who have interacted with the formal support system of shelter and/or police. These people who are within reach of the system have a complex, layered, situationally rooted set of information needs which can certainly be addressed to a limited extent.
As Figure 1 indicates, the needs in each of the three progressive situations vary in relationship to the changes that are possible in the survivor’s situation. Underpinning all of these situations, however, is the constant thread of legal information concerns.

This article deals only with the information needs of IPV survivors. The entire study, however, garnered substantive data on the factors that are woven into information needs, such as preferred and avoided resources, information myths, the relative roles of affective and cognitive support in information experiences, and information-seeking patterns and problems. Those additional findings will be reported in a separate article but this initial analysis of information needs generates implications on four matters: the role of ephemeral information, the need for process-based information, the potential role of public libraries, and the needs of those IPV survivors who are outside the system.

Much of the information is ephemeral and incompletely collected, particularly in low-income municipalities. Simply tracking governmental and private social service agency hours, rules, service parameters, and requirements is a labor-intensive and difficult undertaking. Which low-cost housing has openings? Which companies have temporary and full-time positions available? Which churches have openings in their low-cost daycare service? What documents do state agencies require for which service? Certainly the increasing use of the 211 system is a great help in many communities (Saxton, Naumer, Fisher, 2007) but further testing and expansion of that service would be useful for shelter staff and, to a limited extent, the police. A research study that gauges the accuracy of 211 services in terms of IPV survivor information needs could strengthen the system’s ability to meet crisis-context information requests. From the shelter
perspective, it would be productive to identify the most effective means of incorporating the use of 211 into both staff training and client orientation. That is, assuming the 211 service is efficient and accurate in a particular city, what is the most effective use that shelters can make of it?

In addition to the ephemeral information, much of what IPV survivors require is process oriented and requires careful adherence to procedures. What happens in court when the abuser contests a divorce, a protection order, or abuse charges? What is the correct process for obtaining mental health services for a teenager? Most of these processes involve possible variations and local-area rules that are too numerous to enumerate to an individual in crisis. Simply listing all the standard steps and common variations for the process of filing charges, for example, would require a complex flowchart with substantial explanatory notes. Usability research is needed on the more effective means of helping survivors move through these processes. What level of detail is most useful? When do videos of the inside of a courtroom provide reassurance and when does a checklist of required actions encourage behavioral change? What should come from the shelter staff, the police, and/or a web site? Using the person-in-progressive-situation framework, further research is needed to know how best to empower survivors to make their own decisions regarding legal, social service, and health care processes.

In terms of both ephemeral and complex process information, public library reference service could certainly provide effective information and referral service. Trained in use of the reference interview techniques to help people think through that which they do not know, librarians also possess powerful ethical directives which encourage them to both
respect survivor privacy and make sure that their needs are met. Unfortunately, librarians may not be as aware of the need for cyber-safety support as they should be (Westbrook, 2006), but their ability to obtain and explain information positions them to provide integrated support for survivors who must, otherwise, receive information somewhat piecemeal from those who tend to see information needs from one perspective, e.g., that of the shelter or that of the police. After developing and implementing a community-integrated service initiative in which the public library served as a one-stop information center for survivor information needs (including both ephemeral and process needs), a research study could evaluate the efficacy and impact of such an initiative. A prototype of such a system could inform the development of similar efforts for other crisis-based information needs -- both personal needs, such as elder abuse, and civic needs, such as tornado recovery.

Finally, this study entailed only the perspective of those who are in or part of the formal help-information system. What are the information needs of those who are not in touch with police or shelter staff? Where do they go for information and what might make the formal information systems more affectively or cognitively accessible for them? Perhaps most basic of all – what is needed to insure that they do know about these options and can actually reach them should they choose to do so? An initial examination of survivors who share information on a bulletin board (Westbrook, 2007) indicates that their needs vary somewhat from those identified in this study. They are, for example, somewhat more interested in means of ameliorating their abusers’ mental health and addiction problems as well as the potential effectiveness of court-ordered counseling for the abuser. Are the information needs identified among those bulletin-board users
typical or common? Do they mirror the needs of survivors who neither use such forums
nor interact with formal help systems?

The private crises that take place behind locked doors generate needs for moral
support, legal aid, health care, education, and information. Counselors, police, social
workers, emergency room staff, GED counselors, and shelter workers are usually far too
overworked to analyze, create, deliver, and evaluate the information systems they really
need. Information-studies scholars and public librarians, however, have the intellectual
and ethical capital needed to construct effective information support at the community
level.
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Austin Police Department
Bastrop Police Department
Casa de Misericordia, Laredo
Corpus Christi Police Department
Family Crisis Center, Bastrop
Highland Lakes Family Crisis Center, Marble Falls
Hill Country Crisis Council, Inc., Kerrville
Houston Area Women’s Shelter
Houston Police Department
Kerrville Police Department
Laredo Police Department
Marble Falls Police Department
SafePlace, Austin
Southwest Family Life Center, Hondo

Victoria Police Department

Women’s Shelter of South Texas, Corpus Christi

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References


Appendix A: Example of how findings are derived from coding

Obviously the enormous detail of complete coding records cannot be included herein and the findings, perforce, reflect the overarching themes revealed by the coding. To exemplify that process of moving from codes to findings, the following excerpts from the coding database are provided. The codes are only shorthand for the phenomena but the definitions and exemplars for the full set are available to interested scholars.

Illustrative finding:
During the first situation (i.e., initial consideration of a life change), many IPV survivors need information on abuse itself in order to understand what it is in legal terms and what it means to them, as well as its nature, patterns, and cycles.

Contributing codes:
- abuser tactic her control money job education
- abuser tactic her emotional manipulate honeymoon
- abuser tactic her emotional manipulate via put downs
- abuser tactic her isolate
- abuser tactic her retake home or lock her out of it
- abuser tactic her say police not believe her or not care
- abuser tactic her stalking physical phone email
- abuser tactic her threaten criminal charges
- abuser tactic her threaten deportation dumping
- abuser tactic her threaten no support for kids
- abuser tactic her threaten take kids alone or via court
- abuser tactic her threaten to prevent a divorce
- abuser tactic her threaten violence her kids
- abuser tactic kids manipulate to worry her
- affect believe honeymoon phase promises of reform
- affect fear abuser take or hurt kids
- affect good realize abuse is wrong
- ESL think abuse legal
- ESL culture says violence acceptable
- myth social victim causes violence abuse is ok
- myth social victim not abused if at all functional
- need info on abuse definition causes etc
- pd explain abuse as wrong abuse cycle give support
- resource want info on dv and law on it
- resource want info on VAWA
- stay return cuz abuser pitied seen as ill or abused
- stay return cuz believe or hope he will change love him
- stay return cuz do not know abuse illegal
- stay return cuz do not see it as abuse blame self
- stay return cuz family friends self say abuse normal
In order to maximize protection for all participants in this study, no individual is identified by name, geographical indicator, or other marker. Each quotation is identified only by the speaker’s role in the studies, i.e., Survivor, Shelter Staffer, or Police Officer.

“Cyber-safety” refers to the protections required in using the Internet in order to maintain privacy. For IPV survivors, cyber-safety can literally be a matter of life or death. Naïve users who, for example, use the family computer to search for a local safe-house can leave traces which an abuser reads. An increasing number of safe-house web sites actively support cyber-safety by using pop-up windows to warn of the potential danger; some even urge survivors to use computers at the local public library to hide their tracks. Obviously using e-mail, filling out e-government forms, filling out divorce forms online, using electronic bulletin boards, and similar acts also carry risk. Cyber-stalking is on the rise as abusers learn to use spy-ware and break password-protected files. Cyber-safety requires diligence, attention to detail, and technical knowledge.

An initial four-part model of such progressive situations among IPV survivors, complete with primary information need foci in each of the four parts, has been developed as an extension of this framework (Westbrook, 2008). Applied in the context of police department web site information provision for IPV survivors, the model exemplifies this person-in-progressive-situation approach to more fully understanding this population in crisis.

Providing the details on those variables would make identification of the sites possible and, therefore, the identity of shelter directors and police officers might be determined. The “Acknowledgements” section of the paper, however, includes the names of agencies which were willing to be publicly acknowledged and therefore illustrates the variety of sites visited.

For an example of the coding as it pertains to the broad themes reported in the “Findings” segment of this article, please see Appendix A.

Additional issues arose in the course of the interviews and analysis of those matters will be reported in a separate paper. The 467 codes provide an indication of the breadth of additional information issues and factors of interest to the study participants.

As requested by a reviewer, my “qualifications to conduct the study (in terms of methodology and the topic)” are mentioned here and detailed on my professional web site. In brief, they include a doctorate, several peer-reviewed research publications, and a book in which these methods were employed. My qualifications for studying the topic are not personal but rather based on the reading and research already completed in the field. This particular study was funded by a competitive grant from the University of Texas requiring letters of support for the research proposal from three outside reviewers.

The 211 system is analogous to the 911 system in many U.S. cities in that anyone can phone it at any time without charge, speak to a trained operator, and be given the appropriate assistance, in this case, the full contact information for a governmentnal or social service agency by topic. For example, in cities with the 211 system, a survivor could phone to find out if any local agency of any type (privately funded or governmental) provides low-income housing, clothing, meals, dental care, or other resources.