“I have lost everything”: Trade-offs of seeking safety from intimate partner violence

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Study background and significance

❖ Chief aim of our work has always been safety
❖ But increasingly – survivors come in with complex challenges
❖ Partner violence is one strand of a complex web of trauma, poverty, and oppression
❖ Addressing one strand affects entire web
  ❖ E.g. more violence, financial strain, residential instability, and custody battles
❖ How do survivors understand and weigh these strands in their search for safety?
Research Questions

Q1: To what extent and how does working towards safety affect other domains of survivors’ lives?

Q2: To what extent do survivors anticipate the challenges they face as they pursue safety?

Q3: How do survivors evaluate their safety-seeking efforts in light of retrospective knowledge of the new challenges such efforts produced?
Method

- Domestic Violence Program Evaluation and Research Collaborative: 2 researchers, 18 DV programs
- Design: Mixed method – qualitative and quantitative
- Participants: 301 survivors from 3 states –
- Overall focus: How do survivors think about safety
- Today’s focus: Trade-offs survivors experience in journey to safety
Method

- Trade-offs items (1-5 scale; always true-never true)
  - I have to give up too much to keep safe
  - Working to keep safe has created (or will create) new problems for me.
  - Working to keep safe has created (or will create) new problems for people I care about.

- Four open-ended questions:
  - What kinds of new problems?
  - Did you expect these?
  - If you knew then what you now now, what different?
  - What information do you wish someone had given you?
Study Findings
Q1: Extent of Trade-offs

“I have to give up too much to keep safe” (n=301)
Q1: Seeking Safety and New Problems

"Working to keep safe created, or will create, new problems for me"

- Yes: 51.30%
- No: 48.70%

"Working to keep safe created, or will create, new problems for people I care about"

- Yes: 53.50%
- No: 46.50%
Q1: New Problems due to Safety Seeking (n=165)

“What were these problems?”

- Coded written responses

- Overall Theme = *Loss*
  - 5 categories
Categories of loss

- Loss of social support (20.6%)
  - Religious communities -> sanctity of marriage
  - Friends and family -> not one more man of color in the system, burnout
  - Within shelter/TLP
  - Not a single safe relationship as a result of decision to seek safety

- Loss of home and sense of rootedness (19.4%)
  - I have disappeared from the face of the earth to keep safe, I have lost everything
Categories of Loss (continued)

❖ Loss of financial stability (19.4%)
  ❖ *Changing jobs to get away from my abuser meant a pay cut. Also supporting a complete household of bills & kids by myself is a financial strain. Court dates mean time lost at work and caused me to worry about losing my new job.*

❖ Loss of control over parenting (15.8%)
  ❖ Through shelter life
  ❖ Too few resources
  ❖ Loss of custody
  ❖ Abuser manipulation
    ❖ *In my situation, the more I pull or try to stay away from my abuser the more he keeps my son away from me.*
Extent of trade-offs: Categories of loss (n=165)

- **Loss of freedom (12.7%)**  Constrained by …
  - Shelter with too few rules or alien culture and absence of shared language
  - Social service system that held them down
  - Fear that the abuser would find them

- *I can't do the things I want because I always worry about is he going to find me if I fill out this application or leave my # at a job or use a credit card*
Q2: Expected vs. Unexpected Problems

- About half of survivors (50.9%) reported that they had NOT expected at least some of the problems they experienced.
Q3: What participants would have done differently

- Roughly one quarter of survivors (28.2%) who reported problems seeking safety would have done something differently
  - Avoided, left earlier, or not returned to the relationship
  - Stayed in the relationship
  - Avoided formal help
  - Sought help sooner
Q4: What participants wished for earlier

- Advanced information
  - About DV: warning signs and how it evolves
  - About what programs and shelters are really like
  - About custody issues

- Advice from others to get help

- Advice about what the consequences of their actions would be

- More resources to support them in the process
In closing.....

- Participants juggled their pursuit of safety within a constellation of other competing demands, with gains in safety leading to losses in other domains.

- Are you able to learn about client trade-offs?

- Are you able to respond to them?

- Might your role contribute to them?

- How can you learn about and address survivor trade-offs better?