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Ruth E. Fleury-Steiner and Laura Thompson Brady

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# The Importance of Resources and Information in the Lives of Battered Mothers

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## Abstract

An increasing body of research has documented the overlap between intimate partner violence and child abuse. To date, very little research has explored mothers' perspectives on how child protection services (CPS) actually investigate and intervenes in families where intimate partner violence (IPV) as well as child abuse or neglect have occurred. The current research explores the complex role of information and resources in child protection investigations and interventions. In-person interviews were conducted with 19 mothers who had been battered and who had been involved with CPS because of the violence. Mothers reported difficulties in sharing information with and receiving information from CPS workers, but some also reported benefiting from information they received. Moreover, for a handful of women, the CPS intervention was a source of emotional strength. Implications for improving CPS interventions when IPV is occurring are discussed.

## Keywords

child abuse, child protection, intimate partner violence

## Introduction

Both intimate partner violence (IPV) against women and child abuse are far too common in the contemporary United States. Approximately one in four women will be physically and/or sexually assaulted by a partner or ex-partner during their lifetimes; each year, more than one million women will be physically attacked (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Batterers frequently use psychological abuse and economic coercion

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in addition to physical violence to maintain control over their partners. The statistics on child abuse are also staggering. Every week, child protection services (CPS) agencies nationwide receive more than 50,000 reports of child abuse, and approximately two out of three of those reports result in an investigation. In 2004 alone, an estimated 872,000 children were victims of abuse or neglect as substantiated by CPS (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). However, given that child abuse is underreported to authorities, actual rates of child abuse are likely higher.

Child abuse and IPV are quite likely to happen in the same families; the rate of overlap is estimated to be between one third and two thirds. In the majority of overlapping cases, it is a father or father figure abusing both the mother and child(ren) (Salcido Carter, Weitherorn, & Behrman, 1999; Stark & Flitcraft, 1998).

Although estimates do vary, between three and 10 million children witness IPV each year (Edleson, 1999). Many, but not all, of these children are also subjected to physical abuse or neglect. Currently, states, and even counties within states, differ in the policies that address the overlap between child maltreatment and IPV. For instance, states differ on the definition of child maltreatment and the extent to which IPV is considered grounds for child protection interventions; some states define exposure to IPV as a form of child abuse or neglect in itself (Hagemeister, 2000). More comprehensive and concise policies and definitions regarding abuse and interventions are needed in cases where IPV and child maltreatment overlap.

Numerous types of agencies provide services to survivors and perpetrators of IPV and child abuse, such as law enforcement, family court, shelters or group homes, and CPS. Although CPS exists to address child abuse, CPS workers are also in a unique position to address IPV, even with mothers who have not sought out other formal services. CPS workers have the opportunity to build quality relationships with mothers and provide them with information and avenues for accessing resources. Yet we know very little about battered mothers' actual experiences with CPS workers and the larger CPS system. The current study explored how information and exposure to resources are transmitted between CPS workers and battered mothers whose families have been investigated for child abuse from the perspective of those mothers.

## **Impact of IPV and Child Abuse on Women and Children**

The negative impacts of IPV and of child abuse have been extensively documented. Women who are battered report physical injuries, chronic health problems, and depression as a result of the abuse (e.g., Sutherland, Bybee, & Sullivan, 1998, 2001; Sutherland, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2001; Zlotnick, Johnson, & Kohn, 2006). Moreover, IPV has been linked to other difficulties facing women, such as poverty and homelessness (e.g., Brandwein, 1999; Browne & Bassuk, 1997; Raphael, 2000). Children who have been physically or sexually abused are at risk for developing internalizing problems (e.g., withdrawal, nightmares) and externalizing problems (e.g., school failure, acting out; for example, Gelles, 1998). An increasing body of research has documented

similar negative effects on the estimated three to 10 million children who witness IPV each year (Edleson, 1999), even in the absence of direct physical or sexual abuse (e.g., Pepler, Catalo, & Moore, 2000; Sullivan, Nguyen, Allen, Bybee, & Juras, 2000). When examining the deleterious effects of abuse on women and children, as well as the prevalence of overlap between IPV and child abuse in families, it is crucial to explore how supportive and investigative agencies such as CPS can better address both forms of violence to protect women and children in the future.

## **Services for IPV and Child Abuse**

Despite the overlap between IPV and child abuse in families, services to address IPV and services to address child abuse developed largely independently of each other. Moreover, differences in mandates and philosophy between IPV advocates and CPS workers have complicated attempts each group has made to coordinate and learn from each other (e.g., Beeman, Hagemester, & Edleson, 1999; Findlater & Kelly, 1999; Schechter & Edleson, 1994). Typically, IPV programs and shelters focus largely on the needs of women. Many have their foundation in the feminist movement of the 1970s and started as small, grassroots organizations. The services are voluntary and initiated by clients (Fleck-Henderson, 2000). Although most IPV shelters have space for children and may provide some child care, comprehensive services for child witnesses of IPV and for children who have been abused are less common.

In contrast, CPS focuses on the safety and well-being of children. The essential functions of CPS agencies include screening reports of child maltreatment, making dispositions about the probability of maltreatment and need for services, providing case management, facilitating placement and supervision of children outside of their homes, and making efforts within reason to keep families together or to reunite them (Crosson-Tower, 2005).

In contrast to IPV services, child protection agencies are state-run and have coercive power over families (Fleck-Henderson, 2000). Child protection agencies may or may not provide services or referrals that will address the needs of mothers (Schechter & Edleson, 1994). In addition, child protection services focus on family preservation, that is, determining what, if anything, can be done to keep the family together and the children safe in the home. In contrast, IPV agencies do not focus on keeping the entire family together. Instead, they focus on helping women keep both themselves and their children safe (Fleck-Henderson, 2000).

Perhaps the best known set of recommendations for improving service coordination between CPS and IPV services, as well as the court system, is the Greenbook recommendations put out by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges in 1999. Six demonstration sites were created and evaluated on the basis of these recommendations. Case files reviewed in the evaluation indicated that even after implementation of the Greenbook recommendations, only about half of mothers who were being abused themselves received referrals for domestic violence services (Greenbook National Evaluation Team, 2004). Although this may seem low, even fewer referrals

were made for children's services (Greenbook National Evaluation Team, 2004). Only one of six demonstration sites discussed making efforts to improve referral procedures as part of the Greenbook process, given that improved referral processes are not part of the recommendations (Greenbook National Evaluation Team, 2004). An increase in CPS referral procedures may help ensure battered mothers' access to information and community services that contributes to the safety of themselves and their children. The current study explored mothers' perceptions of their interactions with CPS workers, as well as how CPS workers transmitted referrals and information and provided exposure to services in their communities.

## **Barriers to Accessing Community Resources**

Many battered women experience barriers to accessing resources because of their relationships with their abusive partners and their isolation from the community at large. A great deal of research has documented the extent and nature of psychological control perpetrated against women in conjunction with physical abuse by their intimate partners (see Stark, 2007 for a review). In particular, batterers may attempt to isolate their partners or ex-partners. By isolating women from their informal social support networks and by preventing them from accessing other community resources, batterers are able to establish and maintain control over their partners. Without access to resources that can improve physical safety for women, such as economic support, housing, or protection orders, batterers can more easily continue their violence (Davies, Lyon, & Monti-Catania, 1998, Sullivan, 2000; Sullivan & Bybee, 1999). A woman may decide to continue living with an abusive partner because of economic dependency, not because she is trying to make the relationship work (Brandwein, 1999; Raphael, 2000).

But batterers themselves are not the only barrier that battered mothers must overcome in accessing support services. Barriers at the community level, such as a lack of resources and support and a lack of information about those resources contribute to the entrapment of battered women. The most basic barrier at the community level is a lack of resources. For instance, women living in rural areas may not have access to a shelter, support groups, or legal advocacy in their community. Seeking legal assistance is further complicated if they or their batterer know the police officers or judges, which is more common in less populated or rural areas (Websdale, 1998). Furthermore, low-income women may not have access to resources such as housing, transportation, or child care, thus complicating their attempts to remain safe (Raphael, 2000). As low-income families are overrepresented in CPS investigations (Roberts, 2002; Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996), it is crucial for CPS workers and agencies to address the barriers women may face in accessing various community resources.

Even when resources are available in the community, women who do not know *how* to access information may not be privy to crucial resources. Moreover, long waiting lists for public housing, confusing procedures for protection orders, and reluctance to tell service providers that they have been battered or their children have been abused complicate women's help-seeking behaviors (DeVoe & Smith, 2003; Moe Wan, 2000;

Raphael, 2000). This is particularly critical for mothers who fear they will lose custody of their children if they admit to CPS that their children have witnessed IPV. Even in cases where the child protection worker has information that IPV is occurring or has occurred, the worker may or may not have a thorough understanding of other available community resources that may be useful. The current study explored the relationships battered mothers had with CPS workers as they worked to navigate through the maze of understanding, accessing, and utilizing community information and resources.

### **Importance of Resources and Information Transmission**

Prior research has demonstrated that access to community resources can improve women's safety, whether or not they end the relationship with their batterers (e.g., Bybee & Sullivan, 2002; Davies et al., 1998; Sullivan & Bybee, 1999). For instance, in an experimental study of women leaving a domestic violence shelter, those women who worked with a paraprofessional advocate several hours a week for 8 weeks reported greater ease in obtaining needed resources than did women who did not have access to an advocate. Moreover, they were less likely to experience subsequent violence over the next 2 years than were women who did not work with advocates (Sullivan & Bybee, 1999). Here, advocates served as interpersonal support and were embedded in a structural system of resources for survivors.

Part of the success of this intervention lay in the cyclical process of information transmission between survivor and advocate. This was a survivor-centered, individualized advocacy process wherein the advocates helped survivors access resources and achieve goals they set for themselves. Indeed, part of the success of this intervention was likely due to the effective communication cycle facilitated by the intervention process. Advocates gathered information regarding the survivors' needs and goals and determined which community resources might help meet those needs and goals. Then, the advocates and survivors worked together to access available resources, or to brainstorm alternative ways to meet needs (Sullivan, 2000).

In another study, researchers explored both battered mothers' and CPS professionals' perspectives on the supports mothers whose families had been investigated for child maltreatment received from child welfare services. Specifically, battered mothers and CPS workers stated that emotionally and materially supportive resources and interventions (i.e., development of strong social support networks, mental health counseling, domestic violence services, affordable housing, financial support) were crucial to the safety of themselves and their children (Shim & Haight, 2006). The current study examined battered mothers' perspectives on the resources and information transmitted to them by their CPS workers. Furthermore, the relationships and cyclical process of communication among mothers and CPS workers was explored.

Although community services such as CPS can provide supports for battered mothers, various aspects of structural violence do indeed prevent women from accessing resources and information (James et al., 2003) that are imperative for the safety of battered women

and their children. For instance, some battered mothers have complained that child welfare agencies' focus on intervening with mothers is misplaced when fathers are perpetrators. Second, a number of battered mothers and CPS workers have expressed that once batterers are out of their homes, mothers are capable of parenting their children, thus making protective custody inappropriate (Shim & Haight, 2006).

## Current Study

To date, very little research has explored mothers' perspectives on how CPS actually investigates and intervenes in families where IPV as well as child abuse have occurred. Guided by James et al.'s (2003) description of the relationship between information and structural violence, the current project explores the complex role of information and resources in child protection investigations and interventions from the perspective of battered mothers.

James et al. (2003) provide evidence for an integrative tripartite model of violence. This model describes the relationship between structural violence, interpersonal violence, and intrapersonal violence. They define structural violence as institutional and systemic violence that has disproportionately negative impacts on members of oppressed groups, such as people living in poverty or racial and ethnic minorities. The effects of structural violence, in turn, contribute to interpersonal violence (e.g., physical assault) and intrapersonal violence (e.g., drug abuse, suicide).

Lack of information can be one form of structural violence. As James and colleagues (2003) explain:

Lack of information as a structural violence construct occurs when one group of individuals compared to another group are not informed about important legislative policies and programs that affect their overall well being. Additionally, lack of information can refer to ignorance about one's legal and civil rights. (p. 131)

Without accurate knowledge about legal options (e.g., orders of protection, custody, divorce) and economic resources (e.g., material goods, childcare, housing support), women who have been battered are less able to make appropriate decisions for themselves and their children to increase their safety. Moreover, for parents (abusive or not) to work effectively with CPS, they must be aware of the policies and procedures that will affect their individual cases. The current study explored how battered mothers experienced one aspect of structural violence and/or support: barriers and/or access to information and resources. Ultimately, battered mothers' relationships with CPS workers were examined to decipher how these interactions influenced their access to resources and information, which serve as crucial links to independence and safety for battered women and their children.

## Method

In-person interviews were conducted with 19 women who were recruited through domestic violence shelters, voluntary advocacy programs, domestic violence counselors, and family court. To be eligible for the study, women must (a) have been 18 years or older, (b) have one or more children, and (c) have been assaulted and/or threatened by an intimate partner in the 3 months before a CPS investigation. The abusive partner may or may not have been the biological parent of the child(ren), and may or may not have been living with the child(ren) at the time of the violence. Most interviews were tape recorded in women's homes ( $n = 17$ ) or at the domestic violence shelters where women were living at the time they were interviewed ( $n = 2$ ). Four women declined to have the interview taped.

## Sample

All of the participants were African American (37%;  $n = 7$ ) or White (63%;  $n = 12$ ). On average, they had between two and three children ( $M = 2.84$ ;  $SD = 1.61$ ). Women's ages ranged from 21 to 45 with a mean of 30.7 ( $SD = 7.62$ ); their children ranged in age from less than 1 year to more than 21 years, but all women had at least one child below the age of 18. The majority of women had completed high school or had some education beyond high school (78.9%). The average monthly income was US\$956 at the time of the interview, but it ranged from no income at all to more than US\$3,000.<sup>1</sup> However, once the number of children women had was accounted for, only two women had incomes that would put them and their children above the federal poverty line (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 2005). Most of their assailants were White (52.6%;  $n = 10$ ) or African American (42.1%;  $n = 8$ ); one assailant was Latino. The assailants were slightly older than the participants, with an average age of 34.7 ( $SD = 8.7$ ). At the time of the interview, none of the mothers were involved in a romantic relationship with the batterers (see Table 1).

All of the mothers indicated that they had been threatened or physically assaulted by the abuser during the three months before the most recent investigation about the abuser. In 68% of cases ( $n = 13$ ), the mothers had been threatened with death.

Physical and sexual violence against mothers was measured using a modified version of the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979).<sup>2</sup> During this 3-month period, the majority of the mothers were pushed or shoved (84%;  $n = 16$ ), whereas more than half were punched (68%;  $n = 13$ ). Just over half reported being beaten up at least once; the same number reported being choked (52%;  $n = 10$ ). Half of the mothers reported at least one sexual assault (52%;  $n = 10$ ); two of these women stated that sexual assault was nearly a daily experience. One in five of the mothers (21%;  $n = 4$ ) had been threatened with a gun or knife. One woman was stabbed (see Table 2). All of the mothers indicated that their children had seen or heard the violence against them at least once.

According to the study participants, approximately half of the batterers (53%;  $n = 10$ ) were reported to CPS for physical or sexual abuse of a child. About one quarter of



**Table 1.** Participant Demographics

Demographics	Sample (n = 19)
Participant race/ethnicity	
White	63% (n = 12)
African American	37% (n = 7)
Mean participant age	30.7 years (SD = 7.62)
Mean number of children	2.8 (SD = 1.6)
Completed high school	78.9%
Mean monthly income	US\$965 (range = US\$0-US\$3300)
Separated from assailant	100%
Assailant race/ethnicity	
White	53% (n = 10)
African American	42% (n = 8)
Latino	5% (n = 1)
Assailant mean age	34.7 years (SD = 8.7)

**Table 2.** Percentages of Participants who Experienced Different Types of Violence

Type of violence	Percentage (%)
Threatened with violence	95
Threatened with death	68
Threatened with a weapon	26
Pushed	84
Hit with fist	68
Choked	53
Beaten up	53
Forced sex	53
Assaulted with a weapon	16

the batterers (26%; n = 5) were reported for emotional or physical neglect. Two batterers were reported for committing IPV in the presence of a child. The remaining two batterers were not reported to CPS at all.

In the two cases where batterers were not reported to CPS, the mothers had been reported instead. One mother explained that they became involved with CPS when he reported her for neglect. In the other case where the batterer was not reported, the mother was arrested for assaulting him; she was reported to CPS for neglect, a common police procedure in the state where the study was conducted. Criminal charges against her were dropped when the prosecuting attorney determined that she had acted in self-defense. There were five cases in which both the mother and the batterer were reported to CPS. In all five, mothers were reported for neglect; only one of these

reports of neglect was directly due to exposing a child to IPV. In the majority of cases (63%;  $n = 12$ ), mothers were not reported to CPS at all.

## **Analysis**

Interviews included both closed-ended and open-ended questions about the context of women's lives; violence against them and their children; and their experiences with police, the judicial system, and the child protection system. A qualitative approach to understanding battered mothers' lived experiences is crucial to further developing research and intervention practices for community responses to IPV—in this particular case, when children are involved. The open-ended questions allowed for the capture of direct quotations so that the researchers could record participants' subjective perspectives of their situations (Patton, 2002), which was particularly important for the population of the current study as there are limited findings on how battered mothers perceive CPS services. Interview transcripts and interviewers' notes were reviewed and coded by two project staff.

Emergent themes/categories were determined through the following process. All interviews were read by the two project staff to begin the inductive process of reducing the data (Creswell, 2003). Next, transcripts were further examined to identify the prevalence of the sensitizing concepts (Patton, 2002) of "information and resources," two components of structural violence noted in James et al.'s (2003) model. Through the process of cross-case analysis (Creswell, 2003), subcategories were developed under the umbrella of how information and resources were shared between mothers and CPS workers. For example, under the category of "information," subcategories emerged, such as how mothers shared information about family issues with CPS as well as how CPS workers disseminated pertinent information to mothers.

Intercoder reliability (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of analysis was addressed by having two researchers independently analyze the data using the sensitizing concepts of information and resources. Coding and emergence of categories were checked by each researcher, and consensus was reached about findings through rigorous, systematic review of the data. Validity was addressed as research questions, interview protocol, and analysis strategies were consistent and it was confirmed that findings captured the experiences of the 19 mothers interviewed (Kazdin, 1998).

## **Results**

All women were asked about their experiences with the CPS investigation of their families. Questions focused on interactions with caseworkers and the types of information and resources that mothers received. In addition, women were asked about what was most helpful, what was least helpful, and their overall satisfaction with their CPS investigations and interventions. Women experienced the flow and/or disconnect of information and resources in various ways. Three major categories of their experiences with information and resources emerged: (a) some mothers feared CPS before

they were investigated because of information transmitted by their families and/or communities, (b) many mothers believed there was lack of clarity, misinformation, or gaps in the information they did or did not receive from CPS and in the information they attempted to share with CPS about their families, and (c) a number of mothers felt that CPS provided them with useful information, avenues to resources, and/or support throughout their investigations.

### *Mothers' Fear of CPS Before Investigation*

Some women discussed the perceptions they had of CPS before they and/or their partners were investigated. Generally, mothers remembered feeling a great deal of fear about CPS as an organization and the methods used to investigate families. One woman stated that her cousin's experiences with CPS prompted her to have firm, negative assumptions about the agency.

Because, um, all I know about [CPS agency] is that they take people's kids away from them. That's all I know. So when they said [CPS agency] was called, I was scared, 'cause I'm like I don't want them to take my kids away, I didn't do anything wrong. . . . I was like I'm gonna try to do everything I can, so they don't, you know, so they won't take my kids away from me. That's all. 'Cause [CPS agency] are the bad people in, from where I'm come from. (laughs) They haven't helped anybody. . . . They took my cousin's, all five of her kids. Even the baby that was in her stomach. They took that baby away from her, too.

Regardless of why her cousin's children were taken away from her, the information this mother received about CPS before her family was investigated made her believe that they only came in to take children away from their parents, with no plan for family preservation. Another woman shared similar preconceived notions of CPS before her family's investigation. "I mean, I felt like I was being watched at all angles and I was, I was . . . I've heard horror stories about CPS and they come in and take your kids away and then they figure out what happened . . ." Clearly, these two women felt anxiety about CPS before they were investigated that stemmed from the information they received through informal social networks.

Although a number of mothers had negative impressions of CPS before they were investigated, some felt that their overall experiences with the agency were more positive than had been expected. One woman stated:

I mean at first I thought their main goal was just to come here, snatch my kids away. You know, 'cause that's what everybody thinks about CPS. You know what I mean. And then she was like, "This is what we're gonna do, this is how we're gonna handle this, do you have any questions." So it really wasn't, you know, all that bad.

This mother recognized the discrepancy between the information she received about CPS before she was investigated and her own family's experiences with the organization. Although all three of these women had the impression that CPS is an agency whose mission is to take children away from their parents, each of them had custody of their children when they were interviewed. In these cases, women's fears of CPS were not verified by their experiences.

Another mother discussed her experiences with CPS that were unique to those of other mothers. She was raised in the system herself from an early age because of abuse she experienced as a child. She had custody of her children at the time she was interviewed and her impressions of CPS prior to her own family's intervention were positive, as they related to how they helped her as a child. She referred to the system as being like a parent to her when she was a child, and so when her ex-partner was investigated by CPS, she believed they were there to help her.

### *Problematic Flows of Information Between Agency and Client*

Within the wide range of experiences mothers reported having with CPS, a common thread was problems or gaps in the flow of information between agency and client. Information between CPS and their clients, in theory, is supposed to be cyclical. The agency provides information and resources to the family, while the client shares information and insights about issues within the family, which in turn influences the information and resources provided. Both components of information are crucial to CPS investigations, which has not been emphasized in prior studies.

In the current study, many mothers were unclear about what was happening with their CPS investigations and had trouble navigating through their cases. Others felt misled by their caseworkers, or that they did not understand the information that was given to them in writing. Overall, most women did not seem to have control over the flow of information throughout their investigations and had trouble interpreting what was presented to them.

Mothers' discussions of their experiences highlighted the importance of a cyclical flow of information, although women felt CPS was not always willing to listen to their perspectives. Some mothers felt they were not given the opportunity to tell their stories to their caseworkers and that the "right" questions were not asked of them. They believed that if caseworkers had given them the opportunity to share their perspectives that the processes and outcomes of their cases may have been altered.

*CPS does not receive or hear correct information.* Some women felt that CPS was not truly seeing or receiving information on how they lived, how much they loved their children, or their perceptions of their ability to parent. One mother stated that her caseworker was sharing misinformation about her living situation with family court.

And then the reason why like I said that they didn't really help me, because like the lady would go to court and say we live in a motel. . . . But we don't, it's a actual house back here behind the store that we lived in. . . . I mean she really

came here and took pictures of the motel across the street and tried to say we lived in there.

This mother believed that the misrepresentation of her living arrangement could damage her chances of regaining custody of her son.

Another woman felt CPS was not truly observing or obtaining information on the love she felt and expressed for her children. "They should have seen interactions with me and my children instead of just an interaction with me and a [CPS] worker. As chaotic as it is around here, I mean, you can tell if somebody loves their children or not." This mother had regained custody of her children on the day she was interviewed for this study. She, along with other mothers who had lost custody of their children, felt that CPS had not been open to seeing the positive attributes of their familial relationships.

Other women reported various ways in which they believed CPS had failed to hear their side of the story. One mother stated that, in her case, CPS failed to investigate both parties (herself and her assailant) and did not see the full picture of what happened in their family. Another mother was frustrated because neither she nor her daughter had been interviewed by CPS. Her daughter was sexually abused by her ex-partner, but there was no physical evidence of the abuse because there was a delay between the assaults and when the mother knew to report them. CPS would not take this time lapse into consideration and the mother felt that this was a great detriment to her case. In addition, this mother claimed that CPS did not want to hear about the violence against her. A third mother reported that CPS put inaccurate information into her records and misrepresented her family's situation.

Alternatively, one woman discussed the lack of investigating CPS was doing for her son when she and her ex-partner had been reported for emotional neglect. "If they were so concerned with [son] being emotional neglected how come for the past 2 or 3 months no one came out here and checked on [son] to make sure he was okay?" This mother was even questioning why CPS did not seem invested in determining whether or not she was neglecting her son. She questioned why CPS was not available to get rich and detailed information on her son's situation, even if it implicated her. Ultimately, many mothers were concerned and frustrated because they believed CPS was not fully investigating or seeking important information about their families.

*CPS does not provide enough or correct information.* In addition to frustrations with CPS not getting the right information, some women reported that they had trouble navigating and deciphering written information provided by the agency. One mother was unsure of the mandatory requirements for her assailant's recovery. "I think it was counseling or something. They sent me a big paper on him (assailant), things that, I don't know, it was a lot of words and stuff." Similarly, other women had trouble understanding information from CPS. Another woman stated that CPS "wasn't making sense" and she had to make a lot of phone calls to understand what was going on with her case. She did not know the outcome of her investigation and stated that CPS never notified her about whether the case was still open or closed.

Some women felt that CPS misinformed them about important information. In a few cases, women reported that counselors were misleading and unreliable. For instance, one mother stated that her caseworker did not follow through with tasks and sometimes missed scheduled appointments.

Participant: 'Cause the, um, after we had the report or whatever, like the, uh, treatment CPS lady, she was supposed to be going through and getting me counseling and stuff through CPS and she never, she never did her job. Like she would call and say I'm coming over, you know, make sure you stay there, I'll be there like 1:00. Never come, never called. Called two days later and said oh I'm sorry, something happened. So, they like never, none of them did their job right.

Interviewer: So she would say she was going to come at 1:00 . . .

Participant: And never show up and never call. And then like if you called and leave a message on her machine she would not return your call.

Not only did this woman's caseworker miss appointments without rescheduling, she failed to connect her to counseling services and other resources to which she had made reference in the past. On multiple levels, this mother felt betrayed and let down. Another mother reported that CPS said they would set up counseling but never did. Furthermore, she wanted to relocate and CPS told her there was money to help her move out of state, but never followed through with their offer. A third woman stated that CPS services did not match her needs. Clearly, some women experienced inconsistencies in the reporting of information and provision of resources from CPS which influenced options for themselves and their children.

One mother experienced a total disconnect from her caseworker. She felt no trust in her caseworker and believed that her case was being mishandled.

I think that they can really misled people. Or they've misled me . . . When I moved out of my grandparents where my son was staying, they said that if I kept the house for a month and proved that I wasn't gonna lose the house that I would get him back. And then it changed to they wanted him to stay with my grandparents.

She felt they should have been honest and provided "steps" for how she could have gotten her children back. When asked what CPS should have done for her, she stated, "Just been honest about how to get them back or if I could get them back and what exact steps for me to take." This mother was living in a domestic violence shelter at the time of her interview and she felt she had been left in the dark by CPS.

Interviewer: What have they [CPS] done?

Participant: Bullied me into giving my kids to family members is what they've done. And here it's two and a half months later, I still haven't gotten a case plan. Well, she had 30 days from the time she got the case to give me a case

plan that I need to have a successful completion so that I can go to court and get my kids back. And nothin', nothing. . . . And without that case plan she can say well now you need to do this, well now you need to do that. And whatever I do is never enough. Until she has that in writing, what I need to complete she can just keep saying, well, "You haven't done enough yet."

She had lost her family and home, was residing in a domestic violence shelter, and was infuriated that her caseworker had not given her a case plan so that she could begin the process of regaining custodial rights to her children. She believed that her caseworker's lack of communication and information sharing hurt her efforts to get her children back. She went on to say, "I think they should have had some information for me and things I could do for myself. Some options that I had." This mother felt that the CPS system had completely failed her and that she was not provided with information that could help her.

Not surprisingly, many women indicated both that CPS was not gathering the right information or enough information about their families and also was not providing enough or accurate information to them. Markedly, this indicates a breakdown in the cycle of information sharing.

### *Useful Information From CPS*

Many mothers expressed frustration with the lack of information about their case or the steps they needed to take to regain or maintain custody of their children or have their cases closed. In addition to this frustration, however, many mothers also described the ways in which the CPS intervention and caseworkers were helpful. As a result of their interventions, some women were able to access material goods and services that they otherwise may not have found. Moreover, women received emotional support from CPS directly and explained how the intervention process itself was a source of emotional strength.

A great deal of prior research has described the economic difficulties many women with abusive partners face when making decisions about their safety (Raphael, 2000). Moreover, low-income families are overrepresented in the child protection system (Roberts, 2002; Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996). Given the low incomes reported by the mothers in this study, it is not surprising to find that information about other agencies or programs that could provide material resources were important to mothers. Mothers described receiving winter coats for their children, toys, and Thanksgiving meals as a result of referrals from CPS workers. One mother explained that their economic aid went beyond access to minor, temporary assistance; they helped her apply for welfare benefits. As she explained,

I didn't know how to go to, um, social services and get the help, food stamps and whatever. I, I had no clue about that. So, as far as, um, getting back on my feet and getting a job and all that, being on welfare, they can provide me with training, um, so that I'll be able to work and support my family.

A second mother, whose children were temporarily placed in foster care while she was hospitalized after a brutal assault, explained:

And then when I came home, they bought them all this toys and clothes and everything, and they, they've been buying them stuff ever since the move . . . they wanted me to be comfortable again and not have to worry about so much . . . so they were giving vouchers for school, and it made it a little easier to deal with things and not so much focus right here, like you're gonna be happy today and stuff like that, and that's what I wanted.

Clearly, for this woman and other mothers, having some economic support as a result of the CPS intervention was helpful. It should be noted that several mothers who chose not to use some of the referrals also stated that they were helpful. For instance, one mother explained that CPS had given her information about how to get the locks changed on her home to increase her safety. However, as she was in the process of leaving the home instead, she chose not to do it. Although she did not choose to use that service, she still found it significant that CPS shared the information with her.

Mothers also stated that CPS provided information about IPV and parenting that was helpful. One mother explained that having CPS involved made her more aware of, "Abuse and relationships. A lot of them made me see that there's a better way to communicate with folks other than fightin' and hollerin' and callin' names and dumb stuff." Several mothers were given referrals for voluntary parenting classes and/or IPV counseling services; overall they seemed to find these referrals and subsequent sharing of information useful.

However, women who mentioned receiving useful information never mentioned that this information was in response to their questions. It is possible that women did not see a need to explain to the interviewer that they asked their worker about material resources or about parenting classes and then were given the information. It is also likely that workers themselves decided what women needed or ought to do, and provided referrals based on their own sense of the survivors' needs. Although in some cases workers seemed to accurately gauge what women themselves would find helpful, in other cases the workers' referrals were less helpful or potentially harmful. In one case, for instance, a woman interested in getting a divorce from her batterer explained that CPS mandated that she and her husband get couple's counseling.

Interestingly, many of the same women who spoke about problems in either giving CPS information or getting information from CPS also discussed instances in which they did receive helpful information directly from CPS, or from other resources referred by CPS. Few women had experiences that were entirely helpful or entirely unhelpful; they were much more likely to be mixed. Moreover, the useful information tended to be about material resources in the community, rather than about their case specifically.

*CPS as a source of emotional strength.* When mothers talked about the helpful things that the CPS workers did, they went beyond discussing access to material goods and information about other available services. Some mothers also explained how the CPS



intervention became a source of emotional strength for them as they coped with violence against themselves and their children. As one woman said, “[CPS agency] introduced me to [IPV liason], you know, who was a great big help to me. Um, and not so much as, you know, getting me things but she was always there, you know, to talk to.” Another mother explained that having a third party (CPS) involved with her family helped her to move forward. As she put it,

‘Cause to have a third party, it gave me a strength. When there was someone involved in with the situation that could see what I was seeing and dealing with what I was dealing with, that helped me open up and be able to, to tell a lot of things in front of him. So that way I could get done what I needed to get done.

For this mother, then, the fact that CPS was now involved in her life gave her the emotional support that she needed to talk about what was really going on and to make decisions.

In the state where the majority of the mothers resided, the local IPV programs had obtained funding for an innovative program employing child protection services liaisons. These liaison positions were funded by and supervised largely by IPV programs, but they had offices in the CPS buildings and went through the same trainings. Their role was to provide support to both CPS workers addressing multiple forms of violence in families and to work directly with the mothers whose families were being investigated. Although this program was relatively new during the data collection period and the interview questions did not directly address the liaisons, a few mothers did describe the emotional and informational support they received from liaisons.<sup>3</sup> When asked about what CPS did that was helpful, one mother explained:

So it is a little bit hard, but you know, I am thankful because I really, if, if [CPS agency] never got involved I would have never been referred, you know to a domestic violence advocate and stuff like that. Not, you know, not making their job, you know, smaller than her, you know what I mean, but that was the big help for me, because I really needed that.

One mother summed up the complexity of child protection interventions when she was asked if she would want CPS involved again if she was ever in a similar situation:

Participant: Oh yeah. But I pray that it doesn't happen again. I appreciate them, but I really don't want to see them no more. (laughs)

Interviewer: So why is it that you would want them involved again?

Participant: Because they can hook you up with people that can help you out in the situations that you are in.

For battered mothers involved with CPS, then, access to material resources, information about parenting and IPV, and emotional support were helpful. However, many

were also confused about the CPS investigation process itself, and were frustrated that they were not given adequate information about their cases.

## Discussion

Although an increasing body of literature examines the links between IPV and child abuse, far less work has focused on the actual CPS response from the perspective of mothers who have been battered. Clearly, this intervention is not a simple process; the complexity is reflected in the variety of experiences mothers had with CPS. Mothers reported confusion about the process, difficulties communicating with CPS workers, and frustration that their needs were not being met. At the same time, many mothers also reported that CPS provided them with useful information, particularly about accessing material resources, and with emotional support. Few women had experiences that were entirely helpful or entirely unhelpful.

A number of women reported confusion about the status of their own case and about CPS procedures. This lack of information about the CPS process in general, as well as about their individual case can be considered a form of structural violence (James et al., 2003) against these mothers to the extent that it is a result of standard CPS procedures, rather than a result of individual worker decisions. When mothers do not have accurate information about their case status or the investigative process, they are not in a position to work effectively with CPS. Although mothers reported difficulties in accessing information from CPS workers about their cases, it is entirely possible that CPS workers may have attempted to communicate effectively with the mothers. It is clear, however, that the communication cycle between worker and client is not working for many mothers and additional steps need to be taken to ensure that all mothers truly understand their own cases.

Some of the mothers in the study reported that they did not feel like their CPS workers were gathering the right information about them or listening to their side of the story. To do an adequate investigation into the well-being of children, it seems self-evident that CPS workers would need to listen to the mothers, particularly since in several instances it was *not* the mother's alleged behavior that was the initial subject of the CPS investigation. However, CPS workers are also faced daily with abusive parents who attempt to excuse abusive behavior or deny that anything is wrong. It should not be surprising, then, that some CPS workers may not adequately listen to parents.

It must be clarified that structural violence is not created by particular individuals or groups; rather, it is maintained by existing social systems (James et al., 2003). Child protection workers, then, may be working within a system that maintains structural violence, but as individuals they are not creating structural violence. Systemic changes to the way that child protection workers are able to intervene, such as reduced case-loads to increase the amount of time available or additional training on the overlap between child abuse and intimate partner violence, could improve the flow of information between mothers and workers. As the child protection system is so complicated, providing workers with suggestions for how to communicate information about the

system clearly and concisely could benefit all parties. Given the positive response mothers had to the work of the domestic violence liaisons, expanding this program could also improve the lives of battered mothers and their children as well as reduce burdens on CPS workers.

Moreover, it must be emphasized that by no means did all women report confusion about the status of their case or difficulty in communicating with the CPS workers. Some mothers even reported that the intervention itself was a source of emotional strength. This finding is certainly consistent with many arguments for taking IPV and child abuse out of the realm of private family life and making it a public social problem. By acknowledging that violence is wrong, CPS can send a critical message to mothers that there are supports available to address abuse. In addition, a number of mothers received information they found helpful about parenting and about IPV. Findings provide evidence for strengths in the CPS process that need to be highlighted and further enhanced to ensure greater structural, systemic support for battered mothers and their children.

Additionally, mothers reported that they were able to access material goods and other services as a result of information they received through the CPS investigation and/or intervention. Information about how to access material goods and services (e.g., clothing for children, information on how to apply for welfare) was clearly helpful to many mothers in the study, even though these resources were not targeted toward survivors of IPV or toward children who had been abused or witnessed IPV. Given that families who are involved in CPS investigations and interventions are disproportionately likely to be poor (Roberts, 2002; Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996), and that this was a low-income sample, this finding is hardly surprising. Therefore, providing these sorts of referrals for material support is critical for meeting the multiple needs of families. Additional written materials on community resources (e.g., housing, food, clothing, childcare) could easily be provided to all families involved with child protection.

This finding also speaks to the importance of coordinated community responses; CPS workers can only provide adequate referrals for material goods to the extent that (a) such services are available in the community, and (b) CPS workers are aware of the existing services. Although improving availability of community resources is beyond the scope of child welfare professionals, additional training for CPS workers on available economic supports for low-income families could prove helpful.

Although mothers reported that they found such referrals helpful, it remains unclear whether mothers themselves asked for or wanted such referrals or whether the CPS workers determined what it was that mothers needed. Given the evidence that client-driven interventions with effective communication between client and worker can increase safety among battered women (e.g., Bybee & Sullivan, 2002; Sullivan 2000), ensuring that workers are responsive to mothers' stated needs is critical. However, given that CPS services are typically nonvoluntary and focused on the child, workers may well find themselves in a position where they must make referrals to services mothers do not believe they need. Additional research is needed to further explore the cycle of communication between CPS workers and battered mothers, as well as the effectiveness of referrals.

A few limitations of the study should be addressed. It is possible that mothers who volunteered for the study may be disproportionately unhappy with the CPS system. However, within the sample most mothers did identify ways in which CPS was helpful, suggesting that in fact they did not volunteer for the study solely to complain about CPS. A second limitation is that these mothers were paid for their participation; mothers who were in dire financial situations may have been more likely to agree to participate than were women who did not need the money. Although this was clearly a low-income sample, this also reflects the fact that CPS caseloads nationwide are largely made up of low-income families (Roberts, 2002; Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996).

A third limitation is that mothers were connected in some ways to IPV services. Because of concerns about mothers freely choosing to take part in the study, participant recruitment was conducted through IPV services in the community and through CPS-IPV liaisons. This limitation suggests that the mothers who participated may have more information or access to resources than those who were not connected to IPV services. Future research also needs to address those mothers who have been battered, but who may not have utilized IPV services. Finally, only the perspectives of mothers themselves are represented, and not those of batterers, children, or CPS workers. Clearly, to adequately understand how CPS can better serve families, all of these perspectives are critical.

Although mothers faced barriers to resources and information during their families' CPS investigations, there are multiple opportunities for positive change and growth in responses to women in similar situations. Ultimately, as a society, we need to move from structural violence to systems that provide universal social supports for families facing these issues. The strengths and limitations presented here about CPS investigations provide important implications for future research, practice, and policies regarding families where IPV and child abuse co-occur.

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## Notes

1. When the woman with the highest income (US\$3,333/month) is removed, the mean income drops to US\$824/month.
2. An expanded version of the CTS was used instead of the CTS2 (Straus, Hamby, & Warren, 2003), because of the length of the CTS2.
3. Informal conversations with two of the liaisons revealed that mothers often initially confused them with CPS employees. It is entirely possible, then, that some of the mothers interviewed were not distinguishing between liaisons and CPS workers.

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