Crime Victims' Institute
College of Criminal Justice ● Sam Houston State University

A Safe Place to Go?

A descriptive study of safety strategies among female college students

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Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a pervasive social problem, with one in three women experiencing IPV at least once within their lifetime (Black et al., 2011; Schafer, Caetano, & Clark, 1998). While IPV can impact women at any stage in the life course, research indicates that women between the ages of 18-24 are at an increased risk. It is not surprising, then, to find that 10% to 50% of college students have experienced victimization at the hands of an intimate partner at least once during their collegiate career (Kaukinen, et al., 2012). In addition, female college students are at an elevated risk for IPV due to some aspects of the college experience, including independent living often at an extended distance from parents (Lehrer, et al., 2010).

College women who have experienced IPV are unlikely to access formal systems of help, such as calling the police or seeking services from an emergency shelter or advocacy center (Shorey, et al., 2015; Coker, et al., 2000; Fugate, et al., 2005). Rather, research indicates that young women lean on informal networks for assistance, most often by confiding in a friend, family member, or co-worker about the abuse they are suffering (Hyden, 2015). While disclosing an abusive situation may be cathartic for the victim, the utility of this behavior in regards to providing a protective factor from (re)abuse has been questioned (Goodman, et al., 2005), especially with regard to particularly violent situations (Goodman, et al., 2003).

One strategy that college students might use to prevent and protect themselves from IPV is safety planning. Safety planning, simply put, is a detailed, personalized, and practical plan that is created to protect oneself against an abusive (or potentially abusive) partner (Parker, et al., 2015). Most often used with individuals who present at emergency domestic violence shelters, the purpose of safety planning is to empower victims to strategize ways in which they can keep themselves (and children) safe (Parker et al., 2015). Some examples of strategies employed within a safety plan include hiding money or keys, coming up with a code word to signal for help from a neighbor, and having a list of important numbers to use in case of an emergency (Campbell, et al., 2005; Davis, 2002; Goodkind, et al., 2004).

While safety planning can take many forms, one fairly universal component is to have the individual who is completing the safety plan identify a place she could go in an emergency situation (e.g., her aunt's house). She is also asked to think about and plan for items she would take with her in such a situation (e.g., change of clothes, identification/driver's license, cellular phone and charger, cash/ATM card, medications, etc.). For this report, we will focus specifically on this component of safety planning.

This research brief provides a summary of the results of a survey of female college students enrolled at a state university in Texas, including whether or not students have a safe place to go, where they would go, what they would take with them, as well as what factors influence safety planning.

Sample

The current report draws from a sample of 1,135 female students who were surveyed in the fall of 2014 about their strategies for keeping themselves safe and preventing IPV victimization and revictimization. The original sample consisted of 1,303 college students; however, 168 were removed because students were either male or did not agree to

participate in the survey. As shown in Table 1, the majority of surveyed female students were white (65.2%), born in the United States (92%), with an average age of 30 (range: 18-72; SD=7.9). Over half of students (58.4%) indicated they were employed. While the majority of students disclosed they had a current romantic partner (59.4%), only a quarter (24.7%) were legally married. An even smaller percentage (14.8%) of students reported they had children.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics (N=1,135)		
	% or Mean(SD)	*Range*
Age	30.0 (7.9)	18-72
Race		
White	65.2%	
Non-White	31.5%	
Missing	3.3%	
Born in US	92.0%	
Employment Status		
Unemployed	39.3%	
Employed	58.4%	
Missing	2.3%	
Familial Status		
Has current romantic partner	59.4%	
Married	24.7%	
Has children	14.8%	

Additional questions were asked pertaining to students' year in school, college affiliation, and current grade point average (GPA). Almost half of students were either a senior in college (28.2%) or a junior (21.3%). Roughly one out of four students (23.2%) were in the College of Criminal Justice. The majority of students had a GPA between 3.6 and 4.0 or between 3.1 and 3.5 (34.8% and 30.9% respectively).

Risk Factors for Intimate Partner Violence

Multiple risk and protective factors have been associated with IPV victimization (Kaukinen, 2014). We chose to focus on those most relevant to college students, including social support (Liang, et al., 2005), exposure to violence as a child (Bandura, 1977; Vezina & Hebert, 2007), relationship characteristics (Logan, et al., 2006), and history of IPV victimization (Smith, et al., 2003; Vezina & Herbert, 2007).

Table 2. Student Characteristics (N=1,135)	
	Percent
Year in School	
Freshman	15.7%
Sophomore	14.6%
Junior	21.3%
Senior	28.2%
Graduate Student	17.6%
Other / Missing	2.6%
College	
Business Administration	11.5%
Criminal Justice	23.2%
Education	14.0%
Fine Arts & Mass Communication	8.5%
Humanities & Social Sciences	7.4%
Sciences	19.5%
Undeclared	0.4%
Missing	4.3%
GPA	
3.6 – 4.0	34.8%
3.1 – 3.5	30.9%
2.6 – 3.0	21.8%
2.1 – 2.5	6.7%
2.0 or below	2.6%
Missing	3.3%

Social Support. The presence of social support was specified by a four-part question asking if students had enough people (coded as "1"), too few people (coded as "2"), or no one (coded as "3") that they could count on to: listen to their problems (M=1.24; SD=0.48), help them with small favors (M=1.28; SD=0.51), encourage them to meet their goals (M=1.22; SD=0.46), and lend them money (M=1.48; SD=0.70). In this case, higher values indicate lower levels of social support.

Table 3. Social Support Among College Females		
	Mean*(SD)*	*Range*
Social Support		
People Listen to Problems	1.24 *(6.04)*	1-3
People Help with Small Favors	1.28 *(6.17)*	1-3
People Encourage to Meet Goals	1.22 *(6.02)*	1-3
People Lend Money	1.48 *(6.36)*	1-3

Violence Exposure. In this sample, 17.4% of students reported there was physical domestic violence between adults in their household while growing up and 32.2% reported there was emotional abuse between adults while the student was growing up.
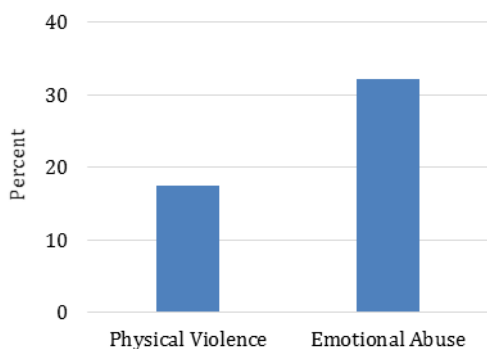
Figure 1: Violence Exposure

Relationship Characteristics. In this study, most students were dating/not cohabiting (49.4%), followed by married (24.8%), dating and cohabiting (22.7%), and divorced or separated (0.9%).
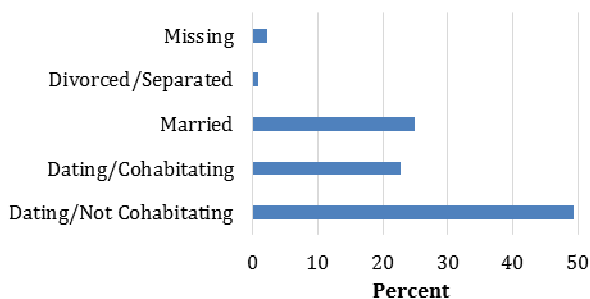

Figure 2: Romantic Relationship Characteristics

Additionally, the length of romantic relationships has been linked to increased verbal abuse; the longer the relationship, the more verbal abuse (Roberts, Auinger, & Klein, 2006). If students do, in fact, experience increased abuse with longer relationships, there is a possibility that they have been alienated from their friends and family due to the abuse (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012), thus decreasing their availability of safe places. In this sample, the average length of romantic relationships was 50.97 months or 4 years (SD=70.70), with a range from 0.25 (or one week) to 528 months (or 22 years). These questions were only asked of students in a current relationship (*n*=674).

Prior Victimization. Lastly, students' prior victimization history was recorded as a possible risk factor. In this sample, 23.4% of students reported experiencing IPV in their lifetime, 4.2% reported experiencing IPV in the past 12 months, 1.0% reported that they were currently experiencing IPV, and 7.1% reported sexual abuse by their partner in the past 12 months.
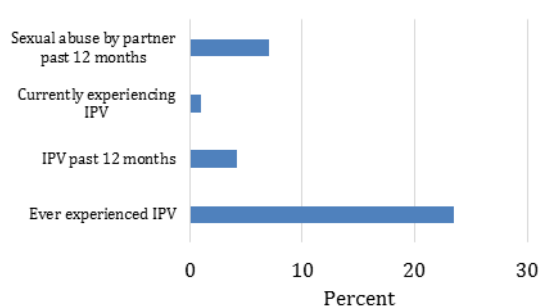

Figure 3: Prior Victimization

Safe Place to Go

As depicted in Table 4, 83.1% of female students indicated that they have a safe place to go in an emergency. Regarding where students would go, 38.9% noted that they would go to a family member, 32.1% reported they would go to a friend, and 3.9% reported that they would go to their significant other.

Table 4. Safety Planning	
	Percent
Safe place to go	83.1%
Where would they go?	
Family	38.9%
Friend	32.1%
Significant Other	3.9%
Missing	19.7%

Most students indicated they would bring cash (70.2%), their debit/ATM/bank card (78.4%), their cell phone (88.0%), their cell phone charger (76.5%), their house key (64.7%), their car key (82.2%), medicine (41.7%), a change of clothes (68.2%), and photo identification (87.2%). Few students stated they would bring baby supplies (8.4%). About one out of four students specified they would bring something else not on the list provided (24.8%), of which the vast majority (78.0%) stated they would bring their pet.

Factors that Influence Whether Students Have a Safe Place to Go

The analyses in this section focus on factors that may influence safety planning among female college students. Bivariate analyses indicated a number of significant relationships, which are reported below. For the sake of brevity, only statistically significant results are presented. Additional risk factors not significantly related to whether the student had a safe place to go included parental domestic violence, rela-

tionship length, relationship status, and prior experience with IPV physical victimization. Current romantic partner, witnessing parental physical violence, and experiencing sexual victimization by an intimate partner were significantly related to reporting a safe place to go.
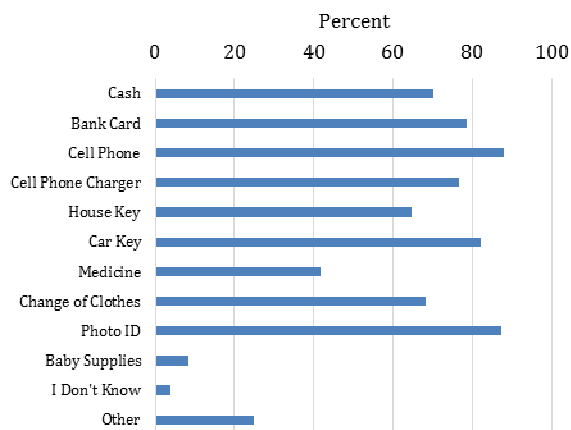

Figure 4: What Would They Take?

Compared to students without a current romantic partner (87.6%), female students with a romantic partner were significantly more likely to report that they had a safe place to go (92.7%; $\chi^2=7.53$, $p=.006$). Next, compared to students who had not witnessed physical domestic violence between their parents (92.2%), a significantly smaller proportion of students who had grown up with parents in a physically abusive relationship (87.0%) reported they had a safe place to go in an emergency ($\chi^2=5.09$, $p=.024$). Additionally, female students who had been sexually victimized within the past year were significantly less likely to have a safe place to go (81.3%) in comparison to students who had not been sexually assaulted (91.6%; $\chi^2=9.33$, $p=.002$).
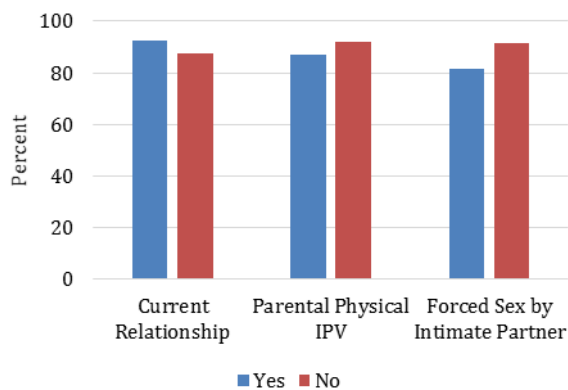

Figure 5. Factors Significantly Related to Reporting a Safe Place to Go

Lastly, among female college students in this sample, social support was related to whether or not they had a safe place to go. Students with less social support (e.g., someone to listen to problems, someone to help with small favors, someone to encourage them to meet goals, and someone to lend money) were significantly less likely to report they had a safe place to go (see Table 5).

Table 5. Differences in Social Support by Having a Safe Place		
	Safe Place	
	Yes	**No**
Social Support		
Someone to Listen to Problems	1.19	1.79
Someone to Help with Small Favors	1.22	1.83
Someone to Encourage You to Meet Your Goals	1.17	1.67
Someone to Lend You Money	1.41	2.09
Note: All differences are statistically significant at p < .05.		

Conclusion

Safety planning generally centers on the premise that individuals in abusive situations need to plan for the likelihood that they will have to leave their partner, either as a protection strategy (e.g., fleeing an immediate abuse situation) or as a leaving strategy (e.g., planning to leave after a certain period of time). As part of the safety planning process, a woman is asked to identify a safe place they can go, whether that be for the short- (i.e., protection strategy) or long-term (i.e., leaving strategy). While safety planning is a core component of most family violence shelters and victim-advocacy programs across the nation, very little is known about the use of this tool among non-sheltered populations, including college students. The current report provided results from what is believed to be the first empirical study of female college students' safety planning strategies.

Overall, the majority of students surveyed (four out of five) indicated that, if they had to leave their home quickly, they had a safe place to go; of which two-thirds identified a family or friend's residence. Most students would take with them items commonly included in a safety plan, including money, mobile phone, keys, identification, and clothing. One student, when asked what "other items" she might need to bring, wrote, rather tellingly about college students overall lack of safety planning:

My 72 hour kit (which has emergency supplies, food and clothes, for 3 days). Never thought about needing this for leaving an abusive relationship, but an emergency is an emergency. Everyone needs to keep one packed and ready to go. (Response 30).

Relatedly, another student wrote:

Most women don't safety plan because they feel they will never be the ones in a (sic) abusive relationship or if they are in one sometimes they feel the abuser will change. (Response 177).

A relatively sizeable number of students also stated they would take their pet with them (almost 10% of the entire sample). Prior research has found that safety of pets is a salient concern among survivors when deciding whether or not to leave an abusive partner. Pet restrictions in family violence shelters can be especially challenging for women who do not feel they have a safe place to go other than a shelter. Consequently, women may have to decide whether to leave their pets behind or stay with their abusive partner.

In addition to whether or not students had a place to escape to, we were interested in which risk factors might influence female college students' safety plans. Bivariate analyses found that students with lower levels of social support were less likely to identify as having a safe place to turn to in an emergency situation. Research indicates that informal forms of social support (e.g., support by friends and family members, monetary support, emotional support, and places to stay) are important for overall willingness to seek help in emergency situations (Liang et al., 2005).

Similarly, students who reported having been exposed to parental domestic violence were less likely to report having a safe place to go. While we know that exposure to parental violence is linked to one's own future IPV experiences (Vezina & Hebert, 2007), less is known about the relationship between parental domestic violence and safety planning. It is plausible that if students' parents were violent toward one another, they may not consider a violent home a safe place.

Another concern was the influence prior victimization may have on a student's safety planning strategies. Because victimization increases one's likelihood of re-victimization (Smith et al., 2003), it might be reasonable that students who had experienced previous IPV victimization may have engaged in safety planning in anticipation of repeat acts of violence. Rather, students who reported they had experienced forced sexual activities within the past year were significantly less likely to report having a safe place to go.

It is important to note that when asked where students would go in an emergency, less than 1% of the sample indicated they would turn to a local shelter or safe house. Is this because they are unaware of the existence of shelters/safe houses in their area? More than likely it is because college students are rather rich in social capital and hence have an extensive network from which they can pull should they need to. Case-in-point, roughly 2 out of 3 students reported they would turn to family and/or friends in a crisis situation. Among the few students who said they would go to a shelter, they pointed out that they would only do so in a "*worst case scenario*" or as an "*option of last resort*".

The bulk of on-campus violence prevention and education endeavors focus on sexual victimization. While there is good reason for this, considering the elevated risk female college students are at for *all* forms of partner violence, the findings presented in this research brief suggest that more needs to be done to instruct students in safety planning strategies. Multiple students wrote in the open-ended section ("is there anything you'd like to tell me") at the end of the survey how grateful they were for this survey, that it had them "*thinking*," that they hoped the results would help others "*in need*," but that awareness on campus related to safety planning needed to be raised. A few of the more poignant responses include:

There needs to be more of an awareness of harmful relationships and how to get out of them safely. (Response 139)

I think universities should help/advise students that are trying to get out of an abusive relationship. (Response 117)

Let's please find a way to stop domestic violence. (Response 183)

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RESOURCES

Love is Respect – Safety Planning Guide (http://www.loveisrespect.org/for-yourself/safety-planning/)

> Love is Respect is a group of highly-trained peer advocates who provide information and support to individuals in dating relationships, concerned friends and family, counselors, service providers, and law enforcement personnel. The goal is to raise awareness about unhealthy relationships and provide information on how to recognize unhealthy patterns and abuse in dating relationships. The Love is Respect website provides resources on the importance of safety planning and helps high school and college students develop a safety plan through an interactive safety planning guide.

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (http://www.ncadv.org/)

> The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence website seeks generally to bring attention about domestic violence to mainstream society. In addition to providing assistance to victims and other agencies in the form of programming and education, the organization provides information about collations against domestic violence at the state level and promotes events combatting domestic violence.

The National Domestic Violence Hotline (http://www.thehotline.org/)

> The National Domestic Violence Hotline website offers a variety of different services and publications related to domestic violence as well as information for survivors, family, friends, and abusive partners. The site also promotes providing 24/7 phone support and the ability to live chat with an advocate. Information for individuals that want to combat domestic violence is also available. To seek assistance through the National Domestic Violence Hotline call **1-800-799-7233**.

Texas Council on Family Violence (http://www.tcfv.org/)

> The Texas Council on Family Violence focuses on preventing family violence, supporting service providers, and informing policy. The website offers resources underscoring facts and statistics of family violence in Texas as well as enacted legislation and a section honoring victims of family violence. In addition, a complete list of family violence shelters in Texas is maintained by the website.

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www.crimevictimsinstitute.org