

Calls to police and police response: A case study of Latina immigrant women in the USA

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the experiences of battered immigrant Latina women when contacting police for assistance in attempting to reduce, end or flee violence. The research consists of interviews with 230 battered immigrant Latina women experiencing violence. The analysis examined the factors contributing to the extent, frequency and readiness of the women to call the police. The police response to and the effect of seeking help by battered immigrant Latina women on arrest of the perpetrator were also explored. The results show that the number of times and the frequency of contacting the police among battered immigrant Latina women was far less than would be expected based on their experiences with intimate partner violence. The factors which led women to call the police were mostly related to the stability of their immigration status, their children's exposure to violence, the women's region of origin and the frequency of domestic violence. The police response to this group of women demonstrates a lack of cultural sensitivity, and produces concerns regarding language accessibility and low rates of arrest. The paper concludes with recommendations about the need to better incorporate immigration as an additional factor in understanding intimate partner violence and help-seeking from police. We propose more thorough diversity training of police focusing particularly on immigrant battered women; the availability of interpreters for such calls within the immigrant communities; educating of the police about appropriate culturally based services available in their communities and better understanding of immigration options for battered immigrant women, including the protections afforded by the Violence Against Women Act.

INTRODUCTION

Most discussion of intimate partner violence and immigrants has become more difficult since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States. The priorities and concerns of the US as a nation have left researchers, advocates and

law enforcement officials struggling to work with immigrant victims of intimate partner violence without seeming insensitive to the other tragic losses and the prevailing sense of insecurity immigrant women face. It is, however, precisely at times of challenge that we need to continue to focus on women, especially those in the immigrant communities who are victims of domestic violence.

Immigrant women do not encounter intimate partner violence at a higher frequency than other women (Ammar, 2000; Orloff, Dutton, Aguilar-Hass & Ammar, 2003). However, they are at greater risk of longer exposure due to their inability to access culturally responsive services. The lack of culturally appropriate responses from the criminal justice system complicates the plight of battered immigrant women even further. Immigrant women encounter language barriers, cultural differences and stereotyping by the mainstream society which often compromise their ability to end the violence (Abraham, 2000; DasGupta, 2000; Dutton et al. 1999; 2000; Raj & Silverman, 2002). While there have been some attempts to remove the barriers that battered immigrant women face, these attempts have not been based on a systematic understanding of the experiences of the women themselves.

This paper addresses the experiences of battered immigrant Latina women when contacting police for assistance in attempting to reduce, end or flee the violence. Although the experiences of battered immigrant Latina women may vary from other immigrant women, the fact that they are the largest immigrant community in the US provides us with a solid base for an initial entry into understanding battered immigrant women's help seeking from law enforcement.

This paper analyses partial results from a large-scale research project undertaken by

Ayuda, Inc. between 1992 and 1995 which was intended to assess the needs of immigrant Latinas in the Washington DC metropolitan area. One of the primary objectives of this study was to investigate the barriers that existed for battered immigrant Latinas who sought assistance through the justice system and other social services to help them end domestic violence.

POLICE INTERACTIONS WITH IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES IN THE UNITED STATES

Historically, the American legal and criminal justice systems have been blatantly discriminatory with regard to minority and immigrant populations (Russell, 1998). Today, despite reforms, law enforcement involvement in minority communities in the United States is replete with evidence of discrimination, differential treatment of minorities, and brutality (Cole, 1999; Mann, 1993). Discriminatory practices by police officers have also extended to various immigrant populations who are too often perceived by police as persons not legally residing in the United States and are more crime prone. These assumptions, combined with the fact that newer immigrants are often people of colour and are living in poverty, have fostered the image that immigrants pose a problem and a danger to US societal fabric (Cole, 1999; Fix & Passel, 2001; Torres, 1991).

Many of the reasons for the strained relationship between immigrant communities and the police are similar to those in other minority communities in the US. These include selective law enforcement, brutal acts of violence; violations of the rights of citizens, and other coercive measures (Perilla, 1999). One added component in the strained relationship between immigrant communities and the police includes police officers' threats of deportation and

reporting of non-citizen victims and witnesses (Orloff *et al.*, 2003; Orloff, Lwekowski & Little, 1999).

These same problems of perception and stereotyping that affect and strain the relationship between immigrants and police officers also affect and strain the relationship between police officers and immigrant victims of domestic violence. Stereotypical attitudes from law enforcement harm immigrant victims both because they are immigrants and because they are women. Researchers have found that the patriarchal occupational subculture of police officers or departments often leads to individual attitudes which tend to blame the victim, project blame on other institutions, and foster negative images of women as manipulative individuals (Ammar, 2000; Wiist & MacFarlane, 1998). When victims are immigrants, violence is often viewed by officers as being a part of the immigrant culture and the lives of immigrant women, leading some police officers to conclude that domestic violence is not a crime when the victim is an immigrant (Dutton *et al.*, 2000; Orloff *et al.*, 2003; Rivera, 1994). Domestic violence, especially when perpetrated upon a person of the same race or ethnicity as the batterer, is not perceived as unusual within the immigrant communities by law enforcement officials (Firestone & Vega, 1999). In light of these problems and practices, it is not surprising that anecdotal evidence from advocates working with immigrant victims of domestic violence reports that the number of arrests for domestic violence within immigrant communities is relatively low.

The call for change in police relationships with immigrants who experience domestic violence is particularly important in light of the changing immigrant demographics in the US (and Europe). The rate of immigrants entering the US has tripled over the past generation and the 1990s witnessed the largest influx of immigrants

to date (Capps, 2003, p.1; Census Brief, Department of Commerce, 2002; US Census Bureau, 2002). A report analysing census data (Camarota, 2004) shows that the nation's immigrant population (legal and illegal) reached a new record of more than 34 million in March of 2004, an increase of over four million since 2000. In 2004, immigrants represented 11 per cent to 12 per cent of the total population in the US, 'the highest in eighty years' (Camarota, 2004; Capps, Fix, Ost, Reardon-Anderson & Passel, 2005). According to Capps *et al.* (2005) in 2004 there were 9.3 million undocumented immigrants in the country and they represented 26 per cent of the total foreign-born population.

Immigrant population now extends beyond people who are foreign born to include the children of these families. In the years 2000 and 2004, 20 per cent of school-aged children had immigrant parents and it is estimated that by the year 2040, 27 per cent of the US population will be immigrants or the children of immigrants (Capps, 2003; Capps *et al.*, 2005).

It is crucial to realise that the increase in the number of persons emigrating to the US means that geographic areas which typically have not had significant immigrant populations since the nineteenth century are now being called upon to respond to the needs of diverse populations of immigrants and refugees. In the 1990s, as in every year since 1971, the primary destination states for legal immigrants were California (291,216/28 per cent), New York (114,827/12 per cent), Florida (90,819/9 per cent), Texas (88,365/9 per cent), New Jersey (57,721/5 per cent), and Illinois (47,235/5 per cent) (Reardon-Anderson, Capps & Fix, 2002). Recently the immigration dispersal pattern has changed showing a decline in foreign-born populations among the top six states, except Texas (Reardon-Anderson *et al.*, 2002). There are new growth states receiving immigrants —

many have not seen this immigrant population growth for over 100 years (Saenz, 2004). Among the top receiving states are North Carolina, Georgia, Nevada, Arkansas, Utah and Tennessee (Nowak, 2004; Saenz, 2004).

The research discussed below provides insight into contributing factors which influence battered immigrant women's decisions to call the police and the problems they encounter once they seek help from law enforcement. The findings can provide important directions for providing appropriate legal, cultural and service delivery assistance to immigrant victims of intimate partner violence.

THE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN ACT AND BATTERED IMMIGRANT WOMEN

Police intervention in domestic violence cases has historically been minimal due to the perception that domestic violence is a private problem (Dobash and Dobash, 1979). The problem of lack of appropriate response from the police and extant police department policies in respect of domestic violence is further compounded when the battered woman is an immigrant. This can occur because the police do not have the capacity to communicate effectively with the immigrant victim in her own language, the police may use her abuser or her children to translate for her, the police may consider domestic violence a culturally sanctioned practice, and/or police may credit the statements of her citizen spouse or boyfriend over her statements due to gender, race or cultural bias.

The response to this lack of attention by police to domestic violence eventually led to the development of mandatory and pro-arrest policies that take away the discretion and power from police officers in deciding whether or not to arrest the batterer. Much emphasis has been placed on mandatory or

pro-arrest policies as a primary form of police intervention in domestic violence cases, but this singular focus can prove to be complicated and harmful for some battered women whose life experiences are determined by issues of race, class, ethnicity, and immigration status (Orloff *et al.*, 2003; Palmer, 1983; Wiist & MacFarlane, 1998).

The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), passed by Congress in 1994, improved in 2000, and being re-authorised as of the writing of this paper (2005), sought, among many goals, to reform the manner in which law enforcement officers intervened in domestic violence cases. The VAWA provided funding, technical assistance, development of model training programmes and support for police department units that specialised in appropriate response to domestic violence calls for help. Overall, although there has been significant improvement in police response to domestic violence in some communities following the passage of the VAWA, appropriate police response to domestic violence in many communities continues to be lacking. The personal attitudes of some police officers about what domestic violence is (a private problem) and how it should be handled (through mediation rather than arrest or formal charges) has the effect of marginalising victims of domestic violence and even disregarding their requests for help (Belknap & Douglas McCall, 1994; Orloff *et al.*, 2003). This paper explores the factors contributing to battered immigrant Latina women's willingness to call the police and police response to such calls of help-seeking.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research sample analysed for this study is drawn from a larger project on immigrant women who reported intimate partner violence and who identified Spanish as their first language. The sampling process was not

a random one, and that poses important limitations on the generalisability of the study. However, since this was an endeavour to recruit undocumented as well as documented immigrant women, there was a concern that the anonymity related to randomness would hinder the recruitment efforts. Also the exploratory nature of the research makes identifying *issues* the focus, rather than the extent of its generalisability. The women were recruited by announcements distributed at local institutions in the Washington DC metropolitan area, including schools, health clinics, churches, community-based organisations and by snowball sampling.

The participants were matched in terms of ethnicity and language and were questioned by trained interviewers who were members of the participants' own community. All interviewers had personal experience with domestic violence and acknowledged this in their dealings with the participants. Participants were briefed about the requirements of their participation and the research followed administration of a human subjects' protocol that described potential risks and efforts to minimise them, as well as potential benefits to participation.

The interview schedule was modeled after a Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights and Services (CIRRS) study conducted in San Francisco in 1990. The survey instrument in this study sought information regarding demographics, language abilities, immigration status, current problems, domestic violence, acculturation, support systems, economics, work history, housing, and other relevant data to help seeking. Interviews were conducted in Spanish with each session lasting approximately one to two hours.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to produce descriptive statistics and cross-tabs analyses,

and to conduct logistic backward regression. The backward regression was used to control for multiple independent variables and their significance at a given time.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

With regard to battered immigrant Latina women and the police, the study focused on five main issues: three relating to women's willingness to call police officers and two relating to police response to such calls. More particularly we explored the extent to which battered immigrant Latina women called the police to report intimate partner violence; the frequency of such calls; the elements contributing to women's readiness to call; as well as police attitude and behaviour towards such calls and their willingness to arrest the batterer.

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Two hundred and thirty immigrant Latina women who had experienced violence or abuse from a past or current intimate partner constituted this sample. The assumption of homogeneity of the terms Latina and Hispanic is problematic since it represents such a diverse cultural, political, social and economic setting. In general, Hispanic denotes individuals with Spanish background or Spanish surnames. Latinos is the term we use in this paper to denote US immigrants from Latin American countries. We have identified the regions of origin of the Latina women in the sample geographically as Mexico, Central and South America.

The largest number of women interviewed identified El Salvador as their country of origin (102/45 per cent), and Central America represented the largest region of origin in the sample (169, almost 75 per cent).¹ Women who identified their

region of origin as South America represented the second largest geographic unit in the sample (37/16 per cent).² Women from Mexico represented a smaller proportion of the sample (14/6 per cent).

The majority of the women in the sample were over 30 years of age (60.1 per cent, $n = 106$). Half of the women reported not being involved in a current intimate relationship at the time of the survey (50.0 per cent, $n = 109$). Two-thirds of the participants were employed (64.2 per cent, $n = 138$) either full- or part-time, however, many (60.7 per cent, $n = 68$) reported an average annual income below the poverty line (\$9,000). In addition, the majority of the women spoke very little or no English (75.6 per cent, $n = 169$) and a smaller number (20 per cent $n = 45$) reported to be semiliterate or illiterate in their native Spanish language.

A large percentage of the women in the sample who answered the question about legal status (209) reported themselves to be undocumented (44.4 per cent, $n = 95$). Within the three regions of origin — Mexico, Central and South American, those from Mexico represented the highest percentage of those reporting themselves to be undocumented (66.7 per cent, $n = 8$), while the other two regions had equal percentages from among the undocumented: Central American ($n = 67$) and South American (41.7 per cent, $n = 15$) respectively.

A little more than one-quarter of the women of those who answered the question about legal status had temporary legal immigration status (28.5 per cent, $n = 61$). Within the three regions of origin the highest percentage in those reporting temporary legal immigration status were from Central American (33 per cent, $n = 53$). The women in the sample from South America represented the second highest percentage with temporary legal immigration status (17 per cent, $n = 6$), while those

from Mexico represented the lowest percentage with such immigration status (8 per cent, $n = 1$).

Approximately one-quarter of the women (27.1 per cent, $n = 58$) had stable or permanent immigration (lawful-permanent residency or naturalised citizens). Those from South America had the highest percentage of lawful-permanent residence or naturalised citizenship (42 per cent, $n = 15$), while the survey participants from Mexico and Central America had the same lower proportion of those with stable immigration status (with Mexico 25 per cent, $n = 5$; Central American 25 per cent, $n = 40$).

RESULTS

Calls to police: The extent and frequency of calls to police

Not many of the battered immigrant Latina women in our sample called the police. Of the 230 immigrant women who reported domestic violence, a little more than 27.0 per cent ($n = 53$) stated that they had called police for assistance following violence or abuse from an intimate partner while in the US. From the regions of origin in this sample, the highest number of women callers were from Central America (81.5 per cent, $n = 43$), next were those from South America (11.3 per cent, $n = 6$) and the smallest number of calls was made by the women respondents from Mexico (7.5 per cent, $n = 4$). Among those who called the police, most women made three calls or fewer (74 per cent, $n = 31$).

Factors related to battered immigrant Latina women's readiness to call the police

Eight factors significantly contributed to battered immigrant Latina women's readiness to call the police. These included the length of time the women had lived in the

US, their current involvement in an intimate relationship, the immigration status of the women, the severity of violence experienced, the frequency of the battering, previous experience with injury, children's exposure to violence, and the existence of predominantly female support systems.

Overall, 65.1 per cent ($n = 125$) of the immigrant victims reported living in the US for three or more years. These women were twice as likely to call the police as women who had been in the US for less time (32.8 per cent vs 16.4 per cent).

Overall, 47.2 per cent ($n = 91$) of the immigrant women reported current involvement in an intimate relationship. These women were less likely to call police than women who were currently not in an intimate relationship (20.9 per cent vs 33.3 per cent).

Battered immigrant Latina women who had a stable immigration status were almost twice as likely to call police (43.1 per cent) than those with either a temporary legal immigration status (20.8 per cent) or those who were undocumented (18.8 per cent).

The sample consisted largely of immigrant women respondents who reported abuse that involved physical and/or sexual violence (84.1 per cent, $n = 190$) with a smaller number of women reporting abuse reported experiencing events that constitute psychological abuse only (15.9 per cent, $n = 36$).

Among those women who called the police 59.6 per cent ($n = 21$) reported some form of visible physical injury at the time they called police. Specifically, 51.9 per cent ($n = 21$) reported having bruises, 13.7 per cent ($n = 7$) having cuts, 11.5 per cent ($n = 6$) having wounds, and 7.7 per cent ($n = 4$) having wounds that made it difficult to move. Thus, 100 per cent of calls to police were from women who were injured, even though injured women comprised only 81.5 per cent of the overall sample.

The frequency of the battering incidents contributed to calling the police within certain parameters. Those in the sample who reported experiencing abusive incidents every one to two days (33.3 per cent, $n = 20$) called police more often than those who experienced violence between every three days to once a week (10.9 per cent, $n = 5$). However, those who experienced abusive incidents very frequently (ie, every one to two days) did not call the police significantly more often than those who experienced violence every one week to one month (31.4 per cent, $n = 11$) or more often than one month (37.9 per cent, $n = 11$). The small cell sizes may contribute to this seemingly unusual pattern or the fact that the frequently abused women live in situations of fear and intimidation that contribute strongly against calling the police. A larger cell size would clarify such a finding.

Women in the sample who have had a previous experience with injury due to domestic violence (79.9 per cent, $n = 147$) called the police almost two-and-a-half times more than women who reported never having been injured in the past (32.7 per cent vs. 13.5 per cent).

Overall, 12 per cent ($n = 22$) of the sample had been abused by more than one intimate partner, however there was no difference in the proportion of women abused by multiple partners who called police compared to women who had been abused by one partner only.

Women also called the police due to their children's exposure to domestic violence. Mothers whose children had been exposed to domestic violence reported calling the police more often (63.5 per cent vs 37.8 per cent).

Bivariate analysis showed that talking with more than one person about their experience with violence was associated with a greater likelihood of calling police

(31.9 per cent vs 0 per cent). All (100 per cent) of the women who called the police for help had spoken to someone else about the abuse prior to making any call to the police. In the vast majority of cases, the people they were talking to about the abuse were other women — female friends (49 per cent), mothers (30.1 per cent), sisters (22.5 per cent) or another battered woman (10.4 per cent) (Dutton *et al.*, 2000). Interestingly, however, while most women reported a 'supportive' (87.1 per cent, $n = 115$) vs a 'non-supportive' (12.9 per cent, $n = 17$) response from those with whom they talked, the type of response was not associated with the calling of police (33.3 per cent and 33.6 per cent for non-supportive and supportive response, respectively).

The eight factors discussed above are all important in understanding the nature of battering among immigrant women in our sample and the choices they made to call or not to call the police. Due to the large number of variables and their potential multicollinearity, we explored their influence in a multivariate analysis. Hence, a backward regression was conducted to examine the independent contribution of these factors to women calling the police (See Table 1).

The model shows that the two largest factors independently contributing to battered immigrant Latina women calling the police (after controlling for variable interaction) are the immigration status of the woman ($\beta = -.492$, $p \leq .001$), and her children's exposure to the domestic violence ($\beta = .451$, $p \leq .001$).³ The other significant variables by level of significance were region of origin and frequency of abuse.^{4, 5} The likelihood of calling the police is increased when a woman reported stable immigration status, and when children witnessed the abuse. The likelihood of calling the police was 10.7 times higher if a

Table 1: Multivariate predictors of battered immigrant women's calls to police

<i>Model</i>	<i>Unstandardised coefficients</i>		<i>Standardised coefficients</i>		
	<i>B</i>	<i>Std Error</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
(Constant)	1.348	.287		4.696	.000
Frequency of abuse	-.355	.146	-.316	-2.435	.019
Woman's immigration status	-.271	.072	-.492	-3.742	.001
Child exposure	.408	.118	.451	3.455	.001
Region of origin	-.305	.120	-.341	-2.543	.015

Note: Predictors entered into the regression included time living in the US, involvement in the relationship with a partner, woman's immigration status, physical injury, frequency of battery, previous experience of partner violence with injury, children's exposure to violence, talking with persons about the violence.

woman was from Central America compared to Mexico, and 7.1 times higher if she was from South America.

Police response

Police response is typically measured in terms of response time and frequency of arrest. Among those who called the police the response rate was generally good: 54.4 per cent (n = 25) reported that police responded within 15 minutes. Other response times were between 16–30 minutes (26.1 per cent, n = 12), 31–60 minutes (6.5 per cent, n = 3), and one hour or more (14 per cent, n = 6).

However, the events that transpired between the time of arrival and departure of the police raise questions about the nature of police response in the cases of battered immigrant Latina women. Upon arrival, in nearly one-third of all cases (31.1 per cent, n = 14) police never spoke to the immigrant woman who made the call to the police for help, speaking instead to the abusive partner (11 per cent, n = 5) or to others (20 per cent, n = 9). Although more than 75 per cent of the women in the sample spoke only a little English, only one-third (34 per cent, n = 16) of the

women reported that Spanish was spoken when police arrived. Finally, a little over one-quarter (28.6 per cent, n = 16) of police calls resulted in the arrest of the abusive partner. Among those who alleged an experience of a form of violence that would legally constitute a criminal offence, police made an arrest only 29.6 per cent (n = 16) of the time.

Neither the immigrant victims' or the perpetrators' immigration status nor the respondents' English language ability were related to whether (or not) the police made an arrest. The single most significant factor contributing to a decision by the police to make an arrest was whether the battered immigrant Latina woman had a protection order at the time of the call. Nearly one-third of respondents in the study, 32.7 per cent (n = 17), reported having a protection order in effect when they called police. Police were more likely to make an arrest when the victims reported having a protection order (50 per cent vs 20.7 per cent).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Eight factors were identified in the bivariate analysis as statistically significant and hence,

as important in understanding the motivating factors leading battered immigrant Latina women to call the police seeking help from their intimate violent partner.

These were:

- the length of time the women had lived in the US;
- their current involvement in an intimate relationship;
- the immigration status of the women;
- the severity of violence experienced;
- the frequency of the battering;
- previous experience with injury;
- children's exposure to violence; and
- the existence of predominantly female support systems.

A multivariate backward regression, however, showed that four of those factors were the most significant in terms of leading battered immigrant Latina women to call the police. The battered immigrant Latina woman's stable legal status and her children's exposure to domestic violence were the most significant factors leading to the calling of the police. The more stable the legal status, the greater the chances that battered immigrant Latina women (in this sample) would call the police to report intimate partner violence. Also, the higher rate of children's exposure to domestic violence increased the chances of the battered immigrant Latina women to call the police. Both of those factors are based on clear conditions of safety and protection. A stable legal status generally frees battered immigrant women from the fear of deportation — as an issue of safety — allowing them to focus on the dangers of intimate partner violence (Orloff *et al.*, 2003), and to call the police. In the case of their children's exposure to intimate partner violence, battered immigrant Latina women (in this sample) seemed to have a sense of urgency about the provision of protection for their children, making them overcome the fear of deportation and thus calling the police for safety.

The two other significant factors contributing to battered immigrant Latina's willingness to call the police were the region of the world they were from and the frequency of domestic violence they experienced. The conceptual framework of these factors is not clear and the results require further investigation. The emerging pattern from this study which shows that battered immigrant Latina women whose region of origin is Central America were more likely to call the police than those from Mexico or South America can be interpreted in a variety of ways. One can argue that this is the result of the area of the US where the research was conducted. On the one hand battered immigrant Latina women from Central America could be calling the police due to positive contextual factors. The Washington DC area, the place where the sample was drawn, has been historically home to Latinos from Central America. There exists in Washington, DC a network of community-based organisations offering services to the immigrant community, a community which is predominantly Central American. As a consequence of their history in the area, there are also more political groups acting as advocates for people from Central America. Such an interaction and history can create more awareness on the part of the community and the police, leading to more calls to the police. The existence of woman-to-woman support systems among women from the same country of origin may be another factor explaining this finding.

On the other hand, for battered immigrant Latina women from South America, negative experiences could be contributing to their fear of calling the police. South American immigrant women may be more isolated and have less access to support from women of their own cultural communities or advocates who have access to their communities. The sampling and the results from

this research can not provide conclusive interpretations of the significance of region of origin in calling the police among battered immigrant Latina women. However, it is anticipated that more research in various areas of the US and among diverse immigrant populations would provide a clearer understanding of how country of origin and historic experience with the police contribute to help-seeking from law enforcement among battered immigrant Latina women.

The finding of this study that there is an inverse relationship between frequencies of abuse and making calls to the police is a serious one. Both the bivariate and regression analysis point to the relationship between the severity of the abuse the lower frequency with which immigrant women make phone calls to the police to seek help as severity increases. This finding is difficult to interpret given the small sample of women who did call the police. However, other research has shown different results. Wiist and McFarlane (1988) showed that women who had used the police during the 12 months prior to their research had experienced more severe abuse than those women who had not. As such, more research, longitudinal in design, is needed to determine whether increased severity precedes or follows abused women's calls to the police or whether it is the reason for not calling the police.

Policing strategies in responding to intimate violence problems in immigrant populations do not reflect a careful understanding of the factors that contribute to battered immigrant women willingness to call them. Once victims have made the call, appropriate police responses (eg the deployment of bilingual officers, the provision of information about legal remedies available through VAWA, information about the existence of protection orders) enhance immigrant women's protection.

The women in this study made the decision to call the police influenced by diametrically opposed forces, namely comfort and distress. Many of the battered immigrant Latina women in this study called the police because their stable immigration status gave them a sense of reassurance vis-à-vis the police. Having a stable immigration status (naturalised citizen or lawful permanent residency) permits women to have a sense of belonging which further fosters the sense of trust of many US institutions and services. The fact that women who feel they belong to this culture because of their stable immigration status call the police more often to report their abuse, suggests that battered immigrant women are amenable to seeking law enforcement help when certain conditions are fostered.

Another comfort-fostering influence in the study is a sense of familiarity with US culture. The bivariate analysis in this study showed that familiarity with US culture (measured in years of residency in US), permits a better understanding of the fact that intimate-partner violence is a crime in the US and contributes to a decision made by battered immigrant women to call the police. The battered immigrant women in this study who had been living in the US for three years or more were twice as likely to call the police as those who did not (32 per cent vs 16.4 per cent).

A third comfort-fostering influence that contributed to calling the police by the group of battered immigrant women in this study, was overcoming their experience of isolation and silence. Being able to break the isolation/silence barrier by talking to other people (most particularly women) informally about their abuse; how the US laws and services try to redress such abuse; and how different the US system is from that of their original homeland, eventually lead to their calling the police. The fact that 100 per cent of the battered immigrant women had spoken to someone else before

ever talking to the police and that 97 per cent of the battered immigrant Latina women in the study who called the police had talked with more than one person about the violence, underscores how breaking the silence is an important factor; one which motivates women to call the police for help.

On the other hand, many battered immigrant Latina women called the police out of distress and because of concerns over their children's exposure to violence. They did so with complete disregard to their individual fear over deportation or maltreatment. The most significant distress reported in this study was children's exposure to intimate partner violence. Women respondents whose children were exposed to intimate partner violence were 1.5 times more likely to call the police for help.

Current involvement with a partner is a factor affecting willingness to call police for help can not be subsumed under either of the influencing factors discussed above. Women who are currently involved with intimate partners are less willing to call the police than those who are not (20.9 per cent vs 33.3 per cent). This is true, despite the reality that women who are currently involved with an intimate partner are at more immediate threat of violence. Numerous experts working with battered immigrant women note that women who are in current intimate relationships are not willing to call the police because of cultural issues related to enforcing the laws. Many immigrant women (Latina women among them) are afraid that the police would force a separation between them and their partner if they called for help (Warrier and Rodriguez, 2003, *personal communication*). Immigrant victims fear that this forced separation will lead to the victim's deportation. Experts argue that in many cultures outside the mainstream US population, immigrant women only want the police to mediate the

violence. They want assistance that does not require separation from their partners.

When battered Latina immigrant women do call the police for help, this study showed that police response in most of the cases was inadequate. Latina victims of domestic violence reported that police responding to calls for help generally did not intervene effectively and did not follow either pro-arrest or mandatory arrest procedures that were in place at the time that the survey was conducted. Cultural, linguistic and police handling of calls from the Latina women presented barriers to many of these women who were seeking relief from the violence.

Generally police did not treat the calls from the battered immigrant women seriously or appropriately. Once the police arrived at the scene — in 31 per cent of the cases of immigrant victims who called the police for help — the police spoke to someone else instead of the victim. In almost one-tenth of the cases police spoke only to the abuser.

The overwhelming majority (75.6 per cent) of the battered immigrants participating in this survey spoke little or no English. Talking to police called to the scene during a domestic violence incident is difficult and traumatic for any domestic violence victim.⁶ Only those battered immigrants who reported speaking English very well could be expected to communicate effectively with police in English. Even those who spoke English well, often find it is easier to communicate about traumatic incidents and intimate details of their lives in their native language.

These communication problems are even more troubling in light of the fact of the prevalence of physical evidence, crime scene evidence and the history of the abuse (that with proper interviewing the police could have discovered) present when police responded to calls from battered immigrant Latina victims. Despite the fact that 39.6

per cent of the time when the police arrived on the scene victims had visible physical injuries, the arrest rate for abusers was only 28.6 per cent. Further, this arrest rate is even more troubling in light of the fact that 32.7 per cent of the battered immigrants who reported domestic violence to the police already had protection orders in place.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to foster the conditions that motivate battered immigrant women to call the police to provide relief for them and their children from violence, the police ought to be sensitive to the legal, safety and cultural issues underlying the immigrant women's help seeking needs. Law enforcement personnel who are familiar with the immigration issues, domestic violence dynamics, culturally appropriate responses and have systems in place for interpretation, would increase the battered immigrant victim's comfort level and would increase the frequency of her help seeking from the police. Police officers who speak the language of the battered immigrant Latina women would improve the communication and hence, the service delivery. Police officers who speak the languages of the various immigrant communities in the US must be recruited, trained and promoted within the ranks of police departments.

Police departments should train or have available at their disposal interpreters who are themselves sensitive to the intersection of gender, violence and immigration. In addition to linguistic communication, a clear commitment to reduce the violence in immigrant women's lives, and a commitment to ignore the immigration status of crime victims and witnesses are critical. The intersection of gender and immigration status in the case of battered immigrant women makes it important that police (and

other justice system personnel) take advantage of every opportunity they have to disseminate to victims who are non-citizens information about attaining legal status through VAWA. Law enforcement personnel need to be trained to assist immigrant victims under new laws including the legal immigration status described for crime victims and domestic violence victims included in the Violence Against Women Act, 2000.

Informal and formal services which provide information and general knowledge about the U.S. laws and violence against women should be available and accessible to women in immigrant communities. This information needs to extend beyond written materials and should include public service announcements, themes in television serials, posters, and so on. These multimedia approaches can be very effective in reaching immigrant women who are not literate in their own language, and who need access to this important safety information. Finally law enforcement agencies need to develop real working relationships with advocates for immigrant women and with programs in their communities that immigrant women trust.

NOTES

- (1) Central American countries included Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama.
- (2) South American countries included Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Paraguay, and Uruguay.
- (3) The negative Beta value here for the immigration status of women shows that the more unstable the status (ie undocumented and temporary legal status) the less the women called the police.
- (4) The negative values of Beta in region of

origin is due to the coding of South Americans as the highest value in the regions and hence it reads the less the value of the region the more frequent the phone calls, hence meaning that women from South America in this sample have made the least calls to the police.

- (5) The negative values of Beta in frequency of abuse is due to the coding where the scale is 1 to 5 where 1 is less frequent and 5 most frequent. This means that the more frequent the abuse the less the woman called the police.

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