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Firearms and post-separation abuse: Providing context behind the data on firearms and intimate partner violence

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Abstract

Aim: The aim of this study is to provide insight from maternal survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV) describing their experiences with their ex-partners' firearm ownership, access, storage and behaviours in the context of co-parenting and separation.

Design: We conducted a qualitative descriptive study informed by the IPV and Coparenting Model.

Methods: The analytic sample consists of self-identified maternal survivors ($n = 14$) who completed semi-structured qualitative interviews between January and May 2023 describing experiences of post-separation abuse. Participants were recruited through social media and domestic violence advocacy and legal aid organizations. In the interview guide, participants were asked one item about firearm exposure: *Have you or your children had any experiences with guns and your ex-partner that made you or your children feel scared?* Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Interview transcripts were managed and coded in ATLAS.ti using a codebook. Codes were applied using descriptive content analysis, discrepancies reconciled and themes related to firearm exposure in the context of post-separation abuse identified.

Results: Six themes emerged related to firearm experiences and post-separation abuse: (1) gun ownership (2) gun access; (3) unsafe storage; (4) direct and symbolic threats; (5) involving the children; (6) survivors' protective actions.

Conclusion: This manuscript provides context on how abusive ex-partners' firearm ownership, access and threats cause terror and pervasive fear for mothers and children following separation.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors have agreed on the final version and meet at least one of the following criteria (recommended by the ICMJE*): (1) substantial contributions to conception and design, acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data and (2) drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Analysis of qualitative data provides important insights into opportunities to address firearm injury prevention.

Impact: Findings add to the contextual understanding of how survivors of IPV experience non-fatal firearm abuse. Existing quantitative data may not capture the full extent of fear caused by perpetrators' gun ownership access and symbolic threats. Data from this study can help inform firearm injury prevention efforts.

Patient or Public Contribution: The authors would like to acknowledge and thank the individuals who helped in cognitive testing of the interview guide prior to conducting interviews with participants, including (3) survivors of post-separation abuse. The authors would also like to acknowledge domestic violence advocates and those individuals who helped with recruitment and connected us with participants. Importantly, with deep gratitude, the authors would like to thank the participants who generously shared their time and stories with us.

Keywords

child custody; family court; firearm injury prevention; intimate partner violence; post-separation abuse; protective orders

1 | INTRODUCTION

Post-separation abuse is an ongoing pattern of intimate terrorism (Johnson et al., 2014) that occurs after relationship separation and is closely intertwined with firearm violence. Internationally, there is substantial variation in the proportion of intimate partner homicides committed with firearms based on jurisdictional laws governing household firearm ownership (Zeoli et al., 2020). In the United States (U.S.), household firearm ownership is prevalent, and women and children are at greater risk of victimization when firearms are owned by domestic violence perpetrators (Campbell et al., 2003; Kivisto & Porter, 2020). Firearm-perpetrated homicides in the context of domestic violence is a leading cause of mortality for women of reproductive age and is the leading cause of maternal mortality in the United States (Wallace et al., 2021). These femicides occur at the intersection of racism and misogyny and disproportionately impact Black, Indigenous and immigrant women (Messing et al., 2022).

Most research on firearms and domestic violence has focused on adult victims and intimate partner homicide as the primary outcome variable of interest. Yet, the use of firearms does not have to result in fatalities to create adverse consequences for victimized individuals. Little is known about the natural progression of firearm coercion, and how subtle or symbolic firearm threats may progress to lethal acts of violence. Despite the contribution of firearm violence and domestic violence to mortality of women and children in the United States, scant research has examined perpetrators' non-fatal firearm use in the context of post-separation abuse against mothers and their children.

2 | BACKGROUND

2.1 | Firearms and lethality in domestic violence

When an abusive (current or former) partner owns a gun, it increases the risk of homicide fivefold for a victim of domestic violence (Campbell et al., 2003). For victims of domestic violence, their current or former partner's firearm ownership and access in itself is the single greatest risk of being murdered. Despite the differences in firearm-perpetrated intimate partner homicides across countries, Zeoli et al. (2020) found that firearm use in intimate partner homicides is gendered: across multiple countries they found that women are more likely to be victims of firearm-perpetrated intimate partner homicides than men.

The United States has the highest firearm mortality for children among high income countries. In fact, the United States accounts for 97% of gun-related child and youth deaths when combined with all other Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries with above median GDP and GDP per capita (McGough et al., 2022). Firearms are the leading cause of death among children in the United States, and parental intimate partner violence (IPV) contributes substantially to these fatalities. Based on data from the National Violence Death Reporting System (NVDRS) in 16 reporting states from 2005 to 2014, approximately two-thirds of homicides of children ages 2-14 in the context of IPV were perpetrated by firearm (Adhia et al., 2019). Fowler et al. (2017) identified that about one-third of children under the age of 13 who are murdered by firearm are killed in the context of parental IPV.

Most murder-suicides occur in the home (81%), involve an intimate partner (65%), are perpetrated by males (91%) and with a firearm (89%) (Violence Policy Center (VPC), 2020). These intimate partner homicide-suicides are most often in the context of intimate partner break ups or relationship dissolution and often involve children as victims. Over one in seven (15%) homicide victims in a murder-suicide in 2020 was a child under the age of 18 years (VPC, 2020). Murders of school age children are disproportionately followed by the suicide of the perpetrator compared to children in other age groups, with over one-fourth (28%) of murdered U.S. children aged 6–10 years in the context of a homicide-suicide (Wilson et al., 2023).

2.2 | The post-separation context

Separation from an intimate partner, or estrangement, is a well-established risk factor for lethality, and is the most common precipitating event for homicide-suicides (VPC, 2020). Nearly half of femicides perpetrated by intimate partners are in the context of separation (Campbell et al., 2003; Wilson et al., 2023). The Campbell et al. (2003) study found that the combination of separation with a highly controlling perpetrator increased the risk of homicide ninefold. Multiple studies have identified that impeding spousal break-up, child custody disputes and separation/divorce precede homicides and homicide-suicides of child victims (Lucas et al., 2002; Lyons et al., 2020; Sillito & Salari, 2011). Abuse may escalate following separation, including perpetrators' use of an array of tactics such as stalking, intimidation, legal abuse, financial abuse and weaponizing children (Spearman, Vaughan-Eden, et al., 2023).

Following separation, survivors and their children typically engage with legal systems. When threatened with firearms, survivors may choose to seek a civil protective order as a safety strategy (Kafka et al., 2021; Lynch, Boots, et al., 2022; Lynch, Jackson, et al., 2022). Family courts are the central legal context that regulates the custody of children following parental separation. However, wide held negative myths around the use of civil protective orders to gain advantage in custody proceedings and false allegations impact the ability for survivors and their children to heard, believed and obtain safety. For example, in a qualitative study with ($n = 20$) judges in North Carolina, all the judges interviewed believed that individuals sought protective orders as a means to obtain custody, rather than violence being the underlying issue (Agnew-Brune et al., 2017). This bias among judicial decision-makers acts as a huge barrier to safety for women and children escaping abuse. A more nuanced understanding of firearm and domestic violence risk in the context of child custody is needed to promote and prioritize child safety.

2.3 | Non-fatal firearm abuse

Even in non-lethal circumstances, firearms are used to coerce, intimidate and threaten, although perpetrator motives may be difficult to ascertain (Adhia et al., 2021; Kafka et al., 2021; Sorenson & Schut, 2018). Some survivors may feel that the threat of firearm violence is ever-present (Adhia et al., 2021; Sorenson & Schut, 2018). Even when a perpetrator does not directly threaten with a firearm, the perpetrator may use subtle references and reminders of firearms as a tactic to terrorize. Non-fatal firearm abuse causes pervasive fear, leads to adverse health outcomes and impacts survivors' help-seeking and agency in negotiating safety and freedom from abuse for themselves and their children. Research in one U.S. study with a nationally representative community-based sample who experienced IPV ($n = 958$) found that 13.6% of women (equivalent to approximately 25 million American women) reported experiencing non-fatal firearm abuse in their lifetime as of 2020 (Adhia et al., 2021). Nearly half of these women (49.2%) had a child at home during the non-fatal firearm event. This proportion is probably higher in populations of a shelter-based women experiencing domestic violence. Sorenson and Wiebe (2004) found that over a third (36.7%) of women in a battered women's shelter had been threatened with a firearm.

Kafka et al. (2021) identified that spoken threats were the most common firearm abuse behaviour, experienced by 81% of their sample. These threats were often directed towards the survivor, but also included coercive suicide threats, or threats to children, other family members, friends or new intimate partners. Threats may be spoken verbally or communicated over technology (e.g. text, email and social media), through hostile gun displays (Azrael & Hemenway, 2000), or more covert tactics such as cleaning a gun in front of a survivor to send a message (Lynch, Boots, et al., 2022; Lynch, Jackson, et al., 2022).

Gun ownership and access have been associated with higher levels of reported IPV and severity (Adhia et al., 2021; Kafka et al., 2021). If a domestic violence survivor knows that their partner has access to a gun, other threatening and abusive behaviour may take on a more lethal subtext, one that is insidious to outside observers. Non-fatal firearm abuse may be one additional tactic of abuse in a pattern of intimate terrorism, coercion and abuse. For example, economic abuse may co-occur with non-fatal firearm abuse. In a study by

Adhia et al. (2021) ($n = 958$), over half of IPV victims who reported non-fatal firearm abuse reported their partner was controlling over money and finances, compared to only 20% of those who had not experienced non-fatal firearm abuse. An abusive (ex)-partner's gun access can inhibit a survivor's ability to negotiate physical and financial safety for herself and her children. Although separation and firearm access are well-established as risk factors for lethality, few studies have examined firearm exposure in the context of post-separation abuse and how children are involved or threatened.

3 | THE STUDY

3.1 | Aims

The purpose of this study is to examine descriptive narratives of ex-partner firearm ownership and access, storage behaviours and direct and symbolic threats among maternal post-separation abuse survivors.

3.2 | Theoretical framework

The IPV and co-parenting after separation (ICAS) theoretical framework (Hardesty et al., 2012) informed the current study's methodological approach and development of the semi-structured interview guide, examining maternal and child experiences of IPV, separation and co-parenting. The ICAS theoretical model provides a framework to examine the unique risks, stressors and challenges of maternal IPV survivors navigating co-parenting with abusive ex-partners and resulting maternal and child health outcomes. The framework provides a heuristic tool to elucidate the risk factors (types of pre-separation violence, demographic characteristics including relative power), protective factors (use of resources and protective/coping strategies), potential mediating variables (such as satisfaction with custody arrangements, child support and other legal agreements; boundary ambiguity); coparenting and post-separation relationship outcomes (nature of post-separation violence, harassment and control); and health outcomes (children's physical, mental and behavioural health; maternal physical and mental health). One question on firearm exposure was added to the interview guide to better understand experiences with firearms in the context of post-separation abuse. The ICAS theoretical framework integrated with a framework on Assault on Fundamental Needs (Spearman, Vaughan-Eden, et al., 2023) was also used to create an a priori codebook.

3.3 | Design

This qualitative descriptive study sought to provide context behind the data on firearm violence and IPV to promote better understanding of mothers' perceptions of their ex-partners' firearm ownership and access and frightening firearm experiences which can be used to inform prevention efforts.

3.4 | Sample/participants

The sample was drawn from a parent mixed-methods research study ($n = 33$) of maternal post-separation abuse survivors who completed semi-structured qualitative interviews to describe their post-separation abuse experiences and their children's health outcomes. The analytic sample for this current study consists of the 14 participants who reported

uncomfortable firearm experiences or that their partner had owned or owns a firearm (42% of the overall sample, with the other $n = 19$ participants not reporting uncomfortable firearm experiences with their ex-partner). Purposive sampling using snowball recruitment techniques was used to select women for participation. Participants were recruited by flyers shared with domestic violence advocates, legal aid organizations and word of mouth from other survivors who shared the recruitment flyer on social media support groups for single mothers (Instagram, Facebook, Tik-Tok, and Twitter). Inclusion criteria included women who had separated from a partner from whom they share a child in common, had a child between the ages of 6 and 17 years and lived in the United States. Participants were asked during a screening call if they (1) had felt they had a say in the outcomes of their child custody case, (2) if their custody case was considered to be “high conflict” and (3) if they had felt fearful for themselves or their children since separating from their ex-partner.

3.5 | Data collection

Qualitative interview participants provided oral informed consent covering the topic of the study, confidentiality, risks and a review of mandatory reporting guidelines prior to participating in the interview. Child abuse mandatory reporting guidelines were followed per IRB-approved protocol.

The interview guide consisted of 42 questions aligned with the ICAS framework on the following content areas: relationship, IPV, and co-parenting experiences including specific tactics and consequences of post-separation abuse, boundary setting, their children’s physical, mental and behavioural health and academic outcomes, legal system experiences and strength-based questions focused on mothers’ use of protective parenting and coping strategies. Interviews were conducted over Zoom, audio-recorded and transcribed. Duration of interviews ranged from 60 to 180 min. Participants were asked one item about firearm exposure in the interview guide: *Have you or your children had any experiences with guns and your ex-partner that made you or your children feel scared?* Transcribed interviews were de-identified and checked against audio recordings for accuracy and completeness by the first author. Audio recordings of interviews and transcripts were stored on a secure university server.

3.6 | Ethical considerations

Confidentiality and data security were monitored, and Institutional Review Board approval was obtained through the Johns Hopkins Institutional Review Board (IRB00336841). As part of the oral consent process, safety considerations for participants included choosing a location for the Zoom interview where they could speak openly without worrying about being overheard and wearing headphones if desired. Participants were also informed that if the interviewer heard sounds that indicated they may be in danger (e.g. an intruder), the interviewer would ask the participant if they wanted the interviewer to call the police. Participants had an opportunity to provide a safety word they could use to terminate the interview. For participants that described risk factors for lethality during the interview, safety planning was discussed with the interviewer (KS) and resources were provided to participants following the interview. Throughout this manuscript, we have chosen not to

report demographic information by participant to enhance participant safety and prevent possible identification.

3.7 | Data analysis

Interview transcripts were managed and coded in ATLAS.ti by three study team members. An a priori codebook was developed based on the ICAS theoretical framework by the first author. The codebook contained a code name, a definition and a statement of when to use or not use the code. Codes were applied iteratively and independently by the first and second authors during the data collection phase, generating in vivo codes that were added to the codebook. The first and second authors met regularly to discuss adding new codes or expanding the definitions of codes. Codes were applied using descriptive content analysis, and discrepancies were reconciled. We identified patterns, developed categories and named themes across the data. Pseudonyms and participant numbers (indicated by “P1” through “P14”) are used in place of their actual names to protect their identities.

3.8 | Trustworthiness

Using Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria, credibility in this study was obtained using multiple coders, intercoder agreement and an iterative process of discussing themes amongst the study team. A process for reflexivity, including memos and reflective discussions during the coding process between the first, second and third authors, enhanced confirmability. To enhance dependability, participants were asked the same question about firearm experiences in the interview guide, and each of the three study team members (KS, LM and AO) coded and identified themes separately before meeting to discuss interpretation and agreement. To establish transferability, the study team members discussed the codes and quotes in the larger context of the participants’ stories to ensure fittingness with the developed themes.

4 | FINDINGS

4.1 | Participant demographics and descriptions

This sample comprises 14 participants from 12 states in five regions (Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, Southwest, Southeast and West) across the United States. Demographic information is summarized in Table 1. The average age among this sample was 40 years old, with participants ranging from 27 to 48 years old. Participants had between one and four children, with an average of 2.2 children. Participants were asked during the interview how they identified in terms of race and ethnicity. Most participants self-identified as non-Hispanic white ($n = 10$), with one participant identifying as Bi-racial (South Asian and white), one participant identifying as Black/African-American, one participant identifying as white/Hispanic and one participant identifying as Asian (Hmong). Less than half (42%) of the participants were employed full time following separation.

4.2 | Themes

We identified six themes relating to participants’ uncomfortable firearm experiences with ex-partners: (1) Gun ownership, (2) Gun access, (3) Unsafe storage, (4) Direct and symbolic threats, (5) Involving the children and (6) Survivors’ protective actions.

4.3 | Gun ownership

All participants reported that a perpetrator's gun ownership coupled with other volatile, controlling and abusive behaviours created an environment of fear for survivors and their children, even when the perpetrator had not directly threatened the survivor with a firearm. Hazel, a mom to one child in Michigan, stated *"I know he has a gun, and that makes me nervous"* (P14). Leslie, a mom of one child in Pennsylvania, described how she *"didn't want a gun in the house, lost that battle, you know"* and that *"just the fact that it is in the house, and now I know it's in his house...that makes me uncomfortable"* (P13).

Julie, a mom of two in Oregon, described her ex-husband's increasing acquisition of guns during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and afterwards:

He definitely started...buying ammunition and gaining access to more guns during the whole 2020 period...He was also like, the insurrection and stuff like that, like it was that whole era. (P7)

The increase in Julie's ex-husband's gun ownership and his increased volatility around their separation was a *"very awful chapter."*

It was another thing that was just unnerving in my own household...did I feel uncomfortable? Absolutely. Did he threaten to use against us? No...But knowing how volatile he could be, it definitely made me feel uncomfortable...My friend was like, I'm genuinely afraid like you're gonna go missing one day, I'm so afraid that you're gonna be like one of those cases. (P7)

Charlotte, a stay-at-home mom of two in Georgia, described the subtlety with which firearm ownership created a sense of fear for her life before she left the relationship, coupled with violence towards their children and escalating abusive tactics towards her.

It was more subtle... I would say that I knew that he hated me. And I felt a lot of tension in the house. And he [was] just becoming more and more violent with the children. And he actually was escalating with me, as far as like screaming at me and punching things near me, and being more controlling financially, that I just thought you know what are the ways that he would conceivably kill me. (P10)

Charlotte also spoke at length about the problems she faced in mobilizing the law to achieve safety, addressing both the response she got in seeking a protective order and in family court, *"even when [the protective order] was active, it was not for the guns. They [police] let him take out guns from the house when they cleaned him out of the house"* (P10). Months later, Charlotte lost custody of her children when a family court judge granted her ex-husband sole legal and physical custody of their children.

Cammie, a mom of four in Arizona, described how she and her four children had been held hostage when she had attempted to leave. She was the only participant in the study whose ex-partner had supervised visitation only with their children. Most participants had joint custody, some mothers had lost custody and only had visitation (like Charlotte). However, Cammie was still navigating family court proceedings and was fearful for the court outcomes for her children. Cammie described how her ex-partners' gun ownership created a context of fear:

He was a gun owner, and he kept one in the glove box of the car, he kept one in a safe in the bedroom, and then he always just kinda had this shotgun kind of around, and that was actually part of the fear when he threatened to don't [sic] let me and the kids leave. (P5)

Many participants described not knowing the extent of their ex-partners' gun ownership. One of Charlotte's protective actions had been to have someone come drill out the gun safe to remove firearms. She described, "*I had someone come drill out the safe and open it. He had so many weapons in there that I had never seen before, and I was not aware that he even had them*" (P10).

4.4 | Gun access

In addition to gun ownership, ease of access and widespread accessibility of firearms from friends, family and in the community increased these mothers' sense of fear in the context of other direct, subtle or symbolic threats. Cammie's ex-partner was prohibited from possessing a firearm under the protective order she had obtained, yet she described how when she was setting up a supervised, recorded phone call for her children with their father per their family court order, her ex-partner had threatened her:

He held up a knife to the camera, and then, the moment my son walked back in, he quickly ... put it away ... when I've seen little threats like that, and knowing he could... I think anyone can get a gun anywhere. Anywhere. He'd go to gun shows. And like all of that, and it does, it definitely scares me. (P5)

Participants also described how the timing of gun acquisitions around separation was perceived as a threat. Eve, a mom of four in Wisconsin, described how she thought her ex-husband had been on the same page with her around keeping firearms out of the house they shared with their children before they separated, and a sudden change in this cause her to fear for her safety.

Before he filed for divorce, like he all of a sudden ... wanted to get a gun, and I thought that was really strange, and, like, I just remember feeling like, why, if you want to get a gun now? Like, you just didn't. – It didn't feel right. (P1)

Layla, a mom to one child in Colorado, described how her ex has "*a lot of guns. He was into them ... I think he had, I'm gonna say 9 or 10. I can't remember*" (P2). As with other participants, she was not aware of the full extent of gun ownership by her ex-partner. She described an incident that scared her after separating from her ex and moving out of the house,

The day after we... left the house and went to my mom's. I still had access to our house cameras, and I saw him ... leaving with guns. He had... all of them ... I took screenshots of it because I'm like, Oh, my gosh! Is he coming to my mom's? I was so freaked out. (P2)

Even when abusers were prevented from having firearms in protective orders, survivors identified multiple points where implementation of these orders failed that still enabled abusers to have access to firearms. As Cammie described,

The order of protection was originally a no weapons, so the police said... we're taking your weapons ... I still don't think they got his glove box ... handgun and then, when I renewed my order of protection, they messed it up and forgot to add the firearm thing, and I went back twice to the courthouse to fix it which isn't easy ... going to the courthouse it's a huge deal, and I tried to get it fixed twice, and they were like, we don't know how to fix this, because the judge didn't mark the box, and you'd have to refile. But you have nothing new to add. (P5)

Moreover, implementation failures from police and courts coupled with ease of access to firearms created concern. Cammie continued,

And so, when I knew that wasn't still on ...the new order of protection, it made me really uncomfortable, and all his friends have guns. (P5)

4.5 | Unsafe storage

The mothers in this study described multiple instances of unsafe storage of firearms that caused them to fear for their children's safety both before, during and after separation. Jane, a mom to one child in Pennsylvania, experienced direct firearm threats from her ex-husband as well as his unsafe storage of firearms:

He put loaded guns on the counters, and we had a 5-year-old running around. He would sleep with that under a pillow, he would carry it for no other reason than to be. He was paranoid, and so I felt like I was in danger, and my daughter was in danger ...He was just wildly inappropriate. (P6)

Jane had obtained a protective order. Yet, she eventually dropped it because of the pressure she felt from family court professionals to co-parent despite the danger she feared from her ex-husbands' firearm abuse and other abusive tactics. Jane is currently sharing joint 50/50 physical and joint legal custody with her ex-husband, although family court litigation is still pending. She has repeatedly asked for her ex-husband to agree to safe storage when their child is at his home and has asked for provisions in their custody order around firearm safety, but she said,

He's refusing to acknowledge that the firearm is not locked up. He's refusing, just flat out refusing. He says that's his right, and there's nothing I can do about it. (P6)

Participants also described other instances of ex-partners' unsafe storage of firearms around their children, often that they did not even realize, as in the example of Cammie. When the police came to take the firearms from Cammie's ex-partner as directed by the protective order, her ex-partner told the police about a loaded shotgun under the kids' library books,

There's a shotgun right here. It's loaded. So, I had no clue that this shotgun that was laying under the kids' library books in the living room was loaded. (P5)

4.6 | Direct and symbolic threats

Participants described a range of direct, symbolic and subtle threats with firearms, as well as suicide threats by the perpetrator with firearms. Some threats were direct firearm abuse, such as the abuse experienced by Jane: "*He brought one [firearm] home when he bought it and pointed it at my forehead*" (P6). Most participants described a range of subtle or symbolic

threats that would be difficult to prove in a court of law but caused them to fear for the lives of themselves and their children. Erika, a mom of two children in Arkansas, sharing joint physical and legal custody with her ex-partner, was able to obtain a protective order that covered her (but not her kids) when she left the relationship. Under this protective order, her ex-partner was prohibited from having a firearm. Yet, Erika described how her children's father was able to use their children to convey threats to her: "*My son did tell me... his dad has a gun. He's seen it*" (P8). Erika also described the way her ex-husband was able to use more subtle threats during a custody transition of their children—including threats with a fake gun while being a prohibited possessor—that let her know her attempts at help-seeking would not be believed within the legal system.

He's also come to my car with a fake gun. Which I know what that meant. That's a real subtle sign of I can kill you. The judge wouldn't think anything of it. But I know what his cues are. And that was really scary, because at the time he wasn't supposed to have a gun. But of course, this is power and control. Let me know, I don't give a damn about by a protection order, I'm gonna let you know I have one, and that's my word against his. (P8)

Participants described uncomfortable experiences with firearms that they perceived as symbolic threats, sometimes disguised as giving or offering to give them a gun as a present. When Isabel, a mom to one in California, and her ex-husband were in the process of separating, she and her child stayed in the home, and her ex-partner had moved out and was living separately. Her ex-husband threatened her: "*Okay, I'm coming back, and so you better be ready*" (P4). Isabel went on to describe the encounter,

He comes home from work, and he says, "Hey, I have a present for you" ... and he shows up with this huge bag, and he hands me the AR rifle and goes "here, it's for you" ... To me that was such a threat, because that's not a present for me. I don't own guns. I don't have guns. (P4)

After that, Isabel left her home with their child, leaving virtually all her marital assets behind and sought informal shelter with family with whom she and her child still live. She continues to share joint custody, and talks at length about how her fear combined with unequal financial resources to access the legal system impacts her ability to protect her daughter and obtain needed mental health services to help her child cope with ongoing trauma.

Amy, a mom to two children in Indiana, described how her child's father tried to buy a gun on her birthday from a family member around the time they were separating.

My ex tried to get [a gun] right [before] ... I filed for divorce...He tried to get his cousin to buy him a gun on my birthday, saying that it was for me. I never wanted a gun. So, the fact that he was trying to get this gun for me tells me, he was never gonna give it to me. He was going to use it on me. (P11)

Sometimes the threats or warnings of danger came from the perpetrator's family. Mary, a mom of four in California, reported that her ex-husband had acquired a number of unregistered guns over the years from her ex-father-in-law who was in law enforcement. "*His dad is retired law enforcement, and his dad's like collected guns over the years, with*

like serial numbers shaved off... And then [he's] given them to his son, my ex" (P12). But after the separation, Mary's former in-laws approached her:

His dad and his sister both told me that they were concerned, that he was gonna come into the home and kill all of us, and then kill himself. And so, I was afraid of, I still am afraid of that. (P12)

Suicide threats from perpetrators were sometimes perceived as an abusive tactic of manipulation, but still caused a lot of fear in survivors, as in the case with Laura, a mom of two in Oklahoma:

I hid [the guns] because I was afraid. Obviously, I probably should have been more afraid that he would use it on me. But I was under the impression that he was going to use it on himself. And that was a tactic that I think he used. (P9)

Other symbolic threats in the context of gun ownership and access took on an even more menacing context, like in Cammie's case, and even during supervised visitation:

Then one of the visitation reports said he was like playing on the playground with the kids. And a knife fell out of his pocket, and they have no weapons thing. The supervisor just let him put the knife back in his pocket and resume the visit, like he's not supposed to have weapons! (P5)

Amy described how seeing her ex-partner make motions of strangulation during custody transitions of their child was causing her to have panic attacks and regularly fear for her life, but like other participants, she described a sense of hopelessness around feeling that the court system would not believe her or listen to the danger.

He's threatened, not in words, but with motions, like he's gonna strangle me. I know, I know it's only a matter of time, but nobody else is gonna listen. (P11)

4.7 | Involving the children

Participants described direct and symbolic threats that happened during exchange of custody of children (like Amy), or perpetrator's using children to communicate threats (like Erika). Participants described symbolic threats towards the children. For example, Emma, a mom of two in Illinois, described how one time her ex "*loaded [a new firearm], and like pointed at the wall. But it was like the wall to the kids' bedroom*" (P3).

Amy has been experiencing post-separation abuse for 2 years, and discussed at length one custody exchange that her ex had requested at an unscheduled time outside of their custody arrangement:

He walked up to my car with her and was just glaring at me. When she got in the car and he started walking away, [our daughter] started crying and she was like... Mommy, I thought Daddy was gonna kill you. And she actually asked me that shortly after the divorce was final, she was 4 years old. We were going to sleep, and she goes, Mommy, did Daddy kill you yet? (P11)

4.8 | Survivors' protective actions

While participants were not asked directly about actions they took in response to threats of their ex-partners' firearms and were only asked about firearm experiences that made them feel scared, they described a number of actions they took to mitigate the risk of homicide and suicide for themselves, their ex-partners and their children, despite receiving little assistance from the legal systems they went to for help. These actions include hiding firearms or bullets, seeking a protective order whether it was obtained or not, requesting safety provisions for children (all participants) through family court custody orders, enlisting the help of law enforcement, storing firearms with family members and advocating for safe storage. For example, several participants reported hiding perpetrators' guns or ammunition during separation, including Hazel.

So what I did, is I found his gun when we were breaking up, and... I think I took his bullets or took, I took something, and then I hid it so he didn't know where it was. (P14)

In another example, Laura described domestic violence incidents she experienced in the process of separating from her now ex-husband, and how she hid his gun:

I hid his handgun, the night after the first physical domestic violence event, when he threw me on the bed. He showed up 2 A.M. the following morning with another one in his hand, telling me that it doesn't matter that I hid the first one, cause he still has this one, and he could use it. He was threatening to use it against himself, and I managed to get him to release the clip, and I hid that in my boots. (P9)

However, perpetrators also reported or threatened to report these protective actions, which survivors identified as increasing their risk to adverse responses from the legal system. Laura continued,

But and then, you know, we spent the next week. He was telling me, tell me where my gun is. Would you even feel sorry that I killed myself? I'm gonna report you to the cops for stealing my gun. (P9)

Perpetrators also used survivors' protective actions with regards to firearms against them in family court cases. For example, Charlotte had described getting a gun safe drilled open when her ex would not provide her with a key, so she could remove the firearms to protect the safety of herself and her children (she was also a gun-owner). The protective order she had obtained did not order firearm removal, and Charlotte eventually returned the guns to her ex-partner, but this protective action was used against her in family court proceedings by her ex.

I turned over all the ones [guns] that were his ...But that was a running thing throughout our family court hearings about how I've had this safe opened and how I stole his guns. (P10)

5 | DISCUSSION

The intersection of firearm violence and domestic violence is a public health crisis affecting families in America. This requires enhanced system coordination across both medical and

legal systems (family court, civil protective orders, law enforcement, criminal courts and child welfare) and a better understanding of non-fatal firearm abuse towards women and children before it becomes lethal. The results from this qualitative study identify that non-fatal firearm abuse as well as ease of gun ownership and access in the context of other patterns of post-separation abuse create contexts of fear and constrain non-offending mothers' ability to negotiate co-parenting. This ultimately resulted in the exploitation of mothers' reproductive, parenting and economic resources. As noted in Table 1, less than half of the participants had fulltime employment following separation. Firearm threats and concerns around ease of gun access played a central role in their (in)ability to negotiate physical safety and economic security for themselves and their children in the post-separation context, with downstream impacts on how this ultimately could affect the social determinants of their children's health. The accounts of the participants in this study are chilling both in terms of the fear these guns engender in women and their children and how consistent their accounts are with data around intimate partner homicide and homicide-suicides and incidents when children are also murdered with guns.

Abusive ex-husbands and ex-boyfriends' firearm access and ownership contributed to a pervasive sense of fear for adult survivors and their children. As noted in prior studies, fear of firearm violence predicts PTSD symptom severity among adult IPV survivors (Sullivan & Weiss, 2017). Non-fatal firearm abuse co-occurs with other threats (Lynch & Logan, 2018), consistent with work by Sorenson and Wiebe (2004), who found that gun use among IPV offenders was associated with the use of a greater number of other weapons against intimate partners as well. Additionally, this qualitative study provides context from survivors around their (ex)-partners' increasing gun ownership during the COVID-19 pandemic and increases in firearm-related abuse tactics, as has been described elsewhere (Lynch & Logan, 2022; Taylor, 2021).

Lyons et al. (2023) identified that one in five children in homes where firearm-related IPV occurred were directly threatened or harmed with a firearm, and one in three children in these homes witnessed firearm-related IPV. In their study ($n = 288$ respondents who endorsed that a current/former intimate partner had threatened or used a gun on them), a greater proportion of the children in homes who were threatened had mothers who were separated from their partners, signifying the importance of understanding firearm access and abuse in the context of post-separation abuse.

Survivors utilize a variety of strengths to seek help post-separation, and their children play a central role in their decision-making (Lyons et al., 2023). Consistent with this prior research, this study also identified survivors' utilization of several safety and protective strategies. The mothers chose to mobilize the law to enhance the safety of their children. Several sought civil protective orders to remove firearms if that remedy was available in their jurisdiction. Survivors also sought to obtain custody of their children to protect them, chose to forego child support or request minimal support, or gave up marital assets to avoid angering perpetrators. Survivors also enlisted the help of friends and families to store, hide, or remove firearms.

Prior research suggests that maternal survivors of IPV engage in more help-seeking behaviours when children are present during non-fatal firearm abuse or when children experience direct firearm threats (Lyons et al., 2023). In this study, participants described frustration, hopelessness and at times despair around judicial betrayal when they had petitioned courts to help with safety for themselves and their children but were not believed, or implementation of existing safeguards failed. These findings are consistent with work by Gutowski and Goodman (2023) that examined the mediating effect of judicial betrayal on the impact of legal abuse on an adult survivor's mental health.

Data from studies such as Lyons et al. (2023) and Adhia et al. (2021) suggests that childhood exposure to non-fatal firearm abuse in the context of IPV and post-separation abuse is widespread. Yet this phenomenon has been neglected in the literature. This qualitative study is an important contribution as it provides additional context around firearm ownership and access and non-fatal firearm abuse towards mother-child dyads. This context provides insight into opportunities for firearm injury intervention and prevention.

5.1 | Implications for nurses and other health care providers

Nurses play a crucial role in assessing and mitigating both firearm and domestic violence in the lives of children and adult survivors. Nurses and other health care professionals can help survivors with safety planning and administer risk assessment tools such as the Danger Assessment (Campbell et al., 2009; Lynch & Logan, 2022). Separation increases the severity of IPV and the risk of intimate partner homicide for adult victims. While separation is associated with risk factors for child homicide (in particular, revenge filicides), child abuse in the context of parental separation is not well understood. Safety planning should be an ongoing process during and after separation, as risks may change over time. Safety planning should incorporate children and recognize the unique vulnerabilities that mothers and children face as they continue to navigate co-parenting and legal barriers to safety that may constrain their space for action (Spearman, Hardesty, et al., 2023).

Health care professionals should assess for firearm exposure for children and adults, including firearm access, direct and symbolic threats, unsafe storage, as well as other ways firearms are used (Sorenson & Schut, 2018). Nurses can provide information about safe gun storage – especially triple safe storage (storing firearms locked and unloaded with ammunition stored separately) (Haasz et al., 2022), and the availability of third-party firearm storage sites in their region. Nurses can also provide resources to families for teaching children about gun safety. In many cases, nurses and healthcare teams often do not address firearm injury prevention when caring for patients, especially within the paediatric population (Haasz et al., 2022). Given that firearms are the leading cause of paediatric mortality, counselling on firearm injury prevention and assessing for firearm risk must become standard of care. Nurses should be familiar with the laws on extreme risk protection orders (ERPOs) in their state, as in some jurisdictions, health care professionals can petition courts for firearm removal. Nurses should also familiarize themselves with laws around firearm removal in civil protection orders, as these orders may also have additional remedies available to survivors, including addressing parenting time provisions that can protect children. Both legal mechanisms are important for firearm injury prevention.

5.2 | Implications for legal systems

Training for judges and family court professionals around firearm safety following separation is urgently needed. Firearm safety provisions should be incorporated into all family court parenting plans and custody orders (Zug, 2022). Universal triple-safe storage of firearms at a minimum should be a provision added to parenting plans, as safe storage has been shown to reduce the risk of suicide and unintentional firearm death for children (Haasz et al., 2022) and may reduce assaultive injuries as well. Other examples of parenting plan provisions (adapted from Weber, 2023) that can be incorporated into family court orders are listed in Table 2 (Weber, 2023).

Additionally, legal systems need enhanced coordination to improve the implementation of existing laws that prohibit possession by domestic violence offenders. Interdisciplinary efforts such as the Regional Domestic Violence Firearms Enforcement Unit in Washington State offer one such example of coordination that enhances judicial enforcement, respondent compliance, firearm relinquishment and ultimately promotes survivor safety (Ellyson et al., 2023). Courts should review files and hold compliance hearings to see if relinquishment has occurred. Family court professionals should also report non-compliance with firearm relinquishment to law enforcement and prosecutors. Non-compliance with firearm relinquishment must be considered in all custody and visitation matters (Weber, 2023).

Non-fatal firearm abuse must be viewed as a child maltreatment issue. Greater integration is needed across law enforcement, child protective services and family courts to promote child safety in the context of firearm abuse. Lyons et al. (2023) suggest that one possible mechanism may be to lower the burden of proof of imminent harm for civil protective orders and ERPOs to increase protections for survivors when children are in the home.

5.3 | Implications for policy

State laws that restrict those under domestic violence restraining orders from accessing firearms are associated with reductions in intimate partner homicide (Zeoli & Webster, 2019). Domestic violence is associated with a significant number of murder-suicides in the United States, especially in the context of separation. Stronger domestic violence legislation, both criminal and civil, is needed to protect the lives of children and adult victims of domestic violence. This study took place in the United States; however, this study has policy implications for other jurisdictions with accessibility to firearms. For example, in their systematic review, Zeoli et al. (2020) identified other countries outside the United States where firearms were the most commonly used method to perpetrate intimate partner homicides, including Portugal and Turkey. In contrast, no intimate partner homicides were committed by firearm in Fiji, and only 3% of intimate partner homicides in England and Wales were committed by firearm (Zeoli et al., 2020). Laws and policies that restrict firearm access and ownership do have an impact on reducing intimate partner homicide, and similar associations have been found in multiple countries (Australia, Canada and New Zealand) (Zeoli et al., 2020).

Batterer intervention programmes that assist batterers with coping with issues of anger, separation and parenting (Violence Policy Center, 2020) are important to help perpetrators. Policies designed to keep firearms out of the hands of abusers should be expanded to address non-fatal firearm abuse (Sorenson & Schut, 2018). Moreover, judicial decisions are a significant determinant of children's health outcomes, and judicial decision-makers should receive training on domestic violence, child maltreatment, lethality assessment, non-fatal firearm abuse and the impacts of threat, fear and trauma on children's neurodevelopment.

5.4 | Directions for future research

Future research should examine how non-fatal firearm abuse may occur towards children in the context of IPV and the impact of firearm abuse on the health outcomes of children across a range of domains (social, emotional, behavioural, mental, physical and academic). No existing risk assessment tool exists that assesses a child's risk of lethality; there is an urgent need for valid and reliable instruments that can measure and assess child risk. There is a need for population-based epidemiological data on the prevalence of non-fatal firearm abuse and research that examines the way that firearms are used to threaten and coerce children, particularly following parental separation. No government entity is tracking judicial decisions and child morbidity and mortality outcomes. Given this contribution to paediatric mortality, this warrants further attention.

5.5 | Limitations

This sample was not recruited specifically for firearm exposure, rather was a community-based sample recruited for experiences of post-separation abuse, family court involvement and children's health. Yet within the overall sample of self-identified survivors of post-separation abuse in the parent study, 42% disclosed "uncomfortable" or threatening firearm experiences with their ex-partner. These are incidental findings and warrant further investigation. This sample lacked diversity and was a highly educated sample with relative access to the legal system. Given the racial disparities in domestic violence and firearm violence that result from historical and current contexts of structural racism, this is an urgent problem to address in research and practice. More attention is needed on firearm threats in diverse populations and the intersections with (lack of) access to the legal system and disparities in legal system responses to help-seeking.

Firearm exposure represented just one aspect of post-separation abuse that created a pervasive sense of fear. In our study, health consequences cannot be disentangled from firearm threats alone; rather, they are part of persistent experiences of toxic stress for mothers and children. This study did not examine the ways in which location influenced firearm experiences, help-seeking and legal system responses (e.g. relevant state laws pertaining to domestic violence and firearm ownership, or shared parenting statutes). However, this is another important direction for future research, as inequity across state lines can exacerbate disparities in outcomes for domestic violence victims (see Sidorsky & Schiller, 2023). This holds for disparities in firearm laws across international jurisdictions and warrants further attention in other countries. The findings of this study cannot be generalized to populations beyond those included in the sample. Despite these limitations,

this is one of the first qualitative studies to ask about non-lethal firearm exposure, specifically with maternal child dyads.

6 | CONCLUSIONS

The findings from this study shed light on the context behind the data on firearms and intimate partner violence and can inform prevention efforts and policies. This study adds to our knowledge of how firearms are used by abusive ex-partners post-separation to terrify the mothers of their children and how these survivors experience non-fatal firearm abuse. Existing quantitative data may not capture the full extent of fear caused by the perpetrator's gun ownership, access and threats. Analysis of qualitative data demonstrates important insights into the many opportunities that exist for health and legal systems to address firearm injury prevention to prevent lethality and promote maternal and child health.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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TABLE 1

Demographic characteristics of maternal survivors of post-separation abuse describing uncomfortable firearm experiences ($n = 14$).

| | |
|---------------------------------|-----------|
| Average maternal age (mean, SD) | 40.5, 5.2 |
| Number of children | |
| 1 | 5 (36%) |
| 2 | 6 (43%) |
| 3 | 0 (0%) |
| 4 | 3 (21%) |
| Age of children | |
| Under 6 | 3 (11%) |
| 6–12years old | 20 (71%) |
| 13–17years old | 5 (18%) |
| Highest level of education | |
| Associates/Some college | 4 (29%) |
| Bachelors | 2 (14%) |
| Masters | 7 (50%) |
| PhD | 1 (7%) |
| Race/Ethnicity | |
| Asian | 1 (7%) |
| Bi-racial | 1 (7%) |
| Black/African American | 1 (7%) |
| White, Hispanic | 1 (7%) |
| White, non-Hispanic | 10 (71%) |
| Current Employment Status | |
| Student | 1 (7%) |
| Part time employed | 3 (21%) |
| Full time employed | 6 (43%) |
| Stay-at-home caregiving | 4 (29%) |

TABLE 2

Parenting plan provision examples.

| |
|--|
| Firearms will be stored safely, locked and unloaded and separate from ammunition and as legally required |
| Neither parent will purchase or maintain firearms in the home without the consent of the other parent |
| Neither parent will allow the children to visit or stay overnight in a home where there are firearms present, whether or not the parent is present, unless firearms are stored safely, locked and unloaded and separate from ammunition and as required by law |
| All laws regarding firearm use will be followed |
| Parties will cooperate with restraining order and other prohibitions regarding firearms |

Note: Adapted from Weber (2023).

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