

## **Writing Toward Wellness: The Power of Personal Narratives for Survivors of Domestic Violence**

Excerpted from Honors Thesis

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### **ABSTRACT**

According to works by Jenifer Lunden (2013), James W. Pennebaker (2007), and other researchers, narrative writing has proven to be beneficial in helping people recover from traumatic events. Therefore, the use of the narrative writing technique can be a valuable way to assess the dimensions of wellness of survivors of domestic violence. A greater focus on restoration is imperative to developing and maintaining stability, which will result in a better quality of life for survivors, after trauma, displacement, and living in shelters.

This study combined personal narrative with research for the purpose of understanding Dr. Bill Hettler's (1976) "The Six Dimensions of Wellness" of domestic violence survivors, living in a shelter. Participants answered prepared survey questions regarding their occupational, physical, social, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional wellness. The study brought about self-realization for the woman, resulting in a more positive attitude, and insights to areas that they need to address in order to improve the quality of their lives.

**KEY WORDS:** Dimensions of wellness, illnesses, self-sufficiency

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## INTRODUCTION

Despite extensive research on domestic violence it appears that there is a gap in practical cost-effective ways to improve quality of life and promote self-sufficiency for survivors after displacement and staying in shelters. This study hypothesizes that focusing on the dimensions of wellness may enhance the quality of life, help survivors to make better decisions, and hopefully end the cycle of violence in their families.

### *The Creative Nonfiction Craft: Combining Research and Personal Narrative*

Research indicates that writing is a powerful instrument that can produce positive and negative effects based on the content of the writing. The selected authors in this article used narrative writing to share difficult personal experiences without losing sight of facts that are related to their lives, which are valuable to their readers.

Jenifer Lunden, author of “Salvage, Salvation, Slave, Writing That Heals,” gives insight into the effects of unaddressed trauma, especially childhood trauma that develops into health crises in adulthood (Lunden Salvage, Salvation...). Lunden effectively makes a connection between past circumstances and present crisis. Lunden states that she behaved as if she was fine and believed she was fine. Despite her actions and beliefs, something contrary manifested in her body. Lunden sought relief through writing, however, her early attempts only produced negative results because she wrote negative words. She continuously wrote “I am broken,” and reiterating this negative phrase caused her condition to deteriorate and kept her in a broken state. It appears that the suppressed trauma continued to produce a distorted self-image for the author and prevented healing. It was after Lunden’s friend encouraged her to get to the root of the problem that Lunden’s perspective changed; so did her writing as well as her physical and emotional health.

The realization that choice matters opened the path for Lunden to write about the painful details of her life. Exposing the trauma causes it to lose its powerful grip on the individual. The process may not be instantaneous and may work at a different pace for each individual, but clearly,

writing about difficult situations leads to benefits, as demonstrated by Lunden. Lunden states that the writing process helps with sorting, organizing, and interpreting life experiences. The interpretation process helps to create a complete picture of past events and allows the individual to see the effects on their lives. A part of the healing process comes from self-realization, when the person is able to see clearly for themselves the issues that they need to change or accept so that they can move forward (Lunden Salvage, Salvation...). Evidence to support this claim comes from the moment the author realized that she had a choice. She states, “After many years of this, I realized it was within my power to make another story about what was happening to me” (Lunden Salvage, Salvation...). Self-realization is more effective than having someone tell the person what is wrong or what they need to address. Therefore, personal responsibility and choice appears to have a tremendous effect on an individual.

Several studies cited in Lunden’s article supports the premise that choice and personal responsibility help individuals to improve their lives. Lunden cites James W. Pennebaker’s theory about the effects of suppressed stories. This theory supports Lunden’s claim that her illness was related to the suppressed traumas of her past. According to Pennebaker, suppressed stories are “low level stressors and physiological work” (Lunden Salvage, Salvation...). Narrative writing is one inexpensive way to release negative stressors. This was evident in the Pennebaker study where students improved their health after writing about traumatic experiences. Again, the benefits appear to come from exposing the trauma as well as self-realization. Lunden describes this as “dissolving their constricting power” (Lunden Salvage, Salvation...). The inference that can be drawn from this concept is that anything that is not allowed to flow through the human system becomes a hindrance, “chunks of ice” (Lunden Salvage, Salvation...). Therefore, unaddressed trauma can be seen as a barrier to health, and wellbeing.

Lunden demonstrates the power of choice and that writing can have positive and negative effects. She states that her first attempts to write her story were ineffective because she was analyzing her story, not telling it, therefore,

perception plays a role in narrative writing. The purpose of the writing determines the results. Supporting evidence comes from the Pennebaker study, in which the control group who wrote about unimportant topics did not reduce visits to the health center (Lunden Salvage, Salvation...). Lunden's article shows that sensory overload, especially an overload of negative events and feelings, leads to constant movement without progress or purpose, which she describes as the "whirlpool" effect. Narrative writing appears to be a tool that can interrupt the "whirlpool," help change direction, and purpose.

Lunden also refers to forgiveness and discovering the "creative self," which connects the individual to God (Lunden Salvage, Salvation...). Through the writing process, the individual is able to perceive that they are more valuable than the illness or trauma that has kept them bound in suffering. Also, from Lunden's perspective the discovery of the ability to forgive others, as well as the self, contributes to healing. Un-forgiveness can be described as a concealed wound, similar to the "physiological work, low level stressors," mentioned in Pennebaker's study. Therefore, forgiving the person who caused the hurt leads to the release of the pain and helps to heal the concealed wound.

Through the writing process, positive results come from within and empower individuals to help themselves. Lunden concludes that writing helps to find "new meanings, find peaceful resolution, and create a pathway to continuous healing" (Lunden Salvage, Salvation...). The author cites several studies that show the benefits of combining personal narrative and research. These studies demonstrate that research can reflect what is happening to ordinary people, while making the studies more reader friendly to a wider audience. Separating the stories from research can be a disservice to the individuals who participated in the study. Overall, Lunden effectively shows that narrative writing can help restore a person's health, as well as add value to research.

In "Thinking Writing, Publishing, Using Narrative to Bridge the Gap Between Science Policy and the Public" author Lee Gutkind answers the question of whether or not science policies can be simplified and made understandable to ordinary citizens, especially

the people who are affected by these policies. Gutkind shows that creative non-fiction can explain these policies to members of society (Gutkind Thinking, Writing, Publishing...). The pilot project described in this work, which paired policy scholars with creative writers, can be viewed in the same manner as combining research with narrative writing. Gutkind states that this collaborative effort resulted in several policy publications that were reader friendly. The long term relationships and understanding between these two different groups show that writing is a powerful instrument when used properly, as validated by Gutkind.

Gutkind highlights the gap between science, policy, and the public. It is possible that other researchers can reduce any remaining gap between research and narrative writing in order to benefit a wider section of society. As stated by Gutkind, most people ignore policies because the language is too technical (Gutkind Thinking, Writing, Publishing...). Research can also be ignored because of technical language. For example, a woman suffering from the effects of domestic violence most likely will not be inclined to read a forty-page report, which reflects data and is written in technical language that does not relate to her situation.

From my own experience, narrative writing can be very effective in helping others and should be utilized more across disciplines. Pennebaker, Lunden, and Gutkind all show that this is possible with their work. Narrative writing helped me when I sought help to recover from divorce and homelessness, at a non-denominational church in 2013. The narratives at the church focused on previous trauma, social, emotional, and spiritual restoration.

The term narrative writing was not mentioned, nor explained to me, and I was completely unaware of this term until I began my summer research in 2015. The narrative writing technique was useful in helping me to find a balance and a path to healing. My summer research helped me to realize that I could blend these two proven principles, narrative writing, and "The Six Dimensions of Wellness," used by the National Wellness Institute, because both principles had played an important role in helping me to rebuild my life.

Forgiveness was one of the key elements of that initial writing and was also addressed on other occasions. Lunden, author of “Salvage, Salvation, Slave Writing That Heals,” also mentions the importance of forgiveness and its benefits in her article. After the narrative sessions at my church I began to write scholarship essays to pay for my college expenses. It took several essays before I realized that I had been telling my story. I also realized that the narrative contents no longer had a debilitating effect on me. There have only been a few scholarships that I did not receive, most of which were denied because I was already fully funded.

Further relief came through writing at a Monday night course at my church. This course was designed by a survivor, and a veteran of the U.S Army, to help members of the church move forward after different types of trauma, such as divorce, abuse, and the death of a loved one. Writing topics were varied and detailed. Looking back, after writing about each topic I was able to see the events from a different perspective. Both the course and the individual time with the counselor provided a powerful boost to my self-esteem and self-image, as did the discovery of the dimensions of wellness. I hope to continue using these methods to help others find healing.

## **MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT SHELTERS**

Unfounded assumptions about the “poor, uneducated women who only want the government to take care of them” make it harder for women to break the cycle of violence and move out of the welfare system. Yes, many of these women are poor and uneducated, however, I have met a woman with a Master of Fine Arts and Creative Writing, a Nurse from Johns Hopkins University, a Tax Accountant, and a High School Computer Science Teacher in two different shelters in two different states. It is important to note that these women had a living wage, which made it easier for them to become self-sufficient. However, for women without a living wage the factors against them are endless: child care issues, transportation, health problems, are just a few of the hindrances women face when trying to rebuild their lives. The public

misconception that women in shelters want to depend on the government is a harmful stereotype; a nurse is not poor or uneducated, yet she is placed in the same category as everyone else.

Some women have developed co-dependency or learned helplessness after being under their abusers’ control for extended periods of time. I have met women who, when given a list of resources to help them, dissolved into panic attacks. They had never been given the responsibility to do things for themselves and had no idea how to follow procedures. In addition, the limited resources available only provided enough help to keep the women alive, but not healthy, or self-sufficient.

## **THE LEARNING PROCESS**

After a literature review, I realized that domestic violence is not under researched. Existing literature shows the benefits of narrative writing and forgiveness, the effects of domestic violence on survivors’ well-being, the number of children affected, pervasiveness nationally, and the cost to society. The most disturbing aspect of domestic violence is the number of children that are affected. It appears that the lack of implementation of the results of previous studies is a hindrance for survivors.

### *The Effects of Domestic Violence on Survivors’ Dimensions of Wellness:*

An article, titled “Applying Environmental Psychology in the Design of Domestic Violence Shelters,” addresses the issues of shelter environments, “overcrowding, small spaces, and too much stress are just some of the factors that residents face on a daily basis. Participants in this study compare the shelters to prisons. From a child’s perspective good people are kept behind these doors while the bad people stay out” (Chanmugam, Grieder 368). This study is extremely valuable because it gives the perspectives of children.

Further supporting evidence that domestic violence affects survivors’ dimensions of wellness comes from the article, “Domestic Violence and Women’s Employment: Fixed Effects Models of Three Waves of Women’s Employment Study Data.” From the perspectives

of these authors “Domestic violence has a negative effect on women’s employment, more abused women receive welfare than those who are not abused. Failure to work or take part in required training programs can lead to benefit loss. Furthermore, abusers can impede women’s ability to work and receive training. Additionally, various kinds of diseases, such as back pain, digestive problems, posttraumatic stress disorder, and depression persist in the lives of these women” (Tolman, Wang147-148). This article provides evidence that shows the long-term impact of domestic violence on women’s overall well-being.

The article, “Does Job Stability Mediate the Relationship Between Intimate Partner Violence and Mental Health Among Low-Income Women?” supports Tolman and Wang’s study, highlighting the fact that “abusers hinder women’s employment, that health issues compound the negative effects on survivors’ well-being, and that domestic violence reduces a woman’s ability to sustain employment” (Sullivan, Kennedy 600-601). Sullivan and Kennedy’s study give reasons to address this problem in a holistic manner.

Annually, over “twelve million people in the United States are affected by domestic violence. The rate of domestic violence is higher for younger women, especially those under thirty-four years of age” (The National Domestic Violence Hotline). The Texas Council of Family Violence states that there were “185,817 domestic violence incidents in 2014. The state was able to shelter 23,311 people, but was unable to meet the need for shelter for another 14,801 people” (Texas Counsel on Family Violence). Texas Council on Family Violence also provides information about the number of women killed in Texas because of domestic violence. (See Fig. I).



Fig. I. Number of women killed in Texas alone over a period of five years (Texas Council on Family Violence).

Locally, the San Antonio Police Department reports that it received an increase in calls between 2011 and 2012, from every area of the city, (San Antonio Police Department). This report dispels the notion that domestic violence only affects the poor. Additionally, the San Antonio Police Department provides information that reflects the number of calls for domestic violence service. (See Fig. II).

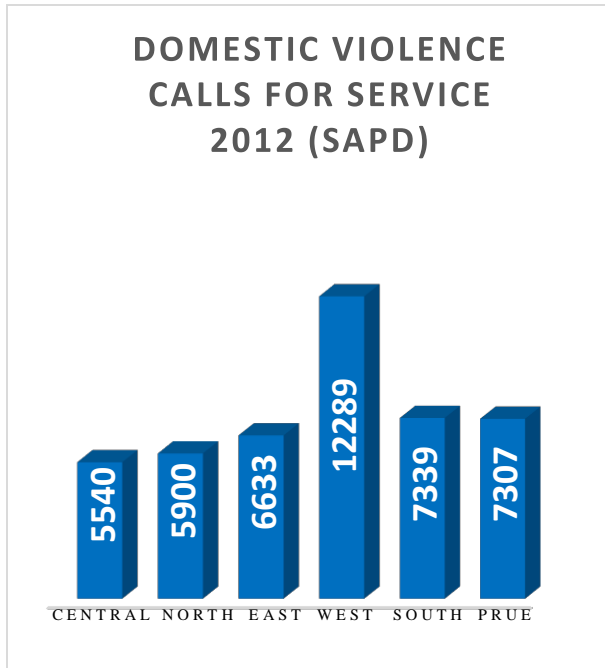


Fig. II. These numbers are significant because the numbers for 2011 are equally horrendous. For example, in 2011 the numbers for the West Side were only lower by “389 and on Sundays the amount of calls escalates to 792” (San Antonio Police Department).

According to Alex Alvarez and Ronet Bachman, authors of *Violence The Enduring Problem* it is difficult to truly define the number of people affected by this social problem since a vast number of these crimes are never reported. However, people of lower socioeconomic status appear to be affected on a larger scale than the rest of the population. Additionally, some children tend to repeat the cycle of violence (Alvarez and Bachman 120). Based on this statement and the above graph, especially the West Side of San Antonio, there is a need for a new course of action.

The San Antonio Police report and Alvarez and Bachman’s book, demonstrate that San Antonio, and Texas as a whole, need to reevaluate policies regarding domestic violence, specifically policies regarding assistance for women and children in shelters. The goal of any new policy should be to promote wellness, restoration, and foster self-sufficiency, in order to prevent children from repeating the violence they have learned.

Additional evidence that demonstrates the need to foster restoration and self-sufficiency can be derived from the following article, “Perspectives on US Domestic Violence Emergency Shelters: What do Young Adolescent Residents and Their Mothers Say?” Author Amy Chanmugam contends that “Fifteen point five million children in the United States, from birth to age seventeen, are living with domestic violence, two point three million of these children range from age twelve to seventeen” (Chanmugam 394). Figure III illustrates the number of children represented in the Chanmugam’s study. (See Fig. III.)

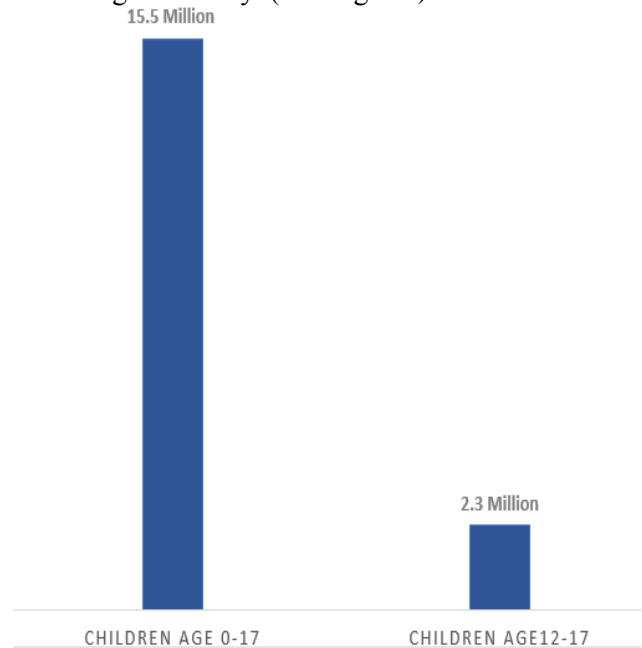


Fig. III. “Studies indicate that 40-60% of these individuals will experience long-term problems, including emotional, behavioral, academic, social, and post- traumatic stress symptoms” (Chanmugam 394).

Based on the information presented by Alvarez and Bachman, that many children repeat the cycle of violence, it is possible that the children between ages twelve to seventeen represented in figure III now have children. Even a fraction of this population is cause for concern since it has been several years since Chanmugam’s study, and domestic violence affects all areas of society. (See Fig. IV.).

## Estimated Cost of Domestic Violence

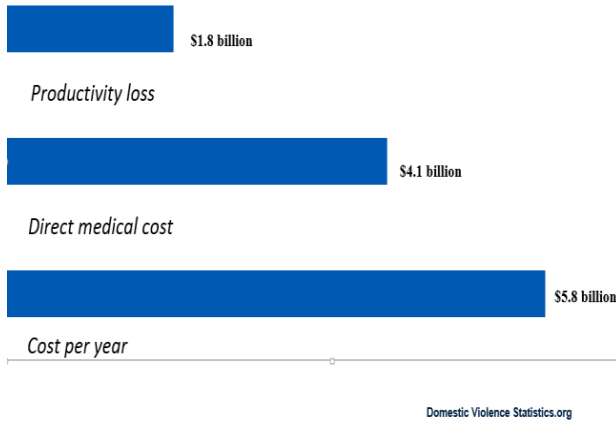


Fig. IV. Reflects the horrendous cost of this social problem.

It is difficult to understand why so many women are still in shelters when the cost is known to policy makers. There is no immunity for citizens from this social problem. Therefore, helping those already in the system to become self-reliant should be of utmost importance to policy makers, and community organizations.

Jake New’s article from PBS NewsHour titled “Domestic Violence is as Prevalent for College Students as Sexual Assault,” shows the severity of the issue and the lack of immunity for people who are educated. (See Fig. V.).

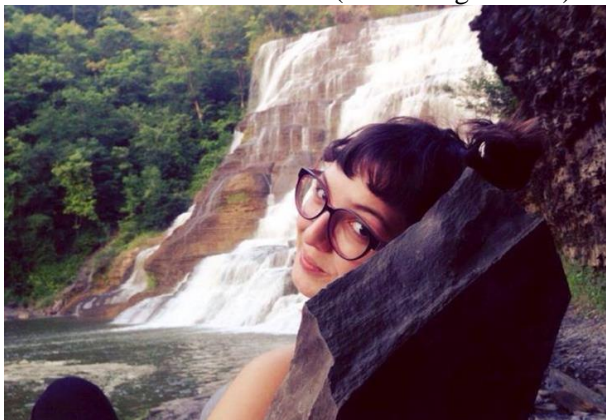


Fig. V. (Photograph from Jake New’s article). Shannon Jones, above, was strangled to death by her boyfriend on Thanksgiving Day. Nadia Ezaldein was shot to death by her ex-boyfriend; Cecilia Lam who was a domestic violence advocate, was shot and killed by her ex-boyfriend (murder suicide),” (Jake New Domestic Violence is as Prevalent for College Students as Sexual Assault).

This report contains a long list of victims in higher educational institutions. The women above represent a few of those who have died due to domestic violence on college campuses across the nation. With such extensive information available to show the pervasiveness of domestic violence, policy changes must be implemented to help restore lives. This nation cannot afford to carry on using the same old polices that basically remove victims from immediate danger, but then leave them in shelters, or transitional housing carrying the same problems, and sometimes additional problems for the rest of their lives. My experience in guiding the women in their narratives taught me that women in shelters need restoration and compassion, not condemnation.

## COURAGEOUS WOMEN

My study was conducted from August through September 2015 at a shelter in an urban area of Texas. A room was reserved for the study, the event was placed on the monthly calendar, and announcements were made to bring awareness to residents. Participants were voluntary and the survey was anonymous. Participants answered prepared survey questions, through narrative writing, regarding their occupational, physical, social, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional wellness. (See Fig. VI).

**Occupational Wellness**– “values, gifts, talents, what gives you personal satisfaction...”

**Emotional Wellness**– “ability to cope with stress, help and support, trust and respect...”

**Intellectual Wellness** – “creativity and problem solving skills...”

**Social Wellness** – “power to make choices and build friendships...”

**Spiritual Wellness**– “beliefs, values, disappointments, and happiness...”

**Physical Wellness** – “physical health, self-esteem, and sense of direction...”  
(National Wellness Institute).

Fig. VI. Reflects elements in each dimensions of wellness (National Wellness Institute).



## RESULTS

Results of this study indicate that there is a need to teach these women about the dimensions of wellness so that they can work on restoring their health in a holistic manner. For anonymity each participant was assigned a name of a flower or a name that reflects something positive. Combining narrative writing and the dimensions of wellness brought about self-realization and gave these participants insights on areas that they need to address for themselves. One participant states “No, I wasn’t aware of these dimensions, but now I know little more about myself” (Lilly). Self-realization also transpired for Rose, she states “No- not the way this dimension has properly explained it. Now I have a better view of what I must work on. Thank you” (Rose).

Common themes that emerged from the study include struggling with the ability to trust others, learning to accept help, various illnesses, and spirituality as a source of strength. Several participants stated that others will have to earn their trust, and that trust will take time, especially in regards to relationships with males. One participant indicated that not all help is good help, she states “Some forms of help can mess you up” (Lee). Another participant states that learning to accept help is not easy. She states, “I know there are people here to help me, just learning how to reach out and take it is a little daunting at times” (Jasmine). Participants wrote about their poor health, some participants are battling illnesses such as panic attacks, anxiety, mental health issues, post-traumatic stress, lack of proper nutrition, and low self-esteem. Spirituality as a source of strength was also a common theme. The women indicated that prayer helps to relieve stress and fears.

Some participants will need more assistance than others; therefore, they must be seen as human beings with individual needs. A one size fits all policy cannot help these women become self-reliant or help them to fulfill their goals.

The lack of awareness of the dimensions among participants was significant. (See Fig. VII.)

### Participants Awareness of “The Dimensions of Six Dimensions of Wellness.”

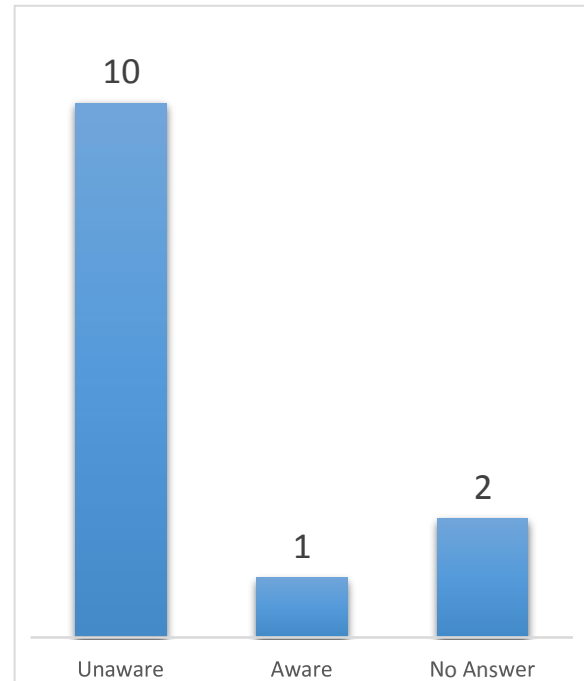


Fig. VII. Reflects participants who sat through the study and followed procedures.

The age of the participants in the next graph is reason for concern. For example, those in their fifties and sixties cannot retire and be self-sufficient, if they continue to move in and out of shelters. Each displacement could mean the loss of a job. If those jobs are in areas such as house keeping with low wages and no benefits their situation is more dismal. The participant, age thirty-three, who has been in shelters five times is cause for alarm, so is the thirty six-year old who has been in shelters four times. The quality of life for them and their children will deteriorate with each displacement. (See Fig. VIII.)



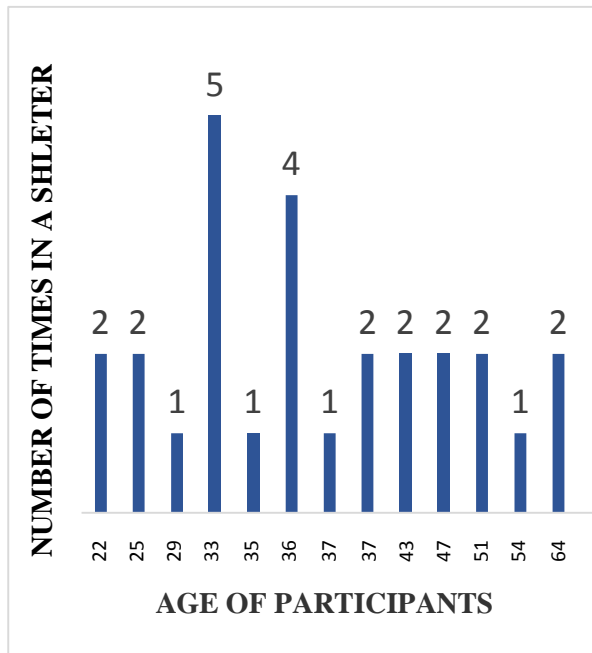


Fig. VIII. Numbers on the bottom row represent age of participants. Top numbers show number of times in a shelter.

The cost to society, the number of children affected, and the numerous diseases associated with domestic violence, are valid reasons to address wellness, restoration, and self-reliance for survivors. It is imperative that restoration for survivors be taken into consideration by policy makers, shelter personnel, and the general public. To ignore restoration would be unethical and a disservice to this nation and future generations.

## DISCUSSION

The shelter where this study was conducted provides various types of services to the residents, such as GED Preparation, how to obtain housing, and parenting classes. One problematic factor for shelter personnel is that, services that are not mandatory are underutilized. This is where policy issues need to be addressed in order to prevent wasting time and resources.

The women's narratives reflect the need for improvement in each of their dimensions of wellness. Mothers wrote about wanting a better quality of life for their children. The shelter carries its own stressors due to being filled to capacity. Despite their own struggles participants

wrote about helping others even when they did not feel well themselves.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board from The University of Texas at San Antonio. Participants were women over eighteen years of age. Through an anonymous survey, participants answered prepared survey questions regarding their occupational, physical, social, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional wellness. All participants were asked to state their age, number of times in a shelter, and whether or not they were aware of the dimensions of wellness before the study.

Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions and raise any concerns. After instructions were given participants had the opportunity to leave the room if they were unable to participate. They were also informed that they were free to quietly leave the room after the study began if they felt that they could not continue. Participants were asked not to write their names on the survey. The room was reserved for one hour each Friday from August through September 2015. Instructions, question and answer time lasted up to twenty minutes before actual writing began. Pens and paper were provided to participants. This qualitative study was based on a modified version of Dr. Bill Hettler's *The Six Dimensions of Wellness*. This study was conducted at a shelter in Texas.

## LIMITATIONS

No Spanish-speaking participants, researcher does not speak Spanish, and small sample.

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