



## The Problem of Domestic Violence

This guide begins by describing the problem of domestic violence and reviewing factors that increase its risks.<sup>§</sup> It then identifies a series of questions to help you analyze your local domestic violence problem. Finally, it reviews responses to the problem and what is known about these from evaluative research and police practice.

Domestic disputes are some of the most common calls for police service. Many domestic disputes do not involve violence; this guide discusses those that do, as well as the measures that can be used to reduce them. In the United States, domestic violence accounts for about 20 percent of the nonfatal violent crime women experience and three percent of the nonfatal violent crime men experience.<sup>1</sup> Harm levels vary from simple assault to homicide, with secondary harms to child witnesses. Domestic violence calls can be quite challenging for police as they are likely to observe repetitive abuse against the same victims, who may not be able to or may not want to part from their abusers. Police typically view these calls as dangerous, partly because old research exaggerated the risks to police.<sup>§§</sup>

Domestic violence is but one aspect of the larger set of problems related to family violence. Related problems not directly addressed in this guide, each of which requires separate analysis, include:

- parent abuse
- child abuse
- child sexual abuse
- elder abuse
- sibling violence
- domestic violence by police officers.

<sup>§</sup> Much of the recent research about domestic violence refers to the problem as “intimate partner violence.” Mostly this guide keeps to the term domestic violence, not because it is more accurate, but simply because it is still so widely used by police. Also in this guide, the term domestic violence is intended to include violence perpetrated by current and former intimates or dating partners, including those of the opposite or same sex.

<sup>§§</sup> Originally researchers failed to separate domestic disputes from other types of “disturbance” calls and raw percentages stretched the findings beyond what they reasonably meant (Fridell and Pate, 1997). Of the 713 officers feloniously slain in the United States between 1983 and 1992, 33 percent (235 officers) were slain while intervening in a crime. Of those, 24 percent (56 officers) were slain during a domestic disturbance. In other words, about five officers a year in the United States over that 10-year period were killed during domestic disturbance calls. The frequency of the call likely makes claims of dangerousness in terms of *injury to officers* overblown as well.



§ NVAWS is a telephone survey of a representative sample of 8,000 U.S. men and 8,000 U.S. women.

In addition, police must address a range of disputes among intimates, former intimates, and family members that may or may not involve violence, including

- domestic disputes
- child custody disputes
- stalking
- runaway juveniles.

Some of these related problems are covered in other guides in this series, all of which are listed at the end of this guide. For the most up-to-date list of current and future guides, visit [www.popcenter.org](http://www.popcenter.org).

## General Description of the Problem

Domestic violence involves a current or former intimate (and in many states, a current or former dating partner). Domestic violence tends to be underreported: women report only one-quarter to one-half of their assaults to police, men perhaps less.<sup>2</sup> The vast majority of physical assaults are not life threatening; rather, they involve pushing, slapping, and hitting.<sup>3</sup> Most women victims of domestic violence do not seek medical treatment, even for injuries deserving of it.<sup>4</sup>

Surveys provide us with estimates of the level of domestic violence in the United States, but there are wide differences among them depending on the definitions of domestic violence used and populations surveyed.<sup>5</sup> Two large surveys provide some insight into the level of domestic violence in the United States. The first, the National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS),<sup>§</sup>

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conducted in 1995 and 1996, found that nearly one in four women and nearly one in 13 men surveyed experienced rape and/or physical assault by a current or former spouse/partner/dating partner at some time in their lifetime, with about one and one-half percent of women and about one percent of men having been so victimized in the 12 months before the survey.<sup>6</sup> The National Crime Victimization Survey's (NCVS) estimates, however, are about one-third lower for women and more than two-thirds lower for men.<sup>§</sup> Differences in survey administration and methodology may account for the large differences in the numbers.<sup>§§</sup>

Even the lower numbers of the NCVS suggest that intimate partner violence in the United States is extensive. However, NCVS trend data through 2001 shows that partner violence between current and former intimates has declined significantly. From 1993 through 2001, the rate of reported intimate violence dropped by about 50 percent in the United States.<sup>7</sup> From 1994 through 2001, the rate of every major violent and property crime declined by similar percentages.<sup>8, §§§</sup> It is unknown whether domestic violence is paralleling these declines for the same or different reasons.

Domestic violence homicides have declined in similar proportions as well. In the United States, there were about half the number of intimate partner homicides (spouses, ex-spouses, boyfriends, and girlfriends) in 2002 as there were in 1976 with the largest portion of the decline in male victims (see Figure 1).<sup>9</sup>

§ The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) collects data about criminal victimization from an ongoing nationally representative sample of U.S. households. The survey is administered every six months to about 100,000 individuals in approximately 50,000 households. Interviewers ask questions about crime victimization of all household members age 12 and older. The survey attempts to capture two types of crime, victimization that was reported to the police and victimization that was not reported to the police. (Rennison and Welchans, 2000).

§§ The NCVS, administered by census workers as part of a crime survey, does not conduct all of its interviews in private because all members of the household are interviewed for different portions of the survey; also in contrast, the NVAWS survey uses more questions to screen for intimate violence, perhaps drawing out more from those interviewed.

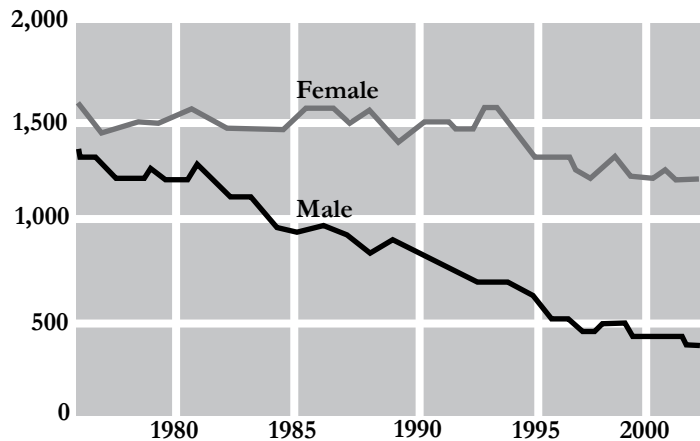
§§§ From 1994 through 2001, the rate of every major violent and property crime also steeply declined: homicide/manslaughter (down 40 percent); rape/sexual assault (down 56 percent); robbery (down 53 percent); aggravated assault (down 56 percent); simple assault (down 46 percent); household burglary (down 51 percent); motor vehicle theft (down 52 percent); theft (down 47 percent). (Rennison, 2001).



Some commentators suggest that the decline in homicides may be evidence that abused women have developed legitimate ways to leave their relationships (e.g., divorce, shelters, police, and courts). The reasons for the decline may be even more complex because there is wide variation by race, not just by gender. Between 1976 and 2002, the number of black male victims of intimate partner homicide fell by 81 percent as compared to 56 percent for white males. The number of black female victims of intimate partner homicide fell 49 percent as compared to 9 percent for white females.<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 1**

**Homicides of intimates by gender  
of victim, 1976-2002**  
Number of victims



Fox and Zawitz (2002)



## Women as Offenders

There is a robust debate among researchers about the level of relationship violence women are responsible for and the extent to which it is in self-defense or fighting back.<sup>11</sup> The NCVS and other studies have found that women are the victims in as much as 85 percent of domestic violence incidents.<sup>12</sup> However, there are also research findings that women in heterosexual relationships have the same, if not higher, rates of relationship violence as men.<sup>13</sup> Generally, studies about domestic violence fall into two categories: family conflict studies and crime victimization studies. Those that tend to show high rates of violence by women (or rates higher than men) are family conflict studies and contain questions about family conflicts and disputes and responses to these, including physical responses. These studies use a family conflict assessment tool. Those studies that show that male assaultive behavior predominates in domestic violence are criminal victimization surveys and/or studies that rely on the counting of crime reports.<sup>14</sup>

Critics suggest that studies finding about equal rates of violence by women in relationships are misleading because they fail to place the violence in context (Dekeseredy et al. 1997); in other words, there is a difference between someone who uses violence to fight back or defend oneself and someone who initiates an unprovoked assault. Also, the physical differences between some women and their male partners may make comparisons between equivalent types of violence (slapping, kicking, punching, hitting) less meaningful, particularly because many studies show that violence by women is less likely to result in injury. Researchers agree that women suffer the lion's share of injuries from domestic violence.<sup>15</sup>

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§ In the United States estimates of the percentage of homelessness among women resulting from domestic violence vary, but it may be upwards of 20 percent (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2004). In the United Kingdom, about 16 percent of the homeless to whom local authorities provided housing were victims of domestic violence (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, n.d.). A recent report from Australia found that domestic violence is a major contributing factor to homelessness. The study also found that more than one-third of those accessing government housing assistance for homelessness were women escaping domestic violence, and two-thirds of the children in the housing program were those who accompanied a female parent or guardian escaping domestic violence (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2005).

Women living as partners with other women report lower rates of violence (11 percent) compared to women who live with or were married to men (30 percent).<sup>16</sup> About 8 percent of men living with or married to women report that they were physically abused by the women. About 15 percent of men cohabitating with men reported victimization by a male partner. These data suggest that men are engaged in more relationship violence.

## Harms Caused by Domestic Violence

Domestic violence can include murder, rape, sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated or simple assault. In addition to the physical harm victims suffer, domestic violence results in emotional harm to victims, their children, other family members, friends, neighbors, and co-workers. Victims and their children experience the brunt of the psychological trauma of abuse, suffering anxiety, stress, sleep deprivation, loss of confidence, social isolation, and fear.<sup>17</sup> Batterers frequently also subject their victims to harassment (such as annoying or threatening phone calls), vandalism, trespassing, stalking, criminal mischief, theft, and burglary.<sup>18</sup>

Domestic violence also has economic costs. Victims may lose their jobs because of absenteeism related to the violence, and may even lose their homes because of loss of income. Some domestic violence victims must rely on shelters or depend on others to house them, and others become part of a community's homeless population, increasing their risk for other types of victimization. § Medical expenses to treat injuries, particularly of uninsured victims, create additional financial burdens, either for the victims or for the public.

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## Theories About Domestic Violence

Theories about why men or women batter and why some people are reluctant to end abusive relationships may seem abstract to police practitioners, but the theories have important implications for how police might effectively respond to the problem.

### Why Some Men Batter

Generally, four theories explain battering in intimate relationships.<sup>19</sup>

**Psychological theory.** Battering is the result of childhood abuse, a personality trait (such as the need to control), a personality disturbance (such as borderline personality), psychopathology (such as anti-social personality), or a psychological disorder or problem (such as post traumatic stress, poor impulse control, low self-esteem, or substance abuse).

**Sociological theory.** Sociological theories vary but usually contain some suggestion that intimate violence is the result of learned behavior. One sociological theory suggests that violence is learned within a family, and a partner-victim stays caught up in a cycle of violence and forgiveness. If the victim does not leave, the batterer views the violence as a way to produce positive results. Children of these family members may learn the behavior from their parents (boys may develop into batterers and girls may become battering victims). A different sociological theory suggests that lower income subcultures will show higher rates of intimate abuse, as violence may be a more acceptable form of settling disputes in such subcultures. A variant on this theory is that violence is

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inherent in all social systems and people with resources (financial, social contacts, prestige) use these to control family members, while those without resort to violence and threats to accomplish this goal.

**Feminist or societal-structural theory.** According to this theory, male intimates who use violence do so to control and limit the independence of women partners. Societal traditions of male dominance support and sustain inequities in relationships.

**Violent individuals theory.** For many years it was assumed that domestic batterers were a special group, that while they assaulted their current or former intimates they were not violent in the outside world. There is cause to question how fully this describes batterers. Although the full extent of violence batterers perpetrate is unknown, there is evidence that many batterers are violent beyond domestic violence, and many have prior criminal records for violent and non-violent behavior.<sup>20</sup> This suggests that domestic violence batterers are less unique and are more accurately viewed as violent criminals, not solely as domestic batterers. There may be a group of batterers who are violent only to their current or former intimates and engage in no other violent and non-violent criminal behavior, but this group may be small compared to the more common type of batterer.<sup>21</sup>

### Why Some Women Batter

Some women batter their current or former intimates. Less is known about women who use violence in relationships, particularly the extent to which it may be in self-defense, to fight back, or to ward off anticipated violence. When asked in a national survey if they used violence in their relationships, many Canadian college

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women said they did. However, the majority of these women said it was in self-defense or to fight back and that the more they were victimized the more they fought back.<sup>22</sup> One researcher suggests that women should be discouraged from engaging in minor violence because it places them at risk for retaliation from men and men are more likely to be able to inflict injury.<sup>23</sup>

Clearly, there are women who use violence in relationships provocatively outside the context of fighting back or self-defense. The extent of this problem, as we noted earlier, remains unknown but is ripe for additional study.

The theories explaining male violence cited earlier may also have some relevance for women, although the picture is not clear.

### Why Some Women are Reluctant to End Abusive Relationships

Police commonly express frustration that many of the battered women they deal with do not leave their batterers. Although many women do leave physically abusive relationships, others remain even after police intervene. There is no reliable information about the percentage of women who stay in physically abusive relationships. Researchers offer a number of explanations for the resistance by some to leave an abuser.<sup>24</sup>

**Cycle of violence.** Three cyclical phases in physically abusive intimate relationships keep a woman in the relationship: 1) a tension-building phase that includes minor physical and verbal abuse, 2) an acute battering phase, and 3) a makeup or honeymoon phase. The honeymoon phase lulls an abused woman into staying and the cycle repeats itself.

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**Battered woman syndrome.** A woman is so fearful from experiencing cycles of violence that she no longer believes escape is possible.

**Stockholm syndrome.** A battered woman is essentially a hostage to her batterer. She develops a bond with and shows support for and kindness to her captor, perhaps because of her isolation from and deprivation of more normal relationships.

**Traumatic bonding theory.** A battered woman experienced unhealthy or anxious attachments to her parents who abused or neglected her. The woman develops unhealthy attachments in her adult relationships and accepts intermittent violence from her intimate partner. She believes the affection and claims of remorse that follow because she needs positive acceptance from and bonding with the batterer.

**Psychological entrapment theory.** A woman feels she has invested so much in the relationship, she is willing to tolerate the battering to save it.

**Multifactor ecological perspective.** Staying in physically abusive relationships is the result of a combination of factors, including family history, personal relationships, societal norms, and social and cultural factors.

## Factors Contributing to Domestic Violence

Understanding the risk factors associated with domestic violence will help you frame some of your own local analysis questions, determine good effectiveness measures, recognize key intervention points, and select appropriate responses. Risk factors do not automatically mean that a person will become a domestic violence victim or an

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offender. Also, although some risk factors are stronger than others, it is difficult to compare risk factor findings across studies because of methodological differences between studies.

## Age

The female age group at highest risk for domestic violence victimization is 16 to 24.<sup>25</sup> Among one segment of this high-risk age group—undergraduate college students—22 percent of female respondents in a Canadian study reported domestic violence victimization, and 14 percent of male respondents reported physically assaulting their dating partners in the year before the survey.<sup>26</sup> And although the victimization of teen girls is estimated to be high, it is difficult to “...untangle defensive responses from acts of initial violence against a dating partner.”<sup>27</sup>

## Socioeconomic Status

Although domestic violence occurs across income brackets, it is most frequently reported by the poor who more often rely on the police for dispute resolution. Victimization surveys indicate that lower-income women are, in fact, more frequently victims of domestic violence than wealthier women. Women with family incomes less than \$7,500 are five times more likely to be victims of violence by an intimate than women with family annual incomes between \$50,000 and \$74,000.<sup>28</sup>

Although the poorest women are the most victimized by domestic violence,<sup>29</sup> one study also found that women receiving government income support payments through Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) were three times more likely to have experienced physical aggression by a current or former partner during the previous year than non-AFDC supported women.<sup>30</sup>

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§ It is unclear how much of the differences in victimization rates by race is the result of willingness to reveal victimization to survey interviewers (Tjaden and Thoennes, 2000).

## Race

Overall, in the United States, blacks experience higher rates of victimization than other groups: black females experience intimate violence at a rate 35 percent higher than that of white females, and black males experience intimate violence at a rate about 62 percent higher than that of white males and about two and a half times the rate of men of other races.<sup>31</sup> Other survey research, more inclusive of additional racial groups, finds that American Indian/Alaskan Native women experience significantly higher rates of physical abuse as well.<sup>32,§</sup>

## Repeat Victimization

Domestic violence, generally, has high levels of repeat calls for police service.<sup>33</sup> For instance, police data in West Yorkshire (United Kingdom) showed that 42 percent of domestic violence incidents within one year were repeat offenses, and one-third of domestic violence offenders were responsible for two-thirds of all domestic violence incidents reported to the police. It is likely that some victims of domestic violence experience physical assault only once and others experience it repeatedly<sup>34</sup> over a period as short as 12 months.<sup>35</sup> British research suggests that the highest risk period for further assault is within the first four weeks of the last assault.<sup>36</sup>

## Incarceration of Offenders

Offenders convicted of domestic violence account for about 25 percent of violent offenders in local jails and 7 percent of violent offenders in state prisons.<sup>37</sup> Many of those convicted of domestic violence have a prior conviction history: more than 70 percent of offenders in jail for domestic violence have prior convictions for other crimes, not necessarily domestic violence.<sup>38</sup>

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## Termination of the Relationship

Although there is a popular conception that the risk of domestic violence increases when a couple separates, in fact, most assaults occur during a relationship rather than after it is over.<sup>39</sup> However, still unknown is whether the severity (as opposed to the frequency) of violence increases once a battered woman leaves.

## Pregnancy

Contrary to popular belief, pregnant women are no more likely than non-pregnant women to be victims of domestic violence.<sup>40</sup> In fact, some women get a reprieve from violence during pregnancy. The risk of abuse during pregnancy is greatest for women who experienced physical abuse before the pregnancy.<sup>41</sup> Some additional factors increase the risk during pregnancy: being young and poor and if the pregnancy was unintended.<sup>42</sup> Physical abuse during the pregnancy can result in pre-term delivery, low birth weight, birth defects, miscarriage, and fetal death.<sup>43</sup>

## Multiple Risk Factors for Women and Men

Being young, black, low-income, divorced or separated, a resident of rental housing, and a resident of an urban area have all been associated with higher rates of domestic violence victimization among women.<sup>44</sup> For male victims, the patterns were nearly identical: being young, black, divorced or separated, or a resident of rental housing.<sup>45</sup> In New Zealand, a highly respected study found that the strongest predictor for committing partner violence among the many risk factors in childhood and adolescence is a history of aggressive delinquency before age 15.<sup>46</sup>

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The study also found that committing partner violence is strongly linked to cohabitation at a young age; a variety of mental illnesses; a background of family adversity; dropping out of school; juvenile aggression; conviction for other types of crime, especially violent crime; drug abuse; long-term unemployment; and parenthood at a young age.<sup>47</sup>

### Other Risk Factors

Several other risk factors emerge from research:

- A verbally abusive partner is one of the most robust risk factors for intimate partner violence.<sup>48</sup>
- Women whose partners are jealous or tightly controlling are at increased risk of intimate violence and stalking.<sup>49</sup>
- There is a strong link between threat of bodily injury and actual bodily injury, suggesting that abuser threats should be taken seriously.<sup>50</sup>

Recently, there is much discussion among police about the link between pet abuse and domestic violence. Although some overlap is likely, particularly under the theory that many batterers are generally violent, not enough is known because of the types of studies undertaken. Some small surveys of domestic violence shelter residents suggest that some women might have left their abuser sooner but they worried about their pet's safety.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, although alcohol and drug use do not cause intimate partner battering, the risk of victim injury increases if a batterer is using alcohol or drugs.<sup>52</sup>

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