

Fact Sheet on Family Violence

The Problem

Violence is a startlingly common problem in American families. According to a 1976 national survey, at least 1.8 million American women are beaten each year in their homes. The researchers who conducted this survey believe that this figure substantially underrepresents the extent of violence in American families, perhaps by half.

Murray A. Straus, Richard J. Gelles, and Suzanne K. Steinmetz, *Behind Closed Doors: Violence in the American Family* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1980).

A 1979 survey of Kentucky women conducted by Louis Harris Associates revealed that one in ten Kentucky women experienced some physical violence at the hands of their spouses in the 12 months preceding the study.

Mark Schulman, *A Survey of Spousal Violence Against Women in Kentucky* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1979).

Domestic violence can result in severe injury to the victim and even death. Women who are abused generally are beaten repeatedly and suffer injuries serious enough to require emergency medical attention. A study at one Connecticut hospital found that almost half of the 1400 injuries brought by 481 women to the hospital's emergency room resulted from beatings by their husbands or boyfriends.

Evan Stark, Anne Flitcraft, and William Frazier, "Medicine and Patriarchal Violence: The Social Construction of a 'Private' Event," *International Journal of Health Services* 9 (1979).

Battering tends to escalate over time, leading, in some instances, to homicide or suicide. According to the 1979 FBI *Uniform Crime Reports*, 40 percent of female homicide victims

are killed by family members or boyfriends. A study conducted at a Connecticut hospital revealed that battering accounts for one in four suicide attempts by women.

Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Uniform Crime Reports* 1979; and Evan Stark, Ann Flitcraft, M.D., et al., "Domestic Violence and Female Suicide Attempts," paper presented at the 107th Annual Meeting of the American Public Health Association, New York City, November 3-7, 1979.

Children, whether physically abused themselves or witnesses to the abuse of their mothers, are also victims of domestic violence. A study by the American Humane Society found that in 20 percent of the families in which child abuse was reported, spouse abuse also occurred.

American Humane Society, *Annual Statistical Report: National Analysis of Official Child Neglect and Abuse Reporting* (Englewood, Colorado: American Humane Society, 1977).

Violence in families passes from generation to generation. In their national survey, Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz found that one out of four people who grew up in households where parents often physically punished their children and hit each other, use at least some physical force on their spouses in any one year. One out of ten of the husbands who grew up in these families severely assault their wives.

Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, *Behind Closed Doors: Violence in the American Family* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1980).

The Response

As of February 1981, there were approximately 400 shelters offering battered women and their children emergency services. Recent cutbacks in funding for social services have undoubtedly forced a number of these

shelters to reduce their services or close their doors. Battered women's shelters are supported by community volunteer labor, donations of goods, private donations, and public funds.

Center for Women Policy Studies, Programs Providing Services for Battered Women, (Washington, D.C.: CWPS, 1981).

Shelters meet the needs of only a small number of the millions of battered women. According to the Kentucky survey, while in 25 percent of the cases of battering the women would have welcomed emergency shelter, shelter was provided in only 2 percent of the cases.

Mark Schulman, A Survey of Spousal Violence Against Women in Kentucky (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1979).

Battered women often cannot find relief from the police or the criminal justice system. A study of domestic homicides in Kansas City found that in 50 percent of the cases, the police had been called to the residence five or more times before the homicide.

M. Wilt, et al., Domestic Violence and the Police, 1977.

A study of Kentucky battered women by Louis Harris Associates reveals that battered women called the police in less than 10 percent of the cases.

Mark Schulman, A Survey of Spousal Violence Against Women in Kentucky (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1979).

Police rarely file reports on domestic violence and even more rarely arrest men for battering. In Cleveland, Ohio, during a 9-month period in 1979, police received approximately 15,000 domestic violence calls. Reports were filed in 700 of these cases, and arrests were made in 460 cases.

Ohio Attorney General, The Ohio Report on Domestic Violence, 1979.

In the District of Columbia in 1974, only 18 percent of the arrests for aggravated assault in families resulted in conviction. Of arrests for simple assaults in families, only 8 percent resulted in convictions.

Parnas, "Police Discretion and Diversion of Incidents of Family Violence" 36 Law and Contemporary Problems (1971).

Legislation

There is no federal legislation on family violence. A bill that would have provided \$65 million in support for domestic violence programs over 3 years was approved by both the House and the Senate in the 96th Congress, but died when the Senate failed to consider the Conference Report.

A similar bill has been introduced in this 97th Congress by Representative Barbara Mikulski (D-MD) and 66 cosponsors. No companion bill has been introduced in the Senate.

According to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, "while the most recent pieces of Federal legislation on spouse abuse are certainly a step in the right direction, they are little more than small project grants that cannot begin to meet the needs of the hundreds of thousands of women who experience abuse each year."

U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, The Federal Response to Domestic Violence: A Report of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1982).

Forty-nine states and the District of Columbia have enacted some type of legislation designed to protect battered women. However, new legislation by itself cannot change the response of courts, police, or social service agencies to the problem of family violence. This legislation is only a tool that victims of abuse and their advocates can use to promote more effective court response to violent families.

Lisa Lerman, "State Legislation on Domestic Violence," Response to Violence in the Family 4 (September/October, 1981).

Thirty-seven states have appropriated some funds for services for violent families. At least fourteen states impose a surcharge on the marriage license to raise funds to support domestic violence programs. Nevertheless, the need for funding for shelters and other sources for violent families is still largely unmet.

Lisa Lerman, "State Legislation on Domestic Violence," Response to Violence in the Family 4 (September/October, 1981).