



Risk in Perspective

Violence Against Women in Intimate Relationships

"Women clearly hold more vivid fears about events that are less within their scope of perceived control."

The analytic tools of risk analysis have historically been applied to cancer risks from man-made technologies such as nuclear power, chemicals, and food items. But the same tools can offer insight into the problem of traumatic injury.

This issue of RISK IN PERSPECTIVE explores the risk of violence against women in intimate relationships in the United States. We explore both perceived risk and actuarial risk. Although "domestic violence" can describe either men or women as victims, the findings reviewed here refer only to women, who tend to be more vulnerable in intimate relationships.

How Big is the Risk?

The last time that a representative study assessed the national incidence of domestic violence in the U.S. was 1985. In the Second National Family Violence Survey, approximately 12% of women interviewed reported some physical violence from male partners in the past year. Slightly over three percent of women 18 and older (or about two million) experienced "severe" abuse, including acts such as hitting, kicking, choking, and threatening or injuring with a weapon. Survey methods often underestimate the rate of intimate violence, and experts are in general agreement that the number of severely abused women in 1985 was closer to three to four million.

These estimates of risk are at odds with estimates reported by the National Crime Victimization Survey sponsored by the Department of Justice. In 1992 this survey estimated only five violent victimizations by intimates (current or former spouses/boyfriends) per 1,000 women per year in the U.S., and these victimizations included not only assault but rape and robbery (i.e., fewer than one percent of women experience intimate violence in a year). This figure is likely to be a significant underestimate, since the survey is introduced to respondents as focusing on "crime," and some women may not perceive abuse within relationships as criminal. In addition, abused women might not have responded fully, or may have refused participation in the survey altogether, due to fear of their partner (e.g., fear of being listened to on the phone). Recent revisions to the National Crime Victimization Survey methodology probe intimate

violence more effectively, but do not overcome all of these methodological drawbacks. Despite the overall likelihood of underreporting intimate violence, the DOJ survey documents that women report victimizations by people known to them (partners, other relatives, acquaintances) significantly more often than by strangers.

How Women Perceive Risk

In the fall of 1995, the Harvard Center for Risk Analysis sponsored a national survey on risk perception. The sample included 513 women ages 18 and older, who were asked: "How concerned are you that the following things could happen to you in the future?" The list of potential occurrences was: "being in a car accident"; "being robbed by a stranger"; "getting a serious disease"; "being sexually assaulted by a stranger"; "being in a plane crash"; "being sexually assaulted by someone you know"; "being hit by a stray bullet" and "being physically assaulted by your spouse or someone you were dating."

Generally speaking, women rated their concern about intimate violence as low. In fact, very rare events, such as being in a plane crash or being hit by a stray bullet, were rated as great or greater in level of concern as was intimate violence (see table). Of course, the salience and finality of premature death might have influenced their ratings, since plane crashes are more likely to be fatal than attacks by a spouse.

A majority of women were moderately or very concerned about being in a car accident (71%) or getting a serious disease (67%). Almost as many were highly concerned about the risk of violence from strangers; 58% feared rape; 65% robbery. However, only a quarter of the women were moderately or very concerned about sexual assault by someone known to them, and only 17% were equally concerned about being hit by a husband or a date.

Large-scale studies have revealed that approximately 15% of American-adult women have been raped, and as many as one in three have experienced attempted rapes. In an overwhelming percentage of cases, the perpetrators are known to the victims (70%). Women, therefore, seem to show disproportionate concern about victimization by strangers, who pose less of a

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Violence Against Women in Intimate Relationships continued

"How concerned are you that the following things could happen to you in the future?"

Event	Moderately or very concerned (%)*
car accident	71.3
robbed by stranger	65.2
get a serious disease	67.3
sexual assault by stranger	58.2
plane crash	34.1
sexual assault by someone you know	25.6
hit by stray bullet	34.7
physically assaulted by spouse/date	16.9

* Response categories were: not at all, a little, moderately, or very concerned.

threat, at least in an actuarial sense. Women clearly hold more vivid fears about events that are less within their scope of perceived control (e.g., robbery, plane crash, rape by a stranger). These findings indicate the need to enhance awareness about the threat of intimate violence in women's lives, in order to better prepare women for the hazards they may encounter in relationships.

The Known Risk Factors

Much of the early research on domestic violence focused on the victims and posed questions such as: "What is different about certain women that causes them to be abused?" and "Why do women stay with abusive partners?" Research over the past decade indicates that the identifiable risk factors among victims are scant. By far the most important is age: younger women (18-25 years) are three times more likely to report severe violence than older women. Women from homes where they observed or experienced violence as children also appear to be at increased risk for victimization, although the only prospective study on this question has just recently been launched.

Among those factors associated with a man's risk of committing violence against his spouse are unemployment and low-educational attainment, alcohol, past exposure to spousal violence in their families of origin, head injuries, and criminal histories. Some of these risk factors appear to have a complex role as catalyst for domestic violence. For instance, although men's unemployment has been implicated in high community rates of both wife and child abuse, some studies have found that the risk is compounded if there is an asymmetry in income or employment, favoring the wife. The 1985 national survey found a clear association between a higher level of alcohol consumption and a higher prevalence of husband-to-wife violence, with the lowest prevalence of violence among abstainers (6%) and the highest among "binge" drinkers (19%). It is important to highlight, however, that abuse is not absent among abstainers or universal among heavy drinkers. Also, the extent to which alcohol use is present in abusive episodes varies across different cultures, which suggests that social norms and expectations probably

mediate the association between binge drinking and the abuse of women.

Reducing the Risk

Various approaches have been developed to address the problem of domestic violence and to reduce the risk for women. Shelters for battered women became widespread during the 1970's, offering physical protection and counseling to women. Only a small proportion of women who are battered actually go to shelters, which suggests that shelter programs may be insufficient to address the needs of women in communities.

In our opinion, even well-funded community programs cannot substitute for economic autonomy, childcare subsidies enabling women to work, access to education and job training, egalitarian relationships, and political voice, all of which would expand options for women otherwise lacking the necessary independence to leave abusive relationships. In addition to providing counseling services to women, some programs have been launched focusing on treating the men for their abusive practices. There is little evidence, however, that batterer treatment programs are successful. It may be difficult for treatment to change entrenched-aggressive behaviors that are tacitly condoned through social norms. Criminal justice approaches that include mandatory arrest policies at a domestic violence scene, probation, and restraining orders have been developed as well across the country to address the problem. The effectiveness of these strategies in reducing future violence remains unclear, and lax enforcement and minimal accountability of these systems remain major problems.

Over the past two decades, wife abuse has gained heightened social awareness as reflected in agencies and laws, but the problem remains widespread. It seems unlikely that a unitary remedy will be forthcoming, but enhancing gender equality in both economic and political spheres probably offers the best hope. Some men will persist in trying to use coercion to control their sexual partners; but if the women have autonomous channels of financial support, they are more able to leave these relationships. Studies have shown that a combination of economic and social resources differentiate women who leave abusive relationships from those who do not. Women with small children are particularly vulnerable to the conflicting demands of the workplace and family, and they are overrepresented in the population of women seeking shelter from abusive relationships. It is especially critical to extend childcare subsidies and income transfers to these women who might otherwise have to endure relationship abuse in order to feed their children. The extraordinary mental and physical health costs of domestic violence, and the relatively high incidence of the problem, make it especially important to provide women with the means to escape it.

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FURTHER READING:

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