Domestic Violence as a Growing Societal
Concern in West Virginia: Contextual,
Historical, and Economic Linkages

by

Branka A. Jikich

RESEARCH PAPER 9619

National Science Foundation Undergraduate Research Fellow
Regional Research Institute
West Virginia University
P.O. Box 6825
Morgantown, WV 26506

Mentor: Professor Ann Oberhauser, Department of Geology and Geography

September 1996

ABSTRACT: Domestic violence essentially affects everyone. It is not merely
a personal or private problem within families. According to the Bureau of
Justice Statistics (US Department of Justice), a woman is beaten every 15
seconds somewhere in the United States. Additionally, the Surgeon
General’s report also reveals that one in five women victimized by their
spouses or ex-spouses say that they had been victimized over and over again
by the same person. These selected statistics easily demonstrate that
domestic violence in the United States is a serious and grave social concern.
This paper explores the many facets of this social ill, ranging from the
psychological makeup of an abuser to the legal ramifications of the problem.

Beginning with a definition of domestic violence, this paper takes a historical
look at the epidemic, examines the cycle of violence in abusive relationships,
and finally links domestic violence to the socio-economic situations of its
victims. This imperative link is especially important because it provides a
perspective into domestic violence as it correlates with poverty levels in West
Virginia. The focus is on West Virginia so that the paper has a regional base,
and also because the state is a clear example of the link between economic
downturns and high rates of domestic abuse.
Introduction

Domestic violence in the United States is a serious and grave social concern. Alarmingly, the rate at which this very intimate violence occurs is increasing. The recent events concerning the criminal trial of former football star O.J. Simpson have shed light upon domestic violence as a national and social ill. The fate Nicole Brown Simpson endured is identical to that of thousands of women who are caught within the vicious cycle of abuse and pay the ultimate price of death as a result.

Domestic violence essentially affects everyone. It is not merely a personal or private problem within families. With this idea in mind, just how horrifying are the facts about domestic violence? According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (US Department of Justice), a woman is beaten every 15 seconds somewhere in the United States. The FBI reports that domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women between 15 and 44 in the United States - more than car accidents, muggings, and rapes combined. Furthermore, the US Surgeon General recounts that battered women are more likely to suffer miscarriages and to give birth to babies with low birth weights. The Surgeon General’s report also reveals that one in five women victimized by their spouses or ex-spouses say that they had been victimized over and over again by the same person.

The selected facts mentioned above highlight only a few crucial pieces of information concerning violence in the home. There exist many facets to domestic violence, ranging from the psychological makeup of an abuser to the legal ramifications of the problem. This paper outlines the fundamental meaning
of domestic violence, takes a brief historical look at the social epidemic, examines the cycle of violence in abusive relationships and finally, links domestic violence to the socio-economic situations of its victims. This last section incorporates an analysis of domestic violence in West Virginia and how this correlates with poverty levels in the state. I have focused on West Virginia because it is one of the most rural states in the nation, and clearly demonstrates the link between economic downturns and high rates of domestic abuse.

**What is Domestic Violence?**

Domestic violence should be understood as existing on a continuum of mild to severe forms of abuse with mild abuse occurring more often than severe abuse. Mild abuse includes pushing, grabbing, shoving, or slapping a woman. More severe abuse includes kicking, choking, beating or using a weapon on her (Stets 3). Injury may range from feeling mistreated to experiencing minor to severe physical pain. Physical injury consists of bruises, black eyes, burns, broken bones, loss of limbs, damage to organs, or even death (Stets 5). Thus, battered women experience serious injuries. In *Breaking Free From Partner Abuse*, Mary Marecek reports that "battered women are severely injured - 22 to 35% of women who visit medical emergency rooms are there for injuries related to ongoing partner abuse" (22). She goes on to inform that “one in four pregnant women have a history of partner violence” (Marecek 24). Although the physical abuse may be the most visible sign of violence, the emotional state of a victim often proves a much more complex issue.
Battering is the establishment of control and fear in a relationship through violence and other forms of abuse. The batterer uses acts of violence and a series of behaviors, including intimidation, threats, psychological abuse and isolation to coerce and control a woman. Even though the violence may not happen often, it is a hidden (and constant) terrorizing factor (Blackman 45). The emotional abuse suffered by victims can last a lifetime.

Research by Murray Straus and Richard Gelles has suggested that the factors related to battering fall under two general areas: background (including childhood experiences and demographic characteristics) and personality factors (53). With respect to childhood experiences, males and females who experience and/or witness violence in childhood are more likely to be in violent relationships in adulthood. Specifically, the males will be abusive and the females will be victims of abuse.

Battering has also been shown to be related to a belief in traditional gender roles that are learned in childhood. If males are taught to be dominant and aggressive while females are encouraged to be submissive and passive, such teachings influence violent behavior and victimization in adulthood. When a man enters a relationship, he may feel that he is expected to respond aggressively to conflict. When a violent incident occurs, he not only invokes what he has learned but also justifies his abusive behavior in terms of what he has been taught. Likewise, when a woman enters a relationship, she may feel that she is to submit to her partner's will. If violence occurs, she may accept it passively and justify it in terms of deserving it or believing that she it to accept
male aggression (Straus and Gelles 56). The present state of domestic violence is continuously being researched in order to find answers for its occurrence. Perhaps an retrospective look at the problem could provide these difficult answers.

**Domestic Violence: A Brief Historical Look**

Domestic violence has occurred for centuries. From the days of ancient Babylon to the rise and fall of the Roman Empire, to the Middle Ages and its feudal economy, to twentieth century industrial capitalism, men's right to use physical force against women has been lawful and expected (Watts 104). Men have been given the right to beat their wives for just about anything. Watts writes: "A woman could be beaten if she behaved 'shamelessly' and caused jealousy, was lazy, unwilling to work in the fields, became drunk, spent too much money, or neglected the house" (107).

Before the nineteenth century, when a woman married she lost property and personal rights. This had implications for wife-beating. In the eyes of the law, when two people became married, they were one.

It wasn't until the 1870's that wife-beating became illegal in most states. Unfortunately, it still remained quite common (Watts 109). By the 1970's, domestic violence reached public awareness as a serious social problem that needed to be stopped. Society's intrusion into the family, along with the emergence of the feminist movement were two of the major reasons for the sudden concern over domestic violence. Gradually, issues in the private sphere infiltrated the public domain and laws began to be instituted for certain rights and
protections of family members. The nineteenth century Married Women’s Act was instituted to ensure that women could control their own property, have their own earnings through outside employment, enter contracts, sue under their own name, and make their own will (Buzawa and Buzawa 254).

With the feminist movement in the 1970’s came challenges against patriarchal order and women’s second class nature. The feminist perspective argued against the rearing of children in traditional ways where men were taught to be aggressive and dominant, and women were taught to be submissive and obedient. As a result, domestic violence was brought to the forefront as a social problem that needed attention. Because violence in the home was a private matter, it had been difficult to study. Suddenly, domestic violence went from the taboo to the talked about. When the shelter movement arose in the early 1970’s, battered wives in shelters became a source of information for domestic violence studies (Buzawa and Buzawa 258).

Even though by the late 1970’s and throughout the 1980’s, most Americans knew that many women were being physically abused by their husbands, many still refused to believe that the problem was sufficiently widespread or severe enough to merit a change in traditional attitudes. Perhaps, this mentality reflects the high degree of violence tolerated in family life and the extent to which socialization about the acceptability of such violence persists even in the face of information that demonstrates its dramatic, negative consequences. Today, we are living in the 1990’s and domestic violence is still a grim social dilemma. There still remains much to learn about what actually
happens in abusive relationships, and the emerging patterns that evolve in cases of domestic violence. A discussion of the cycle of abuse provides insight to these extreme patterns.

**A Dangerous Cycle of Abuse**

In her article, "A Vicious Cycle for Victims of Abuse," Sandy Rovner reports that "the average battered woman needs to leave her abuser three to five times before she leaves for good." Sometimes, a woman is unsure about what to do during the course of an abusive relationship. She thinks she maybe wants out, but isn’t sure. She still loves him...and hates him...and loves him. It make take years for a woman to make a break because “she thinks she can heal the abuser through her loving hands” (Rovner).

Julie Blum, a counselor and administrator at My Sister’s Place, a D.C shelter for battered women believes that the abused woman has typically been brought up to believe that “nice girls aren’t smarter than boys, good men are hard to find and she should hold on to the one she has, and that wives should obey their husbands” (qtd. in Rovner). The batterer tends to focus on his wife’s inadequacies and failures, harping on what appears to him as stupidity and untrustworthiness until her self-esteem is shattered. After a typical battering incident, the husband will try to seek intimacy passionately, begging forgiveness, pledging his desperate need for her. Eventually, he will abuse her again, and the horrifying cycle continues.

For many battered women, the cycle of violence occurs in three stages. The first stages constitutes of rising tension. The woman and her abuser may
argue often. She may make extra efforts to keep the abuser from getting angry. The second stage is violence. In spite of her best efforts, the abuser will choose to allow tension to explode into some sort of violence. The final stage is reconciliation. After the violence, the abuser may apologize and promise not to hurt her again. This phase may persuade the victim to give the relationship another chance. Sadly, this phase does not last, and tensions will eventually increase and the cycle will begin again. Over time, the violent acts usually happen more often and are more severe, unless the cycle is broken. Certainly understanding the cycle of violence can help victims of abuse to learn to break free of the relationship. Let me now turn to an analysis of domestic violence in West Virginia, characterized by rural communities, high unemployment rates, and tough economic times.

**A Focus on: The Link Between Domestic Violence and Economic Status in West Virginia**

With 64% of its residents living in rural areas in 1990, West Virginia is one of the most rural states in the nation (Hammond 33). Modern industrialized economies are more efficient at generating employment in urban areas, where large numbers of companies and workers congregate to take advantage of infrastructure, amenities, and more highly specialized services. West Virginia doesn’t enjoy this advantage. With the decline of the coal mining and timber industries throughout the 1980’s, the state has one of the lowest labor force participation rates compared with the rest of the country.
In 1993, the West Virginia employment/population ratio was 49.1%, while the comparable national average was 61.6%. For women in the state, the employment/population ratio was just 41.4% in 1994, more than 16% below the ratio for men and nearly 13% below the national average for women. The employment/population ratio for West Virginia men was just 12% below the comparable national average.

Data Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics

Rural areas tend to be difficult to commute to and from, especially in West Virginia, where geography often dictates curvy routes for roads. The commuting problem may be especially troublesome for women in families with only one automobile. Women play a nurturing role in many families, taking primary responsibility for raising children and caring for older relatives. Without access to urban amenities like good quality child care and elder care, women in rural counties have fewer opportunities to join the job market. This leads us into a discussion of poverty in West Virginia, and ultimately its connection with domestic violence.
The following chart illustrates the relationship between the poverty rates in West Virginia compared with the United States and the reported cases of domestic violence. As the percentage of the population living in poverty increases, so does the rate of domestic violence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Persons for whom poverty status is determined</th>
<th>Number of persons sub population in poverty</th>
<th>Percent population in poverty</th>
<th>Reported Cases of Dom Viol</th>
<th>Reported CasesDV/ Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>241,977,859</td>
<td>31,742,864</td>
<td>13.12%</td>
<td>500,000</td>
<td>0.21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WV</td>
<td>1,755,331</td>
<td>345,093</td>
<td>19.66%</td>
<td>6,029</td>
<td>0.34%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Source: West Virginia Women: In Perspective 1995

Unfortunately, the above statistics only reflect the number of cases of domestic violence that are actually reported. In her *Wall Street Journal* article, "Poverty, not Race, is Critical Factor in Domestic Homicides," Heidi Evans reveals that domestic violence is one of the most underreported crimes. She cites reasons such as the lack of witnesses, general embarrassment by the victim, and the perception that society doesn't consider the problem serious enough (Evans). Nonetheless, from the cases that are reported, we can still infer the inevitable link between poverty and domestic violence.
Data Source: West Virginia Women: In Perspective 1995

The above illustration most clearly demonstrates the relationship between domestic violence and poverty levels in rural states such as West Virginia.

Conclusion

Understanding is the key to solving the gruesome problem of domestic violence in the United States. By analyzing available data about this growing social concern, we can only hope that policy makers will pay enough attention to lobby for the rights of abused women.

This paper has presented several facets of abuse in the home. Only by exploring the meanings of domestic violence, looking at this very “intimate” abuse throughout history, exploring the abominable and sometimes never-ending cycle of violence, and analyzing domestic violence through socio-economic indicators, can we hope to begin the healing process for the perhaps millions of women who are victims of this most shameful abuse.
Perhaps Ann Jones best portrays how horrifying domestic violence can be when she writes:

*Behind all women's movement struggles for temperance, married women's property rights, liberalized divorce, child custody and suffrage lays the grim fact that dependent women and children are subject to physical and sexual assault* (284).
Works Cited


