

Florida State University Libraries

2005

Trends in Understanding and Addressing Domestic Violence

Daniel P. Mears and Christy A. Visher

The version of record can be found at <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/0886260504267739>.



PRINT VERSION CITATION: Mears, Daniel P., and Christy A. Visher. 2005. "Trends in Understanding and Addressing Domestic Violence." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 20(2):204-211.

PRE-PRINT VERSION

TRENDS IN UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE*

Daniel P. Mears

and

Christy A. Visher

The Urban Institute

* Direct correspondence to Daniel P. Mears, Justice Policy Center, The Urban Institute, 2100 M Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20037, phone (202-261-5592), fax (202-659-8985), e-mail (dmears@urban.org). Dr. Mears is a senior research associate, and Dr. Visher is a principal research associate, in the Urban Institute's Justice Policy Center. The authors thank Adele Harrell and Janine Zweig for their thoughtful comments and suggestions. The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or funders.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

Daniel P. Mears, Ph.D., is a senior research associate at the Urban Institute's Justice Policy Center, 2100 M Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20037, phone (202-261-5592), fax (202-659-8985), e-mail (dmears@ui.urban.org). Dr. Mears conducts basic and applied research on a range of juvenile and criminal justice programs, policies, and issues. These include studies and published articles on the causes of delinquency and crime, domestic violence, drug and mental health assessment and treatment, juvenile justice policy reforms, agricultural crime, sentencing, supermax prisons, correctional programming and forecasting, and prisoner reentry.

Christy A. Visher, Ph.D., is a principal research associate at the Urban Institute's Justice Policy Center, 2100 M Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20037, phone (202-261-5593), fax (202-659-8985), e-mail (cvisher@ui.urban.org). Dr. Visher has over 20 years of experience in policy research on crime and justice issues and has published widely on criminological and criminal justice issues. She currently is conducting several large-scale studies, including an evaluation of the Judicial Oversight Demonstration initiative, a court-based domestic violence intervention in three sites, and a multi-site evaluation of prisoner reentry programs. She previously served as the science advisor to the Director of the National Institute of Justice.

TRENDS IN UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Abstract

We respond to three questions posed by the Editor about past and future research on interpersonal violence, focusing in this essay on domestic violence: (1) What is the most important thing we have learned about this social problem in the last twenty years? (2) What is the most important thing we need to learn about it in the next ten years? (3) What is the most promising methodological innovation in the last twenty years for the study or treatment of domestic violence? Our assessment suggests that the field has witnessed considerable advances in domestic violence research and policy, but that many as yet untapped opportunities exist to improve both knowledge and practice.

TRENDS IN UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence strikes close to the heart of millions of Americans, yet only in the past several decades has this fact been acknowledged. The increased recognition represents a considerable advance and has helped to trigger a tremendous growth in understanding domestic violence and developing strategies to reduce it. We take the opportunity here to summarize our sense of the advances already made and yet to be made in the area of domestic violence by answering the following three questions: (1) What is the most important thing we have learned about domestic violence in the last twenty years? (2) What is the most important thing about domestic violence that we need to learn in the next ten years? (3) What is the most promising methodological innovation in the last twenty years for the study or treatment of domestic violence? As our responses suggest, we believe that the past provides a promising foundation for preventing and reducing domestic violence. But we also believe that considerably more systematic attention from policymakers and researchers is needed if we are to help the women, men, and children who suffer from or are at risk of domestic violence and its consequences.

What is the most important thing we have learned about domestic violence in the last twenty years?

In years past, society largely ignored domestic violence or relegated it to the status of a private matter for families to resolve, a social problem of little consequence. Today, we know better. Domestic violence is understood to be a critical problem, one that occurs along many dimensions, takes many forms, and arises under a range of different conditions. The implications of this change in understanding cannot be underestimated. Among other things, society no longer sees domestic violence as resulting from “normal stress and interpersonal

conflict” within families (Worden 2000:222) — research tells us domestic violence has multiple causes and is not in fact typically associated with healthy individuals or families.

We view the change in perspective as fundamentally important since to intervene effectively first requires recognition that there is a problem. Identification of a problem can lead to critical developments, including new understandings about opportunities to reduce domestic violence. Research shows, for example, that there are several broad dimensions along which we can understand domestic violence and, accordingly, develop interventions. For example, we can focus on different units of analysis, such as offenders, victims, domestic violence events and situations. We can focus on different types of domestic violence (e.g., intimate partner violence, child abuse, sibling violence, elder abuse), using one or more units of analysis. And we also can focus on factors causally related to domestic violence, again focusing on one or more units of analysis and targeting one or more types of violence.

Each combination of these dimensions suggests different strategies for intervening. To illustrate, a focus on offenders and intimate partner violence might lead one to emphasize a programmatic intervention that is premised on assumptions about the causes of battering. The intervention may, for example, view an offender’s inability to control anger or appropriately manage conflict as causally relevant to intimate partner offending, and so might focus on “role-playing and instruction regarding anger management, conflict resolution, and the development of other interpersonal skills” (Brewster 2002:41).

A focus on victims might well lead to a different strategy. For example, shelters typically are used for victims rather than abusers. The assumption is that removing victims from the proximity of abusers may at least temporarily reduce violence.

In the same vein, a focus on one type of domestic violence, such as child abuse, leads to the development of still other strategies, such as mandatory reporting laws. Here, a central premise is that the failure to report suspected abuse contributes to ongoing abuse, and that increased reporting will lead to sanctions that have an incapacitative or deterrent effect. In so doing, such laws may prevent or reduce child abuse.

A focus on intimate partner violence as another type of domestic violence has led to interventions that target either the offender (e.g., programs that help offenders develop awareness of appropriate control strategies), the victim (e.g., programs that teach individuals about self-defense techniques), or both (e.g., hospital-based efforts to screen and identify for domestic violence, referring women to advocacy services and notifying law enforcement about the abuse).

Recognition of these different dimensions can help contribute to awareness that similar intervention strategies may be appropriate for a range of units of analysis and types of domestic violence (e.g., coordinated systems-level responses), while in others, particular strategies may be more effective (e.g., outreach efforts may be especially effective when focusing on vulnerable and isolated elderly populations) (Vinton 1998).

Another way to conceptualize interventions strategies is to think about them as emanating from different societal sources of change, as a recent report by the National Research Council (NRC) has emphasized (Chalk and King 1998). The NRC classified existing interventions into four such sources, and assessed the likely impact of examples of each:

- (1) Legal interventions (e.g., changing reporting requirements so that health care professionals must report suspected domestic violence, protective or restraining orders, arrest, treatment for offenders, criminal prosecution, specialized courts,

integrating criminal justice efforts with those of other systems and agencies, criminal justice personnel training);

- (2) Social service interventions (e.g., shelters, peer support groups, advocacy services);
- (3) Health care interventions (e.g., screening, identification, and medical care of suspected and known cases of domestic violence, provision of mental health services);
and
- (4) Collaborative interventions (e.g., coordinated community responses, substance abuse and domestic violence treatment, and battered women’s shelters).

Not all of these approaches are effective at preventing or reducing domestic violence, or promoting recovery from violence. Indeed, research has a long way to go before it can declare with confidence what will and will not “work,” under what conditions, and for what populations (Mears 2003). As but one example, research on the impact of arrest — long studied by criminologists — still produces equivocal results. Similarly, batterer intervention initiatives have become popular even though studies, including several well-designed replication efforts, have produced mixed findings (Davis et al. 2003; Feder and Forde 2003), largely because of methodological problems (U.S. General Accounting Office 2002; Jackson 2003). More recently, legislative efforts to address domestic violence — including passage of the Violence Against Women Act in 1994 and its reauthorization in 2000, as well as widespread state-level legislative efforts emphasizing the creation of sex offender registries, changes to criminal codes and sentencing laws in cases involving stalking, and amendments to civil protection order laws (Miller 1997, 1998) — remain largely unassessed.

In the meantime, more comprehensive, systematic approaches to reducing domestic violence are emerging. But much progress is needed, especially in understanding the relationships

between domestic violence and other types of crime and violence (Kruttschnitt et al. 2004). Hopefully, research will begin to show which specific interventions, or combinations of interventions, achieve the largest reductions, while identifying those that may cause more harm than good. Dugan and her colleagues (2003), for example, have identified policies that may help reduce intimate partner homicides, such as warrantless arrest laws and welfare assistance. But they also have noted that some policies, such as aggressive prosecutorial action in cases involving protection order violations, may actually increase domestic violence.

What is the most important thing about domestic violence that we need to learn in the next ten years?

We believe there are three inter-related questions that we need answers to in the coming decade. First, how big is the problem? According to data from the National Violence Against Women (NVAW) Survey, close to 1 in 4 women and 1 in 13 men report being “raped and/or physically assaulted by a current or former spouse, cohabiting partner, or date at some time in their lifetime” (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000:iii). Many other prevalence estimates could be mentioned. Yet the fact remains that few studies employ consistent definitions of domestic violence or allow us to measure the occurrence of different types of domestic violence, much less their occurrence across age, sex, and racial/ethnic categories or diverse communities (National Research Council 1996; DeKeseredy and Schwartz 2001; Kruttschnitt et al. 2004).

In part, this situation results from a lack of well-developed, theoretically guided typologies of domestic violence. It also stems from the availability of data containing information relevant to generating prevalence estimates of types of domestic violence. Indeed, many jurisdictions still lack the basic ability to analyze information contained in their own official records (Centers for

Disease Control and Prevention 2000). As a result, they develop interventions based largely on an assumption of need, with little guidance concerning the extent and types of domestic violence in their community. Equally troublesome is the limited ability to monitor domestic violence cases. For example, evaluation of the federally funded Judicial Oversight Demonstration (JOD) initiative, which was designed to provide a coordinated response to intimate partner violence, led to the discovery that each of the three JOD sites lacked “cross-agency information systems that could be used to monitor offender contacts and status by partner agencies charged with holding [offenders] accountable” (Harrell et al. 2002:12).

To develop appropriate and effective interventions, more and improved methods of measuring the extent of domestic violence, guided by the typologies and theories developed in recent years, are required. Efforts should focus on cross-agency database systems that can be feasibly implemented and that provide effective platforms for evaluating domestic violence interventions.

Second, for specific types of domestic violence, we need to learn much more about the interventions that work best, are most cost-effective, and can be implemented across diverse settings. It is one thing — and of course critical — to know in general that certain types of interventions can be effective. But it is entirely another to determine which of these can be implemented in communities comprised of dramatically different populations and with different types and levels of resources. Immigrants, for example, likely experience unique challenges accessing services, including language barriers and fears of deportation of themselves or family members (National Institute of Justice Journal 2003:35). As a result, even a “standard” intervention, such as arrest, may be unlikely to affect domestic violence among immigrant populations.

More attention should be paid to systematic evaluations of existing practice, so-called “standard” interventions. How, for example, do the police and courts process domestic violence complaints across different jurisdictions? What sanctions, if any, result, and what is their duration? What effects do the different types and levels of processing across jurisdictions have on offenders and their victims? And do the effects vary by particular groups (e.g., racial/ethnic minorities, social disadvantaged vs. advantaged communities)? Few jurisdictions maintain databases to answer these basic questions, making it difficult to know whether the “business as usual” approach is effective, or even, perhaps, causes harm.

Third, and finally, we need considerably more basic research about the types and causes of domestic violence, especially research about malleable factors, such as attitudes and beliefs, that interventions can target. Not least is a need for research on the histories and trajectories of domestic violence offenders and victims, and how these occur within the contexts of families and communities. In addition, many practitioners are requesting information about whether specific interventions (e.g., batterer intervention) are more effective with specific types of offenders, victims, or events. Such information is essential for shaping targeted, effective policies, especially ones that can have a large-scale impact.

What is the most promising methodological innovation in the last twenty years for the study or treatment of domestic violence?

Echoing our earlier comments, we believe that two innovations, using the term broadly, are particularly promising for both the study and treatment of domestic violence — first, the recognition of domestic violence as a serious social problem, and, second, the increased understanding that the causes of domestic violence involve multiple levels, including the

intersection of offender, victim, situational, family, and community-level factors, and that interventions should respond accordingly (Brewster 2002). Past research and programming typically has taken a mono-causal approach, emphasizing one factor or another largely to the exclusion of others.

Awareness of the profound impacts of domestic violence and its consequences for individuals, families, and communities has led to marked interest in understanding and addressing domestic violence. But considerably more work is needed to fashion more effective interventions that address a wider range of different types of factors. For example, what types of individuals or families, as determined by specific individual- or family-level characteristics, are most likely to benefit from comprehensive community-level interventions, such as those that coordinate local law enforcement and social service responses (Chalk and King 1998)? Answers to such questions likely will lead to more strategic and balanced prevention and intervention efforts that collectively can reduce domestic violence more effectively than any one effort or set of nonintegrated initiatives (Renzetti et al. 2001; Roberts 2002; Kruttschnitt et al. 2004).

Conclusion

Domestic violence is a devastating experience to victims, and society therefore has an obligation to take serious steps toward effective prevention and intervention. We view the progress of the last twenty years as remarkable, and the challenges that confront researchers and practitioners as daunting yet exciting. Overcoming these challenges will substantially improve our understanding and treatment of domestic violence. But doing so will require a sustained effort, including funding for promising programs and rigorous research guided by well-developed and tested theories.

References

- Brewster, M. P. 2002. "Domestic Violence Theories, Research, and Practice." Pp. 23-48 in Handbook of Domestic Violence Intervention Strategies: Policies, Programs, and Legal Remedies, edited by A. R. Roberts. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2000. Building Data Systems for Monitoring and Responding to Violence Against Women: Recommendations from a Workshop. MMWR 49(No. RR-11).
- Davis, R. C., C. D. Maxwell, and B. G. Taylor. 2003. "The Brooklyn Experiment. Pp. 15-22 in Batterer Intervention Programs: Where Do We Go From Here?, edited by S. Jackson, L. Feder, D. R. Forde, R. C. Davis, C. D. Maxwell, and B. G. Taylor. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Justice.
- DeKeseredy, W. S., and M. D. Schwartz. 2001. "Definitional Issues." Pp. 23-34 in Sourcebook on Violence Against Women, edited by C. M. Renzetti, J. L. Edleson, and R. K. Bergen. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dugan, L., D. S. Nagin, and R. Rosenfeld. 2003. "Do Domestic Violence Services Save Lives?" National Institute of Justice Journal 250:20-25.
- Feder, L., and D. R. Forde. 2003. "The Broward Experiment." Pp. 5-14 in Batterer Intervention Programs: Where Do We Go From Here?, edited by S. Jackson, L. Feder, D. R. Forde, R. C. Davis, C. D. Maxwell, and B. G. Taylor. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Justice.
- Harrell, A., L. Newmark, C. Visher, and C. DeStefano. 2002. Evaluation of the Judicial Oversight Demonstration Initiative: Implementation Strategies and Lessons. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.

- Jackson, S. 2003. "Batterer Intervention Programs." Pp. 1-4 in Batterer Intervention Programs: Where Do We Go From Here?, edited by S. Jackson, L. Feder, D. R. Forde, R. C. Davis, C. D. Maxwell, and B. G. Taylor. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Justice.
- Kruttschnitt, C., B. L. McLaughlin, and C. V. Petrie, eds. 2004. Advancing the Federal Research Agenda on Violence Against Women. Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press.
- Mears, D. P. 2003. "Research and Interventions to Reduce Domestic Violence Revictimization." Trauma, Violence, and Abuse 3:167-187.
- Miller, N. 1998. 1998 Session Laws: Domestic Violence, Stalking, and Sexual Assault Legislation. Alexandria, VA: Institute for Law and Justice.
- . Domestic Violence Legislation. Alexandria, VA: Institute for Law and Justice.
- National Institute of Justice. 2003. National Institute of Justice Journal. November, no. 250.
- National Research Council. 1996. Understanding Violence Against Women. Panel on Research on Violence Against Women, Committee on Law and Justice, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, National Research Council. Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Sciences.
- Renzetti, C. M., J. L. Edleson, and R. K. Bergen, eds. 2001. Sourcebook on Violence Against Women. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Roberts, A. R., ed. 2002. Handbook of Domestic Violence Intervention Strategies: Policies, Programs, and Legal Remedies. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tjaden, P., and N. Thoennes. 2000. Extent, Nature, and Consequences of Intimate Partner Violence. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Justice and Centers for Disease Control.

General Accounting Office, U.S. 2002. Justice Impact Evaluations: One Byrne Evaluation Was Rigorous; All Reviewed Violence Against Women Office Evaluations Were Problematic.

Washington, D.C.: U.S. General Accounting Office.

Vinton, L. 1998. "A Nationwide Survey of Domestic Violence Shelters' Programming for Older Women." Violence Against Women 4:559-571.

Worden, A. P. 2000. "The Changing Boundaries of the Criminal Justice System: Redefining the Problem and the Response in Domestic Violence." Pp. 215-266 in Criminal Justice 2000, vol. 2, Boundary Changes in Criminal Justice Organizations, edited by Charles M. Friel.

Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Justice.