

# **Domestic Violence and Deviant Behavior**

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## Theoretical Overview

Physical violence against women by their male intimate partners is a public health problem of enormous importance. From infrequent slaps, pushes, grabs, or shoves to frequent and severe life-threatening assaults, intimate violence in its various forms has significant individual and social consequences. Fear, depression, intense anxiety, and social isolation are common among battered women, and the collateral damage that follows from domestic violence extends beyond the individual suffering of victims (Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 1998; National Research Council, 1996; Stephens, McDonald, and Jouriles, 2000). For example, children of battered women are at high risk for being victimized (Appel and Holden, 1998), suffering significant emotional and behavioral maladjustment (Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 1998; Jouriles et al., 2001; Ware et al., 2001), and perpetuating violence in their interpersonal relationships (O'Leary, 1988).

At the community level, the burden occasioned by violence against women includes lost work time and wages, reduced productivity, and costs associated with the provision of health care and social services for victims and their families (National Research Council, 1996). In short, the individual and social consequences of intimate partner violence are great. A better understanding of the development of domestic violence and its causes and correlates should be a national scientific and public policy priority.

Theories of the development of domestic violence differ in how they conceive of the relation between domestic violence and “other forms of deviance.” (Such deviancy encompasses behavior other than domestic violence, such as theft, fraud, violence toward nonfamily members, and illicit substance use that is criminal, antisocial, or otherwise in violation of the prevailing community norms.) Some theorists and researchers have speculated that men’s domestic violence is but one expression of a general tendency to engage in deviant behavior (see Simons et al., 1995). Rooted in general theories of crime (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990), this view maintains that domestic violence, like other criminal or antisocial behavior, might best be explained by theories that invoke general explanatory principles such as low self-control or antisocial behavior traits. Such theories suggest that domestic violence and other forms of deviant behavior (though not necessarily any *specific* form of deviant behavior) should be associated. Such an association would be indicated by a greater prevalence of deviant behavior among men who engage in domestic violence compared with those who do not.

This theoretical approach contrasts with the argument that domestic violence is a unique form of deviance, distinct in cause and correlates from other forms of deviance, and thus requires its own special theories for adequate explanation. According to proponents of this view, domestically violent men are expected to differ from other men and from one another in a variety of important ways (Gordon, 2000; Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 1997). However, a tendency to engage in criminal, antisocial, or other deviant behavior is not expected to be one of the ways that *most* domestically violent men differ from nonviolent men. That is, men who engage in the most common forms of domestic violence (relatively infrequent slaps, pushes, grabs, and shoves) are expected to be indistinguishable from other men in terms of other deviant behavior (Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 2000; Gordon, 2000). Those men who *do* engage in frequent and severe domestic violence (who are often found in clinic or court-referred samples) also engage in high levels of

other deviant behavior. But these men constitute only a tiny proportion of all domestically violent men and are thought to be very different from men who engage in the most common forms of domestic violence (those men often found in representative community samples). Thus, the high levels of other deviant behavior found among the subset of the most violent abusers are not expected to characterize domestically violent men in general. In short, this theoretical approach suggests that the prevalence of deviant behavior in a representative community sample of domestically violent men should not differ from the prevalence of deviant behavior among men who are not domestically violent.

## **Exploring the General Deviance Explanation**

This research is the first step in an investigation to determine whether domestic violence, as it most commonly occurs in community samples, and other forms of deviance are related in a manner consistent with a general deviance explanation of domestic violence. Although the findings of much previous research appear consistent with a general deviance explanation and suggest that further study is warranted, existing research fails to address the issue directly for several reasons: The nature of the samples selected, the range of deviant behaviors investigated, and other methodological idiosyncrasies create interpretive ambiguity or limit generalization. It is unclear, for example, whether the co-occurrence of domestic violence and other specific forms of deviant behavior (e.g., violence toward strangers) found in clinic or court-referred samples (see Gondolf, 1988; Shields, McCall, and Hanneke, 1988) is likely to be true for community samples as well. It is also unclear whether the relations obtained for specific deviant behaviors are likely to reflect the relation between domestic violence and deviant behavior in general. The few studies that report an association between domestic violence and other forms of deviant behavior in community samples correlate this association in a way that precludes determining the comparative *prevalence* of deviant behavior among men who do or do not engage in domestic violence (see Simons et al., 1995; Magdol et al., 1998).

The present research defines deviance broadly and examines the co-occurrence of domestic violence and other forms of deviance, instead of analyzing the correlation between them. The authors consider the occurrence of one or more of a wide variety of deviant acts rather than one or two specific types, using a community sample of young men rather than a clinic or court-referred sample, so that “typical” rather than extreme domestic violence can be investigated. A longitudinal component is included that accounts for past deviant behavior as well as deviant behavior that is concurrent with the domestic violence. Support for a general deviance explanation of domestic violence as it occurs in the community would increase if the following hypotheses were confirmed:

- ◆ Domestic violence and other forms of deviant behavior are associated concurrently, as indicated by a higher concurrent prevalence rate of deviant behavior among men who engage in domestic violence compared with men who do not.
- ◆ Domestic violence and other forms of deviant behavior are associated prospectively, as indicated by differing past prevalence rates of deviant behavior. That is, men who have

engaged in domestic violence would be more likely to have engaged in deviant behavior in the past than men who have not.

## **Methods**

Data for this research was taken from the National Youth Survey (NYS) and consists of a national probability sample of continental U.S. households that had a youth between the ages of 11 and 17 as of December 1976. This dataset has been widely researched, and the sample characteristics and sampling strategy are presented in other reports (see Huizinga, 1978). This study concentrates on just two of the multiple waves of data that were collected: Wave V (1980) when the participants were between 15 and 21, and Wave VI (1983) when the participants were between 18 and 24. More specifically, it focuses on Wave VI men who were married or cohabiting with a partner of the opposite sex and who completed a measure of domestic violence ( $n = 176$ ).

## **Measures**

**Domestic Violence.** Men's violence toward their female partners was measured using the eight physical aggression items from the Straus Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS) (Straus, 1979). Men who had engaged in one or more of these behaviors in the year prior to assessment were classified as domestically violent; those who refrained from such behavior were classified as not domestically violent.

**Deviant Behavior.** Men's general deviance (defined as acts other than domestic violence) was measured by participants' responses to 44 items at Wave VI and 40 items at Wave V that describe illegal or socially proscribed behavior. Items at both waves sampled a range of deviant behavior, from relatively minor (e.g., stole something worth \$5 or less) to more serious deviant acts (e.g., set fire to a building, car, or other property). Most items, however, fell between these extremes (e.g., snatched someone's purse or wallet or picked someone's pocket; stole money, goods, or property from employer). Several of the deviance items differed at the two waves to reflect the age differences of the groups, but most were the same. Illicit substance use was included in this measure of deviance at both waves. Questions about the use of specific substances (e.g., marijuana, cocaine, and heroin) were combined into a single item and scored present (the use of at least one illicit substance) or absent (no report of illicit substance use). Participants were classified according to the number of different types of deviant acts they had engaged in (i.e., none, one or more, two or more, three or more). Deviance data were missing for 13 men at Wave V, reducing the sample size for analyses using Wave V to 163.

## **Findings**

### **Domestic Violence**

Of the 176 married or cohabiting men in the Wave VI sample, 66 (37.5 percent) reported engaging in one or more acts of physical violence against a female partner (as measured by the CTS) in the year prior to assessment. The 1-year prevalence rate for domestic violence (37.5 percent) is comparable to rates obtained from other large samples of young couples (see Magdol

et al., 1997; O'Leary et al., 1989). As expected, the levels of domestic violence in this sample were relatively low, with the domestically violent men reporting, on average, three to four violent acts ( $M = 3.7$ ,  $SD = 3.67$ ) in the year prior to assessment. This is comparable to the frequency of husbands' violent acts in other nationally representative community samples (see Straus, 1990). The highest number of acts reported by any participant was 18.

These numbers contrast with the levels of violence typical of clinic, court-referred, or shelter samples. Women in shelter samples, for example, typically report experiencing more than 60 acts of husband-to-wife violence in a year, with the majority reporting severe violence such as repeated beatings and threats with knives or guns (Jouriles et al., 1998; Jouriles et al., 2000).

## Deviant Behavior

To measure the co-occurrence of domestic violence with other forms of deviant behavior, the authors created a dichotomous variable to indicate whether the men reported engaging in one or more deviant acts in the year prior to assessment. At Wave VI, 66 percent of the total sample reported engaging in one or more deviant acts; at Wave V, conducted 3 years prior to Wave VI, 75 percent of the total sample reported engaging in one or more deviant acts.

Given the high rates of deviant behavior that were reported using this arguably liberal operationalization of deviance, two additional variables were created: one to reflect whether or not the men reported engaging in two or more deviant acts in the past year; the other to reflect whether or not the men reported engaging in three or more deviant acts in the past year. Sixty percent of the Wave V sample and 54 percent of the Wave VI sample reported two or more acts. Three or more acts were reported by 48 percent of the Wave V sample and 38 percent of the Wave VI sample. The authors examined the co-occurrence of domestic violence and other acts of deviance using each of these increasingly conservative operationalizations of deviance.

**Exhibit 1. Co-occurrence of Domestic Violence and Concurrent Deviant Behavior (Wave VI)**

Conceptualization of Deviant Behavior	Number Engaging in Deviant Acts ( $n = 176$ )	Prevalence of Deviant Behavior			$\chi^2$
		Domestically Violent ( $n = 66$ )	Not Domestically Violent ( $n = 110$ )		
> 1 act	116 (66%)	76%	60%		4.56*
> 2 acts	95 (54%)	65%	47%		5.31*
> 3 acts	66 (38%)	53%	28%		10.87*

\*  $p < .05$

The co-occurrence of domestic violence with current deviant behavior (based on the Wave VI sample) is presented in exhibit 1. Seventy-six percent of domestically violent men reported engaging in one or more concurrent deviant acts. Chi-square analyses indicate that a greater proportion of domestically violent men engaged in other deviant behavior than men who were not domestically violent,  $\chi^2 (1, n = 176) = 4.56$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\phi = .16$ . This was also true for the more conservative definitions of deviance: two or more acts,  $\chi^2 (1, n = 176) = 5.31$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\phi = .17$ ; and three or more acts,  $\chi^2 (1, n = 176) = 10.87$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\phi = .25$ .

The co-occurrence of domestic violence with past deviant behavior (based on the Wave V sample) is presented in exhibit 2. Eighty-nine percent of domestically violent men reported engaging in one or more deviant acts at the Wave V assessment. Chi-square analyses indicated that domestic violence at Wave VI was predicted by deviant behavior at Wave V,  $\chi^2(1, n = 163) = 10.21, p < .01, \phi = .25$ . This was also true for the more conservative definitions of deviance: two or more acts,  $\chi^2(1, n = 163) = 8.95, p < .01, \phi = .23$ ; and three or more acts,  $\chi^2(1, n = 163) = 12.50, p < .01, \phi = .28$ .

#### **Exhibit 2. Co-occurrence of Domestic Violence and Past Deviant Behavior (Wave V)**

Conceptualization of Deviant Behavior	Number Engaging in Deviant Acts (n = 163)	Prevalence of Deviant Behavior			$\chi^2$
		Domestically Violent (n = 62)	Not Domestically Violent (n = 101)		
> 1 act	122 (75%)	89%	66%		10.21*
> 2 acts	97 (60%)	74%	50%		8.95*
> 3 acts	79 (48%)	66%	38%		12.50*

\*  $p < .05$

## **Discussion**

This research investigated whether domestic violence as it typically occurs in the community is associated with other acts of deviance in a way that is consistent with a general deviance explanation of domestic violence. Results indicate that most of the men who had engaged in domestic violence (76 percent) also reported engaging in one or more other deviant acts concurrently. An even larger proportion (89 percent) reported a history of deviant behavior 3 years earlier. Although the rates of deviant behavior among men who were not domestically violent were also high (60 percent and 66 percent, respectively), the rates for men who had engaged in domestic violence were significantly higher.

The high base rates (concurrent and past) reported for deviant behavior across the entire sample indicate that deviance is rather common during adolescence and young adulthood. To determine whether the relationship between domestic violence and other deviant behavior would hold under more stringent definitions of deviance, the authors reanalyzed the data with increasingly conservative operationalizations of deviance: two or more deviant acts in the past year, and three or more deviant acts in the past year. The pattern of results, however, did not change. Domestic violence and other deviant behavior were associated both concurrently and prospectively, regardless of the operationalization of deviance used.

## **Implications for Researchers**

These findings are consistent with a general deviance explanation of domestic violence and suggest a potentially fruitful area of future study. These preliminary but provocative results underscore the need for further investigation of potential developmental antecedents of the most

common forms of domestic violence. The authors intend to follow up these preliminary analyses to clarify the relation between domestic violence and other acts of deviance.

### **Implications for Practitioners**

The nature of the relation between domestic violence and other acts of deviance, and the developmental model of domestic violence this relation may suggest, has important policy and practice implications. If a general tendency to engage in deviant behavior accounts for a significant proportion of domestic violence as it typically occurs in the community, interventions designed to prevent or reduce deviant behavior in general may similarly prevent or reduce domestic violence. However, if the general deviance explanation does *not* account for a significant proportion of domestic violence as it typically occurs in the community, interventions designed to address other distinguishing characteristics of men who engage in this form of domestic violence—perhaps with greater attention to the unique context of intimate partner violence—may be more effective.

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