



# National Institute of Justice

## Research Preview

Jeremy Travis, Director

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# Drugs, Alcohol, and Domestic Violence in Memphis

*Summary of a Presentation by Daniel Brookoff, M.D., Ph.D.*

A 1995 study of domestic violence in Memphis, Tennessee, revealed that almost all assailants had used drugs or alcohol during the day of the assault; two-thirds had used a dangerous combination of cocaine and alcohol. The vast majority of those assaulted were repeat victims of the current assailants. Two-thirds of assailants were on probation or parole at the time of the assault. In addition, a majority of battering incidents involved the assailant's use or display of a weapon, and a number of victims suffered injuries severe enough to require immediate medical attention.

These and other findings emerged from a month-long pilot study funded by the Methodist Hospital Foundation of Memphis. This collaborative community study sought to determine the city's prevalence of domestic violence and factors contributing to it. A survey team of medical personnel and University of Memphis researchers accompanied officers from the Memphis Police Department as they responded to nighttime calls for assistance. On average, the police received more than 15 calls per 7-hour shift for domestic assault or other residential disturbances. The survey team studied 62 incidents fitting the legal criteria for domestic assault; several involved multiple victims (a woman and her child) or multiple assailants (a man and his friend). The team privately interviewed persons who were at the scene when police arrived, including all 72 victims, two-thirds (42 of 64) of their assailants, and 75 adult family members.

## Characteristics of victims and assailants

In the Memphis study, 72 percent of victims were female and 78 percent of the assailants were male. Of the 20 male victims, 9 were the sons of female victims who had tried to intervene in the assault of their mothers. Of the female victims 40 percent had been assaulted by cohabiting boyfriends, 29 percent by noncohabiting boyfriends, 20 percent by cohabiting husbands, and 11 percent by estranged or divorced husbands or former boyfriends. The remaining incidents involved sibling or in-law assault, parent-child or child-parent assault, and wives battering their husbands. Eleven victims were children.

## Findings

**Alcohol and drug use.** Victims and family members reported that 92 percent of assailants used drugs or alcohol during the day of the assault. They also reported that 67 percent had used a combination of cocaine and alcohol, which forms cocaethylene, a substance that produces heightened and prolonged intoxication. Nearly half of all assailants (45 percent) were described by families as using drugs, alcohol, or both daily to the point of intoxication for the past month. Nine percent of assailants were either under treatment or had previously received treatment for substance abuse. According to their own reports or reports of family members, about 42 percent of victims used alcohol or drugs on the day of

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the assault; 15 percent had used cocaine. About half of those using cocaine said that their assailants had forced them to use it.

**Previous assaults.** In an overwhelming majority of incidents (89 percent), the primary victim had suffered a previous assault by the current assailant; 91 percent of those victims had reported a prior incident to the police (73 percent within the previous 2 weeks). Most prior victims reported daily (35 percent) or weekly (55 percent) battering. Of the 45 women assaulted by a current or former sexual partner, 44 percent reported an assault by that man during pregnancy.

**Weapons and injuries.** In 42 (68 percent) of the domestic assault episodes, assailants had used or displayed weapons, including 19 blunt instruments (hammers, baseball bats, etc.), 17 knives, and 6 guns. About 15 percent of victims suffered serious injuries requiring immediate medical attention.

**Arrests and court action after the incident.** Two-thirds (28 of 42) of those assailants who were present when police arrived were arrested, mostly for domestic assault. The survey team reviewed arrest and court records 8 weeks after the police calls and found that 33 percent of those arrested on the scene for domestic assault had pleaded guilty, 8 percent had charges dismissed, and 58 percent were released and awaiting case disposition. Of arrested assailants, 75 percent were out of jail in less than 18 hours; half of these did not have to post bond. All assailants who pleaded guilty were given suspended sentences of 30 to 90 days with 1 year of probation; 50 percent were ordered to participate in an anger management program; and 25 percent were ordered to perform 3 days of community service. In 23 percent of cases in which the assailant fled the scene before police arrived, the victim later swore out a warrant for his arrest. All victims were told how to obtain a warrant, but most refused—possibly because of the \$50 fee, fear of escalating violence and retaliation by the assailant, or reluctance to expose the assailant to punishment.

**Involvement of children.** Eleven victims (15 percent) were younger than 18 years; most were assaulted after witnessing assaults on their mothers. A total of 90 children directly witnessed 53 (85 percent) of the assaults. In many cases, researchers observed small children emulating violent behavior on the scene. When child abuse occurred in conjunction with the battering of an adult, the adult victim did not bring the child abuse to

the attention of the police. None of the children in the survey was referred to treatment or child protective services as a result of the police visit.

## Postsurvey results and suggestions

As a result of the survey, the medical and criminal justice communities in Memphis are collaborating to ease the plight of domestic violence victims and increase the penalties for assault in cases where alcohol, drugs, or weapons are used or children are present. A small crisis center has been established within the police department to provide immediate medical care. Victims are brought to the center without having to initiate action themselves and are automatically referred to counseling and support services. In addition, supplemental reports of victim and assailant interviews are sent to prosecutors so that drug or alcohol problems are known at arraignment and rehabilitation can be ordered. Finally, the fee for obtaining an arrest warrant has been waived. Suggestions for future action include:

- Testing assailants at the time of arrest for alcohol or drug intoxication.
- Detoxifying arrested drug- or alcohol-dependent assailants prior to release from jail.
- Assessing children who directly witness domestic violence to determine if psychological treatment is needed.
- Allowing domestic assault victims to swear out arrest warrants at the assault scene.
- Providing emergency counseling or psychiatric treatment for women whose self-esteem has been eroded by the manipulative and coercive behavior of a batterer.

This summary is based on a presentation at the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) by Daniel Brookoff, M.D., Ph.D., Associate Director of Medical Education at the Methodist Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee, to an audience of researchers and criminal justice practitioners. The seminar, *Drug Use and Domestic Violence*, is available as a 60-minute videotape for \$19 (\$24 in Canada and other countries). Use the order form on the next page to obtain this videotape, NCJ 163056, and any of the others available in NIJ's Research in Progress Seminar Series.

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