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Exposure Reduction or Backlash? The Effects of Domestic Violence Resources on

Intimate Partner Homicide

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

In the United States, rates of homicide involving "intimate partners" -- spouses, ex-spouses, boyfriends, girlfriends -- have declined substantially over the past 25 years. During the same period, public awareness of and policy responses to domestic violence have increased. The coincidence of the two trends leads naturally to the question of their relationship: To what extent has the social response to domestic violence contributed to the decline in intimate partner homicide? This research explores this question by retrospectively collecting data documenting the types of resources available to victims of domestic violence since 1976, and examining their relationship to the changing patterns of partner homicide.

Trends of intimate homicide differ considerably depending on the victim. Larger decreases have occurred for males, blacks, and married victims (including ex-spouses) than for females, whites, and unmarried intimates (Greenfield et al. 1998; Rosenfeld, 1999). For this reason, we examine the impact of domestic violence resources and other factors on partner homicides by the victim's race, gender, and marital relationship to the offender.

Also, domestic violence policies, services, and programs have expanded dramatically since the early 1970s when the battered women's movement began pressing for a social response to the needs of women abused by their spouses (Schechter, 1982). By the mid-1990s, over 1,700 agencies nationwide were addressing the multiple effects of violence against women and their children (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 1997). Our team of data collectors—which is comprised of practitioners, legal experts, and a police detective—successfully gathered information from agencies in 48 of

the 50 largest US cities. Data include the types of services offered by domestic violence agencies, the strength of local legal advocacy programs, policies adopted by police departments and prosecutors offices to better protect victims of partner violence. Our team also documented the adoption history of select state statues. Without the help of these professionals, this research would not have been possible.

Building on the research by Dugan et al. (1999), we interpret the relationship between the above factors and patterns of homicide in terms of their *exposure-reducing* potential. Exposure reduction refers to shortening the time that participants in a violent relationship are in contact with one another. This perspective on intimate homicide assumes that any mechanism that reduces the barriers to exit from a violent relationship will lower the probability that one partner kills the other. For example, the availability of welfare benefits, by hypothesis, reduces a woman's exposure to violence by providing financial support for her and her children to leave an abusive partner.

Although the idea of exposure reduction is relatively straightforward, its effects on violence need not be. Substantial evidence shows that the highest homicide risk is during the period when a battered victim leaves the relationship, suggesting a potential backlash from exposure reduction associated with domestic violence interventions (Bernard and Bernard, 1983; Campbell, 1992; Crawford and Gartner, 1992; Goetting, 1995). Such backlash effects could occur if the intervention (e.g., restraining order, arrest, shelter protection) angers or threatens the abusive partner without effectively reducing contact with the victim.

Our attention to exposure reduction naturally leads us to focus on protection orders—a legally mandated exposure reducing mechanism that is available to women

who want reprieve from violent relationships. Together with practitioners, we identified key policies, services, and statutes intended to make protection orders more successful at preventing future violence. For example, we documented the years in which each district attorney's office became willing to prosecute violators of protection orders.

This study has several hypotheses. We expect that state laws with provisions for no contact between victims and abusers and for warrantless and mandatory arrest will be associated with lower rates of intimate partner homicide. The exposure reduction effects of state statutes should be strengthened, in turn, by aggressive and specialized local enforcement and strong legal advocacy services. However, we do not expect that each of these factors will have similar effects for all victim types, for at least five reasons. First, discrepancies in implementation of policy or services can limit exposure reduction. Second, not all victims of domestic violence have equal access to the types of protection mandated by law and policy. Third, victims may perceive barriers preventing access to legal protection. Fourth, violent relationships between unmarried partners may be more sensitive to outside intervention because the partners typically have fewer legal and financial dependencies than spouses, and therefore more free to leave. Finally, some interventions may increase the risk of lethal violence for intimate partners if they increase strain without reducing contact, and the increased risk may vary by marital status, race, and gender.

The analysis is based on a panel data set of 48 of the 50 largest US cities for the years 1976 to 1996. We estimate separate panel models for the eight possible combinations of victim sex, race, and marital relationship. Our analysis incorporates eleven indicators of the state and local domestic violence resources. Four are measures

of state statutes, five measure components of local police and prosecution policy, and two measure the strength of legal advocacy programs and the prevalence of hotlines in the city. Our analysis controls for non-intimate adult homicide rates, marriage and divorce rates, women's relative educational attainment, and welfare benefit levels in each of the cities. Poisson regression models are used to estimate the effects of these variables on homicide. Additional methodology was designed to reduce the chances that the estimates are statistical artifacts due to unusually influential cities or years.

The study offers mixed support for the general exposure reduction hypothesis. A little more than half of the findings support the predictions of exposure reduction, and the others show that domestic violence resources are associated with more killings for some victim types. This backlash effect is especially pronounced for unmarried partners.

Some factors are consistently positive or negative regardless of victim type. The adoption of a warrantless arrest law is associated with fewer killings of white women and black unmarried men. Increases in the willingness of prosecutors' offices to take cases of protection order violation are associated with increases in the homicide of white married intimates, black unmarried intimates, and white unmarried females. Also, an untoward consequence of cutting AFDC payment levels appears to be increased homicide victimization of black married men, black unmarried partners, and white unmarried females.

Other resources have conflicting results depending on victim category. Increases in the strength of legal advocacy are associated with fewer white women killed by their husbands but with more black women killed by their boyfriends. The adoption of certain types of protection order statutes is associated with both *decreases* in black married

female victimization and *increases* in the number of black women killed by their unmarried partners. In general, we find that policies designed to protect African American women are more likely to be associated with homicide declines for married women. The risk for unmarried women may actually increase in the presence of domestic violence resources.

Although exposure reduction is an intuitively appealing and plausible prevention strategy, the results imply a more complicated reality. Evidence of increased lethality, and even the null findings, could reflect failures within the criminal justice and social service systems to adequately protect victims once they access their services. Or, the most violent relationships may require that exposure is effectively reduced to zero. However, intimate partnerships are inherently difficult to end without some contact, especially if the couple share children or property.

These findings do not mean that designing prevention strategies based on exposure reduction is a bad idea. One limitation of our study is that it measures the aggregate availability of resources (e.g., the presence or absence of a given legal provision or local program), but not who accesses the system and how well it works in individual cases. However, when placed in the context of other research and practitioners' reports, our findings suggest that exposure reduction that does not effectively separate the partners (or unmet promises of exposure reduction) in severely violent relationships may be worse than none at all. Absolute reduction of exposure in such relationships is an important policy objective. Without any contact, neither partner has the opportunity to kill the other. But achieving this type of protection from abuse is not simple. More research is needed to better understand the dynamics of successful

exposure reduction compared to unsuccessful cases, so that policy makers and practitioners can tailor resources to the diverse needs of a heterogeneous population of women and reduce prevention failures.

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