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# CRIMINAL JUSTICE BOOK SUMMARIES

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## The Family Secret:

Domestic Violence in America

by William A. Stacey and Anson Shupe

ACQUISITIONS

This book summarizes a 2-year research project on both victims and perpetrators of family violence conducted in Texas. Its diverse sources of information were combined to present a picture of family violence that the authors believe is more complete than studies based on smaller samples and from only one perspective. The sources include:

- Detailed histories of 542 women and their batterers who entered the Friends of the Family shelter in Denton, Texas, or Family Place shelter in Dallas between January 1980 and March 1982.
- Exit forms from a majority (262) of the women who entered and left Family Place during this period.
- Followup interviews 1 to 2 years later with selected women who had been residents of these shelters.
- Telephone interviews with 2,096 persons who called Family Place hotline between January 1980 and December 1982.
- Entry-form information on 67 middle- and upper-class women at

Family Place's Help Center to aid women who have to cope with abuse but who are not seeking shelter.

- A review of 67 cases at the West Texas Legal Services Office in Fort Worth, who had experienced domestic violence and were seeking a divorce.
- Interviews with 74 widowed, separated, or divorced women who had sought job training help from a Displaced Homemaker Center in Arlington, Texas, and who were contacted 2 years later about domestic violence in their previous marriages.
- Informal discussions and formal interviews with dozens of abused women outside these shelters, law enforcement personnel, lawyers, social workers, psychologists, and legislators.

The book focuses on Family Place, a relatively well-funded shelter that runs what the authors describe as model therapy programs for women and children. The shelter is offered as a benchmark for shelters in the 1980's.

### Women: The most visible victims

The women in this study reported that the most frequent type of battering was a combination of slapping, punching, kicking, and pushing into walls, over furniture, or down stairs. More serious abuse, some of it life threatening, was not uncommon. Half of the women had been threatened by weapons, and one out of five assailants had actually used a weapon during a beating. About 42 percent reported they had been battered while pregnant. One in four women reported sexual abuse such as rape, kicking the genitals, and mutilating the breasts and genitals.

### Who are these women?

The 542 women who came to the Dallas-Fort Worth shelters do not represent a cross-section of all abused women because shelters are typically used by women who are more severely abused. Their background characteristics, however, suggest a picture of battered women: their average age was 25; 72 percent were married, most in their first marriage; 64 percent were white, 22 percent black, 10 percent Hispanic, 5 percent other; a slight majority were high school graduates, some had taken college courses, very few were college

Summarized from *The Family Secret: Domestic Violence in America* NCJ 92295 by William A. Stacey and Anson Shupe with permission from Beacon Press, Boston. 1983. 237 pp. including references, tables, and index. Summary published in January 1986.

*The Family Secret* is available from Beacon Press, Order Dept., 25 Beacon Street, Boston, MA 02108. Price \$16.95 cloth, \$9.95 paper.

graduates; almost half worked outside the home, but earned less than \$10,000 per year.

Overall, they were neither indigent nor from minority groups. Few had drug or alcohol-related problems. They were economically lower-middle and lower class, and their limited educations put them at a disadvantage in the labor market.

These findings cannot, however, be used to validate the myth of class-related family violence. The study contains many lower- and lower-middle-class women because women who come to shelters have fewer resources in terms of money, transportation, and friends or relatives to help them. They come to a shelter because they have limited alternatives.

Nor do the study's findings support the hypothesis that children exposed to violence become conditioned to expect it. Less than a third of the women in this study had experienced abuse or neglect as children.

### **Why do they stay and what makes them leave?**

Most of the women who came to the shelters had been living in a violent family environment for more than a year. As the battering episodes increased in frequency, their severity also increased. Drugs and alcohol often acted as a catalyst for violence as did jealousy, job or financial pressures, or demands for sex.

Most women said they stayed on for what could be termed negative reasons, such as economic dependency or coercion. For the majority, a lack of feasible options was the primary reason for staying with the abuser; shelters provided the option they needed to leave the abuser.

The theory of learned helplessness—that abused women have been brutalized into a lethargic, submissive state—does not describe the courage and resourcefulness of the women who came to the shelters. These women did ultimately make the decision to leave their homes, often with great sacrifice and risk.

The authors described the women who entered shelters as survivors, not

casualties, of domestic violence. The women who never leave abusive settings are perhaps the victims of learned helplessness or are devout followers of religious or sexist ideologies that are determined to preserve the family unit regardless of a destructive outcome.

### **Children: The most helpless victims**

During the 2-year study period, 424 shelter residents brought their children with them. For a majority of the 803 children, adult violence (directed at them) was common. Two out of three had been abused for at least a year, and some older ones had been abused for 7 years or longer. They had been verbally abused, punched, kicked, slapped, burned, and some had been sexually abused. Painful confinement, particularly for small children, was common.

Analysis revealed that men who battered women more severely also were more likely to harm their children. Observations and discussions led shelter staff to suspect that child abuse was higher than the 45 percent originally reported.

Most children witnessed their mothers being abused. Mothers reported being forced to neglect their children when an abusive man demanded full-time attention or when injuries prevented them from caring properly for their children.

Children who have been abused or who have witnessed abuse communicate their stress in many ways. They are frequently aggressive and disruptive when they first arrive at the shelter. Boys who identify with their fathers may act out the violence they have seen. The authors saw the son of a battered woman playfully chase his younger sister down the hall of the shelter, calling her a bitch and threatening to kill her.

### **Men: The perpetrators of violence**

#### **What kind of man batters?**

Most of the Dallas-Fort Worth batterers were husbands rather than boy-friends. Generally, they were in their

late twenties or early thirties, slightly more than half had graduated from high school, few had gone to college. Most were blue collar workers or held low paying white collar jobs; the average median income was \$15,000 or less.

Poor education and low income provide little buffer against economic pressures. This does not mean that poor education and economic pressures cause family violence, but they do create stresses that make it easier for violence to happen.

The vast majority of batterers displayed a general pattern of violent behavior. Almost 90 percent were violent toward children, animals, and physical objects as well as to their mates. More than 80 percent had an arrest record.

### **Was the batterer a child victim of family violence?**

The data show substantial support among men for the hypothesis that violence transfers from one generation to the next. In this study:

- 60 percent of the men had witnessed physical violence between their parents; and,
- 40 percent had been neglected by their parents and the same proportion had been physically abused.
- Batterers who were abused during childhood were more likely to abuse their own children.

### **The reaction of both parties**

Almost half the batterers followed a cycle of violence—acting affectionate and repentant after an abusive episode only to repeat the violence later. It is more noteworthy that half the men felt the beating was justified, and when the men felt the beatings were justified, the violence was most severe.

While a battered woman is the target of a man's rage, psychologists have repeatedly noticed that he is also very dependent on her. Ironically, need and anger become so thoroughly intertwined that the man himself often becomes blind to how he switches from one emotion to the other. The

resulting erratic emotional pattern makes some battered women distrustful and cynical toward all men.

## **Battered women's options**

### **The option to stay**

Women who stay may endure the abuse passively. For many women, however, passivity does not make the violence abate. Calling the police is another option and may end the fight in progress, but the police cannot make peace in the home or solve problems between spouses. In a surprisingly large number of cases, the women reported that the police did not even respond to calls of domestic violence.

A battered woman may contact a member of the clergy, but the authors state that few clergy are trained to counsel victims of family violence. Contacting an outreach program is another alternative for abused women who do not want to leave their marriages, and it is an opportunity for group counseling and practical survival skills for handling situations that trigger violence.

### **The option to leave**

Deciding when to go is not easy. *The Family Secret* provides a 27-item questionnaire to help gauge how violent and dangerous a domestic relationship is and may help with the decision to stay or leave.

Women who leave the abuser may go to a youth hostel, a motel, the YWCA, or the Salvation Army; the authors describe these facilities as temporary, expensive, and as offering limited services for abused women. However, they do offer some service if only a space to sleep. Or the women may go to friends and relatives, who are often a positive resource and generally very supportive. They may also divorce the batterer if they can arrange a living situation that keeps their whereabouts hidden from the batterer until the divorce is final. Regardless of the law, however, the man may not consider the relationship terminated.

## **Another alternative: Shelters for battered families**

A shelter is a place where an abused woman who decides to leave her home can go to assess her life and situation and where anger and hostility do not constantly impinge on her thoughts. It is more permanent than a hostel but less permanent than a home. The staff generally is sympathetic to her need to leave an abusive relationship but not committed to encouraging her to end it.

Women who come to a shelter have focused all their energies on escaping. The authors report that the women usually have no clear idea of what to expect from the shelter. Group living and discussions are an important part of the shelter experience and adjusting to communal life can be difficult for women who are unfamiliar with sharing their living quarters.

The residents serve as their own maintenance staff. Alcohol, non-prescription drugs, firearms, and the use of physical violence to discipline a child are forbidden.

Precautions are taken not to disclose the shelter's location, and security requires that residents respect the midnight curfew and abide by the check-in and check-out procedures. Women who do not respect the precautions may be asked to leave.

The shelter offers some women the opportunity to chart new directions for their lives. Others are unable to adjust to the daily inconveniences of communal living and probably re-experience domestic violence when they leave.

### **After the shelter experience**

In a small followup sample of 44 former Family Place residents, about half had returned to the man who had abused them; of those, only one reported that the abuse was worse. In other cases, the abuse had dropped off noticeably or had stopped. A Texas Department of Human Resources survey revealed similar findings. Apparently, the decision to go to a shelter shatters the myth that the abused woman is helpless, dependent, and powerless. The shelter experience appears to give her new skills to deal with male aggression

and a new awareness that makes male battering unacceptable.

## **From insult to injury: The dead ends and possibilities of the law**

According to the authors, the legal system's response to family violence is impeded by the traditional American attitude that disciplining women and children is the prerogative of the head of the household. They further state that it is additionally impeded by lawmakers' ignorance and lack of concern over the problem, by prosecutors' negative attitude toward domestic violence cases, and the confusion about the civil vs. criminal legal issue of domestic violence. These attitudes are reflected in the relatively light sentences imposed on men convicted of spouse abuse and judges' leniency with men who violate restraining orders or peace bonds.

Although the authors report that police departments feel swamped with domestic violence calls, most women in an abusive situation do not call the police for help. Those who do call often have unrealistic expectations about the power of the police to intervene in domestic conflicts. Although more and more programs are being developed to train police in domestic intervention skills, the authors observed that most police have not had the training to properly handle these disturbances.

One alternative to the existing legal response is a diversion program for batterers in which the batterer does not receive a criminal record if he completes a counseling program. Another approach is an interagency arrangement among the courts, police, and district attorneys to take a more concentrated approach to domestic violence cases and their followup.

### **What can be done**

Sweeping changes in the social and legal systems are largely unrealistic, but concerned citizens can act on the authors' recommendations which are for:

- Legislators and elected officials to be informed of the true extent of local family violence and the need to help abused women, children, and their batterers.
- Schools and churches to educate the public about the scope, frequency, and dynamics of domestic violence.
- Shelters in every community to augment their limited funds through support from the agencies, foundations, civic organizations, and local businesses.

#### Other sources of information

Office for Victims of Crime  
Cindy Stein  
633 Indiana Avenue NW.  
Washington, DC 20531  
202-724-5947

Program listings; grant information;  
general information on victim-related  
topics.

Center for Women Policy Studies  
2000 P Street NW.  
Washington, DC 20036  
202-872-1770

Sells publications; responds to tele-  
phone inquiries on specific topics;  
publishes a quarterly journal.

National Coalition Against Domestic  
Violence  
2401 Virginia Avenue NW.  
Suite 306  
Washington, DC 20037  
202-293-8860

Film loan library; provides biblio-  
graphic and statistical information;  
provides a listing of shelters for  
women.

#### Further readings

*Spouse Abuse—Stopping the Violence: A Participant's Handbook.* NCJ 94254. By M.L. Millar. Sponsored by the National Institute of Justice. 1982. 216 pp. Availability: NCJRS microfiche (free) or photocopy (\$26.60).

"Attribution Processes in Violent Relationships: Perceptions of Violent Husbands and Their Wives." NCJ 94048. By N.M. Shields and C.R. Hanneke. In *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 13, no. 6 (November/December 1983), pp. 515-527.

*Beating Wife Beating.* NCJ 92839. By L.H. Bowker. 1982. 157 pp. Availability: Lexington Books, 125 Spring Street, Lexington, MA 02173. Price: \$22.00.

*Battered Women and Their Families: Intervention Strategies and Treatment Programs.* NCJ 92747. By A.R. Roberts. 1984. 217 pp. Availability: Springer Publishing Company, Inc., 200 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10003. Price: \$17.95.

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