

U.S. Department of Justice  
Bureau of Justice Statistics



## Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report

# Preventing Domestic Violence Against Women

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- From 1978 to 1982 the National Crime Survey showed that once a woman was victimized by domestic violence, her risk of being victimized again was high. During a 6-month time period following an incident of domestic violence, approximately 32% of the women were victimized again.
- Close to half of all incidents of domestic violence against women discovered in the National Crime Survey (48%) were not reported to police.
- The most common reason given by women for not reporting domestic violence to police was that the woman considered the crime a private or personal matter (49%). Fear of reprisal from the assailant was the reason in 12% of unreported crimes.
- For the estimated 52% of incidents of domestic violence that were brought to police attention, one of the most common reasons given by women for reporting the crime to the police was to prevent future recurrences (37%).
- Evidence from the National Crime Survey for 1978 to 1982 indicated that calling the police did seem to help prevent recurrences. An estimated 41% of married women assaulted by their husband who did not call the police were subsequently assaulted by him within an average 6-month time period; for women who did call the police, 15% were reassaulted. Calling the police was thus associated with 62% fewer subsequent assaults.

Fear of crime erodes the quality of our lives. It makes us wary of people we do not know. It keeps us from going to unfamiliar places. It forces us to lock our doors and take other precautions.

The main source of our fear is violent crime by strangers. But for a great many Americans, the source of their most intense fear is not crime by unknown attackers but crime by nonstrangers, in particular, family members and close friends. Their plight is especially troubling. In many cases, they feel they have nowhere to go to feel safe and secure; all too often, they find a criminal justice system unresponsive to their pleas for help.

- About a third of the incidents of domestic violence against women in the National Crime Survey would be classified by police as "rape," "robbery" or "aggravated assault." These are felonies in most States. The remaining two-thirds would likely be classified by police as "simple assault," a misdemeanor in most jurisdictions. Yet, based upon evidence collected in the National Crime Survey, as many as half of the domestic "simple assaults" actually involved bodily injury as serious as or more serious than 90% of all rapes, robberies, and aggravated assaults.

### Introduction

The term "violent criminal" may evoke a mental image of a stranger attacking the unlucky person who

August 1986

This report is about such persons. It focuses on domestic violence victims—women victimized by spouses and ex-spouses, in most cases. The question it asks is: Does calling the police increase or decrease victims' chances of being victimized again? Findings presented here provide a tentative answer.

This report forms part of the BJS effort to provide more relevant information for the American public and more practical guidance for criminal justice professionals and policymakers.

Steven R. Schlesinger  
Director

happens to make an easy target; often the image and the reality are not the same. The violent criminal in many crimes is actually someone the victim knows. In fact, as national homicide statistics illustrate, much violence in America is domestic, occurring between relatives or persons otherwise well known to one another (table 1).

Not long ago, many experts thought that the police could do little to prevent domestic violence. Although stranger crimes often occur in public places such as streets and subways and are therefore preventable through police patrols or other police activity, domestic violence, the experts explained, often occurs in private residences inaccessible to the police, and therefore there is little the police can do to prevent it.

Beginning with a study published in 1977 by the Police Foundation, expert thought has been changing. Using police records, the study examined domestic assaults and domestic homicides that occurred in Kansas City, Missouri, over a period of years. It found that, in the 2 years preceding the domestic assault or homicide, the police had been at the address of the incident five or more times in half of these cases.<sup>1</sup>

The important practical value of these findings was immediately recognized: Contrary to popular thought, opportunities do exist for the police to combat domestic violence.<sup>2</sup>

The Kansas City study did not show what the police could do to prevent domestic crime, only that it may be preventable. Encouraged by these results, the Minneapolis Police Department in 1981 agreed to participate in an experiment sponsored by the National Institute of Justice designed to assess which of three police responses to domestic assault was most effective in preventing subsequent assault.<sup>3</sup>

The experiment applied only to simple (misdemeanor) domestic assaults. It called for police officers arriving at the scene of a misdemeanor domestic assault to 1) give advice, 2) order the suspect to leave the premises for 8 hours, or 3) arrest the suspect. Police response to assaults was assigned at random. After police intervened, victims were interviewed over the next 6 months to learn whether there was a repeat assault by the same suspect. From these victim interviews and from police records, the experiment determined whether one response was any better than another in reducing the recurrence of violence.

The victims (314 of them altogether) were mostly women beaten by their boyfriend (current or ex-boyfriend) or husband (current, divorced or separated).<sup>4</sup> The findings indicated that when the police made an arrest, the suspect was less likely to assault the woman again than when the police merely gave advice or ordered the suspect to leave the premises.<sup>5</sup> Victim interviews revealed, for example, that

<sup>1</sup> Domestic violence and the police: Studies in Detroit and Kansas City. Police Foundation (Washington: Police Foundation, 1977), p. iv.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. iii-vi, "Foreword" by James Q. Wilson.

<sup>3</sup> Sherman, Lawrence W. and Richard A. Berk, "The specific deterrent effects of arrest for domestic assault," *American Sociological Review*, no. 49 (1984), pp. 261-272.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 266, table 2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 267.

Table 1. Percent of total murders by relation of offender and victim

	Percent of total murders
<b>Relatives</b>	
Husband kills wife	5%
Wife kills husband	3
Parent kills child	3
Child kills parent	2
Sibling kills sibling	2
Other relatives	3
<b>Friends and acquaintances</b>	
Boyfriend kills girlfriend	2
Girlfriend kills boyfriend	1
Neighbor kills neighbor	1
Friend kills friend	4
Acquaintance kills acquaintance	30
Stranger kills stranger	18
Undetermined	26
Total	100
Number of murders	18,692

Source: 1984 FBI Uniform Crime Reports

37% of the advised suspects and 33% of the suspects ordered off the premises recidivated (committed a new assault or some other crime against the woman within a 6-month period), compared with only 19% of arrested suspects.<sup>6</sup> The researchers concluded that, in domestic assault cases coming to police attention, "an arrest should be made unless there are good, clear reasons why an arrest would be counterproductive".<sup>7</sup>

To experienced police, the experiment's findings may have been surprising. Many have come to believe that arrest in domestic assault cases is futile. One reason may be that it rarely leads to a court conviction. (Only 2% of the domestic assaulters arrested in the Minneapolis experiment went before a judge to receive court punishment.) Before the case gets to court, the woman may withdraw the complaint because the offender threatens reprisal, or she may become discouraged with the justice system, or she may have a change of heart. Believing that arrest in domestic assault cases is to no avail, the police have often deliberately refrained from making arrests in these cases. The Minneapolis experiment showed, however, that arrest is effective, whether or not it leads to conviction. At least for the 6 months after police make an arrest, the victim of domestic assault is safer than she otherwise would be.

#### The present study

All the battered women in the Minneapolis experiment were victims who

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 268, table 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 270.

had come to police attention. The experiment lacked information on battered women whose cases had not come to the attention of the police. Consequently, while the experiment could show that police responses varied in their effectiveness, it could not say whether calling the police was better than not calling.

The experiment thus raises a new question for investigation: Should domestic violence victims call the police? It is not clear how experts would answer it. Some might argue that victims who call the police reduce their risks of continued violence, since the threat of punishment (which the police represent) deters offenders from committing new crimes. Others might argue that victims who call actually risk making matters worse. This report presents the results of a study examining these possibilities.

#### Results

Data for the study are for 1978 through 1982 from the National Crime Survey (NCS), an ongoing nationwide survey of the American people to measure their criminal victimization. The survey at the time of this study involved interviews twice each year with approximately 128,000 members of a nationally representative sample of 60,000 households. Survey interviewers asked household members if they were victimized by crime during the 6 months preceding the interview. If so, interviewers then asked additional questions to elicit details on the crime, including the victim's relationship to the offender, whether the crime was brought to police attention, and reasons for either reporting or not reporting.

This report focuses on married, divorced, and separated women who indicated in the NCS that they were victims of domestic violence at least once during a 12-month time period.

#### Characteristics of domestic violence

This report uses the terms "domestic violence" and "domestic assault" interchangeably, although assault is not the only form of violent crime subsumed under the general heading "domestic violence." In this report, domestic violence refers to any rape, robbery, aggravated assault, or simple assault committed against a married, divorced, or separated woman by a relative or other person well known to the victim. Defined in this way, domestic violence was found in the NCS to have the following characteristics:

1. A third of the incidents of

domestic violence against women detected in the NCS would be classified by police as "rape," "robbery" or "aggravated assault." Throughout the United States, these three crimes are "felonies," the more serious class of crime. The remaining two-thirds of incidents of domestic violence in the NCS would be classified by police as "simple assault," a "misdemeanor" (the less serious class of crime) in most States.

Although most incidents of domestic violence in the NCS would fall into the less serious legal category used by police (that is, misdemeanors), many of these simple (misdemeanor) assaults are actually relatively serious. Victim injury is at least as common among domestic crimes that would be classified as simple assault (42%) as it is among felonies that would be classified as rape, robbery, and aggravated assault (36%). Moreover, in terms of actual bodily injury, as many as half of all incidents of domestic violence that police would classify as misdemeanors are as serious as or more serious than 90% of all the violent crimes that police would classify as felonies. The reason is that the presence or absence of victim injury is not critical when deciding to classify a crime as a felony or as a misdemeanor. What is critical, however, is the presence or absence of a weapon and the extent of injury. Consequently, many violent crimes classified as felonies either do not involve injury (for example, an aggravated assault where a firearm is present but injury is not) or involve injury no more serious than that present in domestic assaults classified as misdemeanors (for example, the victim sustains an injury no more serious than a scratch or a bruise). Data from the NCS suggest that traditional ways of distinguishing felonies from misdemeanors may have the unintended effect of masking the seriousness of domestic violence. The tendency to classify these crimes as misdemeanors rather than felonies may give the impression that domestic violence against women is less serious than it actually is.

2. Nationally, 7 out of every 10 incidents of domestic violence in the

<sup>8</sup> A study of juvenile delinquency offenses using police records in an urban jurisdiction has similar findings: "...as many as 28 per cent of bodily injury cases classified by the police as simple assaults were as serious or more serious, in terms of the resultant harm, than three quarters of the cases classified as aggravated assault." Also: "Offenses classified as simple assaults resulted in proportionately more serious injurious consequences to victims than did robberies with personal violence." Sellin, Thorsten, and Marvin E. Wolfgang, *The Measurement of Delinquency*. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1964), p. 192.

Offender is:	Percent of incidents of domestic violence
<b>Relatives</b>	
Spouse	40%
Ex-spouse	19
Parent or child	1
Sibling	2
Other relative	3
<b>Close friends</b>	
Boyfriend or ex-boyfriend	10
Friend	9
Other nonrelative	16
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>
Number of crimes	706,031

Source: 1984 National Crime Survey

NCS were committed by the woman's spouse, ex-spouse, boyfriend or ex-boyfriend (table 2).

3. An estimated 52% of all incidents of domestic violence in the NCS were brought to police attention. Close to half (48%) were not reported to police (table 3).

4. The most common reason given by women for not reporting domestic violence to the police was that the woman considered the crime a private or personal matter (49%). Fear of reprisal from the assailant was the reason in 12% of unreported crimes. One of the most common reasons given for reporting domestic violence to the police was to prevent future recurrences (37%) (table 3).

The recurring nature of domestic violence

Because domestic violence victims interviewed in the NCS may choose not to reveal their victimization, the NCS is not able to detect every victim of domestic violence in the Nation. But while the NCS cannot show how many women become domestic crime victims each year, the NCS can provide revealing information about another dimension of the problem's seriousness, namely the recurring nature of this form of crime.

The NCS from 1978 to 1982 found an estimated 2.1 million women who were victims of domestic violence at least once during an average 12-month time period. A salient characteristic of these victims is the relatively high risks they faced of a recurrence of the violence. During the average 6-month time period following their "initial" victimization, an estimated 32% were victimized again. Victimized an average of three times each, these repeat victims actually accounted for most

	Percent of incidents
<b>Were the police called?</b>	
No	48%
Yes	52
<b>Why weren't the police called?*</b>	
Private or personal matter	49%
Afraid of reprisal	12
Crime not important enough	11
Police couldn't or wouldn't do anything	10
Reported to someone else	4
Other reason	14
<b>Why were the police called?*</b>	
To keep it from happening again	37%
To prevent this incident from happening	24
To punish the offender	11
To recover property	3
It was a crime	3
Felt it was duty	3
Needed help after the crime	2
Other	17
<b>Who actually called the police?</b>	
Victim	75%
Other household member	4
Someone else	17
Other	4

\*Most important reason.  
Source: 1983 National Crime Survey

(57%) of the estimated 3.4 million incidents of domestic violence that the NCS detected between 1978 and 1982 (inclusive). By comparison, 1982 NCS data on stranger-to-stranger violent crime revealed that only 13% of the victims of stranger-to-stranger crimes were subsequently victimized by strangers during a 6-month followup period. Moreover, unlike domestic violence, most (70%) violent crimes by strangers in the NCS involved a person victimized only once by this crime in a 12-month period.

The effectiveness of calling the police to prevent the recurrence of domestic violence

Of the estimated 2.1 million women who were victims of domestic violence at least once during an average 12-month time period between 1978 and 1982 (inclusive), roughly 1.8 million of them could be classified as either "callers" or "noncallers" on the basis of their responses to the survey question, "Were the police informed or did they find out about this incident in any way?" About 1.1 million victims were callers, meaning someone (usually the victim herself) called the police at the time of the initial (or only) victimization during the 12-month period; the remaining approximately 700,000 victims were noncallers at the initial (or only) victimization during the 12 months (table 4).

**Table 4. Number of domestic violence victims subsequently assaulted, by whether the police were called on the initial incident**

Victim's marital status	Were the police called?			
	Yes		No	
	Was victim subsequently assaulted?*		Was victim subsequently assaulted?*	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Married	58,207	390,493	66,897	224,905
Divorced/separated	121,986	560,585	98,585	324,103
Total	180,193	951,078	165,482	549,008

\*Includes rape, robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault.  
Source: 1978-82 National Crime Survey

During the average 6-month time period following their initial victimization, only about 180,000 of the 1.1 million callers, representing 16% of all callers, were victimized again by domestic violence (tables 4 and 5). By contrast, about 165,000 of the 700,000 noncallers, representing 23% of all noncallers, were subsequently victimized during a comparable average 6-month followup period (tables 4 and 5). The women who called the police were less likely than the women who did not call to become repeat victims of domestic violence (16% vs. 23% respectively).

Not only was calling the police associated with reduced risks of repeat violence, but there was also no evidence that subsequent crimes became more serious (in terms of the presence or extent of bodily injury) as a result of calling. An estimated 2.9% of women who called the police had a subsequent incident more serious than the initial one (table 6). This compares with 4.2% of women who did not call the police (table 6). This difference was not statistically significant.

Table 7 provides further details on the effectiveness of calling the police. The table contains two key findings:

1. When the assailant at the initial incident was the woman's spouse or ex-spouse, the risk of subsequent domestic violence was only 18.1% among women who called the police, versus 30.9% among women who did not call. A woman was thus 41% less likely to be assaulted again by her spouse or ex-spouse when she called the police.
2. In the case of married women (as opposed to the combination of married, divorced, and separated women), the effect of calling the police was apparently stronger. The risk of subsequent violence by a married woman's spouse was only 15.4% when she called the police but 41% when she did not call. A married woman was thus 62% less likely to be assaulted again by her spouse when she called the police.

**Discussion**

The Minneapolis experiment dealt with one question (when domestic violence victims call police, should police make an arrest to prevent recurrences?) but raised another (should domestic violence victims call the police?) Some might argue that, because calling the police probably deters men from committing new crimes, victims should call. Others might argue just the opposite: that, while calling the police perhaps deters some men, it probably angers or otherwise adversely affects even more, inciting them to further acts of violence.

This study undertook to ascertain whether calling the police was associated with higher or lower rates of subsequent violence. It found that calling the police was associated with lower rates. Moreover, it found that subsequent acts of violence against women who called the police were no more serious than those against women who did not call.

One possible explanation for these results is that victims of domestic violence are simply good judges of

**Table 5. Rate of subsequent domestic violence, by whether the police were called on the initial incident**

Victim's marital status	Percent of victims subsequently assaulted* when the police were:	
	Called	Not called
Married	13%	23%
Divorced or separated	18	23
Total	16%	23%**

\*Includes rape, robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault.  
\*\*Difference between "called" and "not called" is statistically significant at 90% confidence level.  
Source: 1978-82 National Crime Survey

**Table 6. Rate of more serious subsequent domestic violence, by whether the police were called on the initial incident**

Victim's injury at initial incident	Percent of victims with more serious subsequent injury when the police were:	
	Called	Not called
No injury	3.3%	7.0%
Minor injury	2.4*	1.0*
Total	2.9	4.2

Note: None of the differences between "called" and "not called" are statistically significant at the 90% confidence level.  
\*Estimate is based on 10 or fewer cases.  
Source: 1978-82 National Crime Survey

character and are thus careful about who they report and who they do not report to the police. Perhaps offenders judged unlikely to seek reprisal because of being reported generally are reported whereas offenders judged likely to seek reprisal generally are not. The comparatively low rates of repeat victimization found among victims who called the police may be mostly due to crime victims' good judgment about which offenders not to report to the police. If this is true—that victims are

**Table 7. Rate of subsequent domestic violence, by whether the police were called and by relationship of offender to victim**

Assailant at initial incident	Victim's marital status	Percent of victims subsequently assaulted by "same" assailant when the police were:	
		Called	Not called
Spouse or ex-spouse	Married	15.4%	41.0%*
	Divorced or separated	19.1	27.1
	Total	18.1	30.9*
Other relative	Married	7.7**	16.7**
	Divorced or separated	9.9**	9.0**
	Total	8.4	13.7**
Close friend	Married	10.6	15.0
	Divorced or separated	12.9	18.1
	Total	11.9	16.6

Note: "Same" assailant means that the victim was re-assaulted by an individual with the same relationship to the victim as in the original assault.  
\*Difference between "called" and "not called" is statistically significant at 90% confidence level.  
\*\*Estimate is based on 10 or fewer cases.  
Source: 1978-82 National Crime Survey

good judges of which offenders not to report—it means that encouraging victims to call the police who would otherwise not call could prove unproductive or possibly even counterproductive.

An alternative explanation for the study's results is that police represent the threat of punishment, and merely calling the police, no matter what they do, is enough to deter some men from committing new acts of violence. It may be, however, that calling the police is insufficient. The critical element may be what police actually do once they are called. The arrests that undoubtedly occurred in some fraction of the incidents recorded in the NCS may largely or even entirely explain the lower risk of subsequent violence against women who called the police.

The viability of such alternative explanations needs to be tested through carefully controlled experiments. In the meantime, the results of this study provide no evidence that calling the police makes things worse; indeed, the women who told National Crime Survey interviewers that they called the police appear to have reduced their chances of repeat victimization.

#### Further reading

Further details on the study's methodology are contained in "Preventing Domestic Violence Against Women: Discussion Paper," available upon request to BJS (202-724-6100).

Bureau of Justice Statistics  
Special Reports are prepared principally by BJS staff under the direction of Joseph M. Bessette, deputy director for data analysis. This report was written by Patrick A. Langan and Christopher A. Innes and was edited by Mr. Bessette. Marilyn Marbrook, publications unit chief, administered report production, assisted by Millie J. Baldea and Joyce M. Stanford.

August 1986, NCJ-102037