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## Do Domestic Violence Services Save Lives?

by *Laura Dugan, Daniel S. Nagin, and Richard Rosenfeld*

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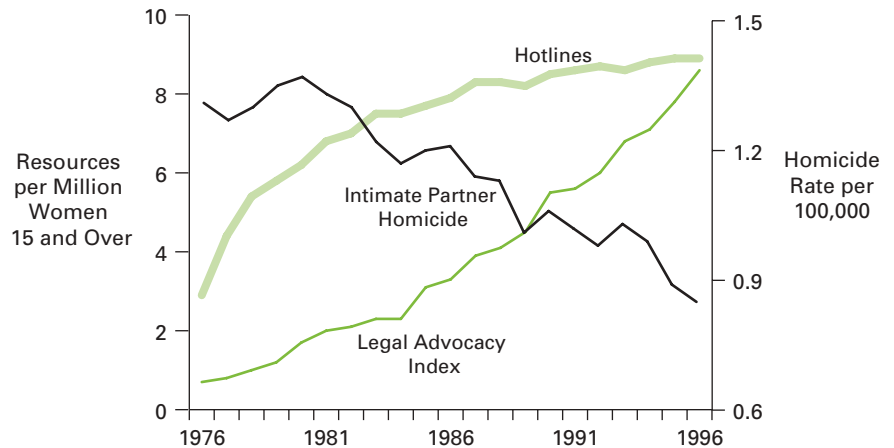
Policies and services designed to help victims of domestic violence appear to have two possible and opposing effects: either they decrease the abuse and risk of homicide, or they have the unintended consequence of increasing them. Some interventions that reduce contact between intimate partners in violent relationships also reduce opportunities for further abuse and potential homicide attempts.<sup>1</sup> But certain interventions designed to help victims gain access to helpful resources may actually increase the risk of homicide—they have a backlash or retaliation effect. The outcome depends on the type of intervention and the characteristics of the victim and the offender.

Researchers have examined the effects of many domestic violence resources and their impact on intimate partner homicide to determine whether any conclusions could be drawn about the relationship between the policies or services used and the risk of death or further injury. Although clear conclusions cannot be drawn and additional research is needed, current findings suggest that certain interventions (such as warrantless arrest laws and economic assistance for victims of domestic abuse) may help reduce domestic violence homicides. In addition, life circumstances of the parties involved seem to play a role in homicide rates. For example, unmarried black women may be especially vulnerable to homicide if they elect to use domestic violence resources.

### Resources Up, Murders Down

In the United States, rates of homicide by intimate partners—spouses, ex-spouses, boyfriends, and girlfriends—have fallen over the past 25 years. During that same time, public awareness of and policy responses to intimate partner violence have intensified. As a result, domestic violence policies and programs expanded dramatically beginning in the early 1970's, when the battered women's movement began pressing for greater response to the needs of women abused by their spouses.<sup>2</sup> The movement prompted officials to redefine domestic violence as

**Figure 1: U.S. Intimate Partner Homicide Rates and Domestic Violence Services, 1976–1996**



Source: Supplementary Homicide Reports, 1976–1996, and the authors.

a criminal offense rather than a private matter. Policymakers responded with stronger criminal justice sanctions, specialized procedures, and services for victims.

Specifically, the number of domestic violence legal advocacy programs and hotlines grew sharply from 1976 to 1996 in 48 of the country's largest cities, as the intimate homicide rate declined (see figure 1). Legal advocacy resources increased ninefold, with especially rapid growth after the mid-1980's. The number of hotlines shot up in the late 1970's, then stabilized at between 8 and 9 per million women after the late 1980's. During the 20 years of the study period, the intimate partner homicide rate dropped from roughly 1.3 to 0.9 victims per 100,000, a decline of about 30 percent.<sup>3</sup>

The decline in intimate partner homicide varied by the victim's sex, race, and relationship to the offender. Larger decreases occurred among men, blacks, and married victims than among women, whites, and unmarried partners.<sup>4</sup> The rate for married 20- to 44-year-old black men dropped a surprising 87 percent, from 18.4 to 2.4 per 100,000. These numbers highlight the importance of assessing the effect of domestic violence resources by characteristics of the victims.

*The risk of intimate partner homicide is highest when a victim of domestic abuse tries to leave the relationship.*

## Demographic Influences

Because most intimate partner killings involve married couples,<sup>5</sup> perhaps the most crucial factor in reducing intimate partner homicide has been the sharp drop in marriage rates among young adults during the past 25 years. At the same time, separation and divorce rates have increased.<sup>6</sup> Fewer marriages may translate into less exposure to abusive partners. This decrease in exposure may lower the risk for intimate partner homicide. Fewer marriages also could mean that the marriages that do take place are different: those who marry may be more selective in choosing partners and, thus, less likely to marry abusers.<sup>7</sup> Finally, violent relationships may more likely end in divorce.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, women's economic status has improved. Women are now more likely to finish college and to have a job—both in absolute terms and in relation to men. Women's incomes also have increased.<sup>9</sup> This improved status means that women may depend less on intimate partners, including abusive partners. But at the same time, such gains may sometimes provoke retaliation from men who fear loss of status or control in their intimate relationships and thereby contribute to increased violence.

Women on welfare reportedly are more likely than others to experience domestic violence.<sup>10</sup> But for women with children living in poverty, public assistance may help cushion the financial blow of leaving an abusive partner.

## Weighing Exposure Reduction Against Retaliation

**Reducing exposure.** One might assume that anything that makes it easier for an abuse victim to leave a violent relationship will reduce the contact between the intimate partners and lower the chance that one will kill the other. This approach is called "exposure reduction." For example, welfare benefits may give a woman and her children the financial resources they need to leave an abusive man and thereby reduce their exposure to violence.

But sometimes factors designed to reduce a woman's exposure may cause an abusive partner to retaliate.

Research shows that two policies support exposure reduction: (1) warrantless arrest laws and (2) higher Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) benefit levels.

Warrantless arrest laws have been associated with a decrease in intimate partner homicides. Reductions in AFDC benefits have been associated with an increase in intimate partner homicide.

Warrantless arrest laws allow police to arrest abusers who violate protection orders without an officer first having to obtain a warrant. These laws are associated with fewer deaths of white women, whether or not they are married. According to the research, the period during which a woman seeks to obtain a warrant is the most dangerous because a batterer is more likely to be antagonistic after the police intervene. The effect of warrantless arrests was especially noticeable among unmarried white females.

Reductions in AFDC benefit levels have been associated with an increase in homicides of unmarried men, particularly unmarried black men. When welfare payments were lowered, there was an associated increase in women killing their boyfriends.<sup>11</sup> This suggests that cuts in AFDC may limit opportunities for unmarried women with children to live independently of their abusers: perhaps when women see no other alternative, they are more likely to kill their abusers. Conversely, increases in AFDC benefits may provide opportunities for unmarried women to live independently of their abusers, thereby reducing exposure and the likelihood that these women will kill their abusers.<sup>12</sup>

For unmarried black women, cuts in AFDC benefit levels appear to endanger their lives. For white women, however, cuts seem to have no effect.<sup>13</sup> Blacks may be more sensitive than whites to changes in AFDC benefits. That interpretation is in line with blacks' higher AFDC participation rates.<sup>14</sup>

## DATA AND METHODS

The homicide data for this study were from the Supplementary Homicide Reports of the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting Program.<sup>1</sup> The researchers looked at the relationship between homicide among heterosexual intimate partners and domestic violence resources in 48 large U.S. cities between 1976 and 1996. The researchers controlled for marriage and divorce rates, the relative education of women and men, and other factors. The researchers also looked at the number of homicides in each city over time by the victim's sex, race, and marital relationship to the offender.<sup>2</sup> Married people included ex-spouses and common-law couples; unmarried people included boyfriends and girlfriends.

The researchers developed 11 variables in an effort to measure exposure reduction and retaliation:

Variable	Measure
<i>State Statutes</i>	
Warrantless arrest	An indicator variable identifying States that have a warrantless arrest law for when protection orders are violated.
Mandatory arrest	An indicator variable identifying States that have a mandatory arrest law for when protection orders are violated.
Violation index	An index that sums the total number of the following consequences for violating a protection order: contempt (either civil or criminal), misdemeanor, or felony.
Exposure reduction index	An index that increases by one increment for each of the following statute provisions: no-contact order and custody relief (if married) and protection beyond cohabitation and no-contact order (if unmarried).
<i>Local Policies</i>	
Police arrest index	An index totaling the number of the following arrest policies: pro-arrest for violation of a protection order, mandatory arrest for violation of a protection order, and mandatory arrest for domestic assault.
Police commitment index	An index that increases by one increment if the department has a domestic violence unit, and by one increment if it offers domestic violence in-service training to officers.
DA willingness index	An index that increases by one increment if the prosecutor's office takes cases of protection-order violation, and by another increment if the office has a written policy standardizing the prosecution of such cases.
DA specialization index	An index that increases by one increment if the prosecutor's office has a domestic violence unit, and by one increment if the office has trained legal advocates on staff.
No-drop policy	An indicator variable that identifies cities with prosecutors' offices that have no-drop policies.
<i>Programs</i>	
Legal advocacy index	Index that sums the number of agencies with a separate budget for legal advocacy with the number of agencies that have lawyers on staff, adjusted for the number of women over age 15 years (14 years in 1970) in the city.
Hotlines	The total number of hotlines adjusted for the number of women over age 15 years (14 years in 1970) in the city.

1. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Supplementary Homicide Reports 1976–1996. Machine-readable files and documentation were obtained directly from the Uniform Crime Reporting Program, 1998.
2. The analysis was conducted using 6 waves of data, with 3 years in each wave.

The risk of intimate partner homicide is highest when a victim of domestic abuse tries to leave the relationship.<sup>15</sup> Such a *retaliation effect* or backlash may also be triggered by an intervention—such as a restraining order, arrest, or shelter

protection—that angers or threatens the abuser without effectively reducing contact with the victim.

**Backlash.** Two policies appear to provoke backlash: (1) prosecutor willingness to

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take cases of protection order violation and (2) the relative education of the partners. As prosecutors' willingness to pursue such cases increased, the research seemed to indicate an increase in the murder of married white and unmarried black partners and in the victimization of unmarried white women. Thus, it could be that the prosecutor's willingness to pursue protection order violations may aggravate these conflicted relationships.

The researchers also noted that as the relative education of black women to black men grows, there is an associated increase in the number of black husbands killed and in the number of black unmarried partnerships that end in homicide. The large difference in education between black men and women may add more stress to already contentious relationships, creating a backlash.

Other factors supporting the backlash theory were the availability of hotlines in the city, the presence of domestic violence units or training programs in police departments and prosecutors' offices, and the employment of trained legal advocates on the prosecutor's staff. Each of these factors was designed to assist abuse victims, but they also appear to be associated with retaliation by abusive partners.

### Factors That Can Cut Both Ways

The research found a number of factors that supported both exposure reduction and backlash theories, but only among different groups, based on marital status, gender, and race. These factors included:

- State laws requiring mandatory arrest for violating a protection order.
- The availability of contempt, misdemeanor, or felony charges for violating a protection order.
- State laws providing for no-contact orders, custody relief, or protection beyond cohabitation.
- Agencies with dedicated budgets for legal advocacy and with lawyers on staff.
- Pro-arrest and mandatory arrest policies for protection order violations and mandatory arrest for domestic assault.

### Policy, Planning, and Prevention

The fact that retaliation occurs doesn't mean that prevention strategies are a bad idea. Instead, prevention should be tailored to individual needs. These results also imply that reducing exposure just a little—or failing to meet promises of exposure reduction—can be worse than doing nothing at all for persons in severely violent relationships. For them, exposure reduction is crucial, although it may not be easy to achieve.

Much research has looked into failed efforts by abuse victims to leave their abusers. Case reports and interviews often provide rich details of the events leading to a homicide. Yet, that is only half the story. How people in severely violent relationships can avoid deadly consequences must be understood.<sup>16</sup> Only more research documenting both successful and unsuccessful cases of relief from partner violence will help in the design of policies to better meet victims' safety needs.

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#### For more information

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#### Notes

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